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The Naturalist Novel and the Boundaries of Japanese Literature

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Although often dismissed as the precursor of the “I-novel,” the naturalist novel in Japan bears international and extra-literary filiations that challenge the conventional delimitations of Japanese literature in the American academy. At the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth century, proponents of the naturalist novel in Japan such as Kosugi Tengai and Tayama Katai had intellectual compatriots spread across several continents, including Stephen Crane and Frank Norris in this country, who looked to Emile Zola as guide and inspiration. In Japan as elsewhere, the naturalist novel borrowed theories and motifs from other genres of social representation, such as criminology and psychiatry, that themselves were in international circulation. The naturalist novel, along with these genres, formed part of what Regenia Gagnier and Martin Delveaux call the “global ecology of the fin de siècle,” a cultural, political, and economic environment comprising both diverse microclimates and planetary trends.¹

I want to propose that the naturalist novel provides an opportunity to reconsider the proposition of “Japanese literature” as an object of study. As part of an international phenomenon, the naturalist novel resists explanation solely in terms of national literary evolution or in terms of “influence” or “reception” as usually construed. The extra-literary filiations of the naturalist novel similarly alert us to the extent to which literary practice is defined through its interactions with other practices for the representation of subject and society. In this talk I will briefly examine the international filiations of the naturalist novel in Japan, and then spend a bit more time looking at its extra-literary filiations, with the turn-of-the-century notions of neurasthenia and degeneration as examples.

As is well known, the naturalist novel emerged in France in the 1860s in work of Emile Zola and the Goncourt brothers. Zola was responsible for the especially important introduction of psychiatric and criminological theories, which he transformed into methods of representation in what he described as “experimental novels.” The school thrived in France into the 1880s and gained adherents around the world, including, by the 1890s, admirers in Japan. The first fruits of the encounter appeared around the turn of the century, in what is typically referred to as the “Zolaist” early period of Japanese naturalism—works such as Tengai’s *Hatsu sugata* (New Year’s Finery, 1900), Katai’s “Jūemon no saigo” (The End of Jūemon, 1902), and Nagai Kafū’s *Jigoku no hana* (Flowers of Hell, 1902). As in other parts of the world, the establishment of a naturalist school was supported by critical discourse on Zola, including early essays by Kafū and Hasegawa Tenkei.²

One cannot adequately explain this aspect of the establishment of a naturalist school in Japan by following either of the common models with which the field continues to saddle itself, internal development and external influence. There is no denying that the naturalist novel in Japanese emerged as a transformation and repudiation of the weepy *hisan shōsetsu* or “novel of

¹ Regenia Gagnier and Martin Delveaux, “Towards a Global Ecology of the Fin de Siècle,” in *Literature Compass*, vol. 3, no. 3 (2006), 572–87.

² Nagai Kafū, “Emitsu Zora to sono shōsetsu,” included in *Joyuzi Nana* (Tokyo: Shinseisha, 1903) along with Kafū’s translations of Zola’s *Nana* and “L’Inondation”; Hasegawa Tenkei, “Jinrūgaku yori mitaru Zora,” *Shinbungei*, vol. 1, no. 8 (August 1901).

miser⁷ of the mid-1890s, but young writers' encounters with Zola and Guy de Maupassant, his sometime protégé, were crucial. These writers conceived of their practice in terms of their affiliation with naturalist writers elsewhere. Nonetheless this was not a case of "influence" as commonly conceived. Although the works of Zola were important, what would be the source of the supposed "influence" was not simply a French writer. This is clear in the role that critical discourse on Zola by writers outside of France (by Norris in the United States and Kafū in Japan, for example) played in the spread of the naturalist novel around the world.⁸ If the work of Zola and Maupassant was the initial *production* of the naturalist novel, novels and critical discourse outside of France were its *re-production* and what made the naturalist novel visible worldwide. Rather than simply being influenced by Zola, writers such as Tenguai, Kafū, and Katō took part in the creation of the naturalist novel as an international phenomenon. One can only grasp this situation by recognizing that "Japanese literature" was enmeshed in a much broader fabric at the turn of the century and that its history thus is not simply a national one.

One aspect of this fabric was the belief that the progress of "civilization" was creating modern maladies that afflicted those living in a hurried, competitive age. Neurasthenia or nervous exhaustion was considered one such malady, and debates on it in medical and intellectual circles affected the development of the naturalist novel in Japan. The diagnostic category of *shinkei suijaku* (as neurasthenia was translated) has a complex provenance. The diagnosis of neurasthenia was proposed in United States in 1869 by two physicians, one of whom, George Beard, became a widely recognized figure in discussion of the disease. In Beard's formulation, neurasthenia named a range of symptoms, from insomnia and loss of appetite to debilitating fatigue and melancholy, that were caused by a physiological dysfunction of the nervous system. The fundamental cause was modern civilization itself, distinguished from ancient civilization by five features: steam power, the periodical press, the telegraph, the sciences, and "the mental activity of women." Beard argued that "When civilization, plus these five factors, invades any nation, it must carry nervousness and nervous diseases along with it."⁴ The disease was a particular hazard for people Beard called "brain workers"—particularly businessmen—who unlike "muscle workers" suffered the strains of long mental exertion and heavy responsibility. Although Beard's inability to explain the specific neurological pathology involved invited skepticism, the diagnosis was quickly recognized in other countries, including France, Germany, and Japan, where it entered medical discourse in the late 1870s.

In Japan, the recognition of *shinkei suijaku* as *burnmei no yamai*, or a "disease of civilization," took place alongside the introduction of the concept of *shinkei*, or "nerves," into medicine and the medical profession's attack on popular notions of mental disturbance, particularly fox possession.⁵ Although Beard presented neurasthenia as a "distinguished malady" because it indicated advanced civilization, in Japan the association of *shinkei suijaku* with civilization was typically dark.⁶ Articles in publications like *Jogaku zasshi* and *Taiyō*

warned of its danger.⁷ One physician wrote in 1909 that *shinkei suijaku* was "the Meiji period's own endemic, intractable malady, adding that it perhaps should be called "Meiji disease," *Meiji byō*.⁸ *Shinkei suijaku* entered the popular lexicon, and after the Russo-Japanese War there was a boom in discussions of neurasthenia, reflecting what cultural historians commonly recognize as fatigue with wartime mobilization and a broader disaffection with Meiji-era ideologies of success and striving.⁹

In the first decade of the twentieth century, *shinkei suijaku* became a familiar aspect of literary representations of mental life and the relationship between subject and social environment. The affliction is familiar from the work of Natsume Sōseki, but naturalist writers, with their interest in medical explanations of aberrant behavior, were in the lead in incorporating it into the mimetic apparatus of the *shōsetsu*. Nagayoshi, a character in Kafū's *Jigoku no hana*, suffers bouts of the illness as the consequence of the stress of social ostracism.¹⁰ The spiral of melancholic isolation that results is an essential part of his tragic end. In "Futon" (The Quilt, 1907), Katō ascribes the impulsive independence of Yoshiko, the aspiring writer who is the object of the protagonist Tokio's lust, to *shinkei suijaku*.¹¹ That independence leads to her banishment to her father's house and Tokio's tortured acknowledgment of his desire for her. Both *Jigoku no hana* and "Futon" reflect the common use of *shinkei suijaku* to describe a pathology that is both individual and social. Polite society shuns Nagayoshi because of the way he gained his fortune—marrying the Japanese widow of a missionary whom he served as translator—but Kafū's heroine Sonoko observes that society tolerates worse crimes of the flesh by politicians.¹² That Nagayoshi suffers the condition thus reveals society's contradictions. Similarly, as a girl student, Yoshiko is an iconic Meiji figure whose mental disturbance goes hand in hand with what Katō portrays as a general dislocation of male power.

Shimazaki Tōson's novel *Haru* (Spring, 1908) is a particularly interesting example of the novelization of *shinkei suijaku* as individual and social diagnosis. *Haru* is a *roman à clef* concerned with characters modeled after Tōson, Kitamura Tōkoku, and other writers involved with the journal *Bungakukai* in the 1890s. The novel has a double narrative focus on Aoki, the Tōkoku figure, and Kishimoto, the character modeled on Tōson. Aoki suffers from the indifference of society toward his aesthetic and philosophic ambitions, slides into nervous exhaustion and then more severe nervous illness, and finally takes his own life.¹³ Kishimoto,

⁷ See for example Yabunaka Shun'an (Iwanami shoten, Yoshiharu), "Danjo seito no shinkei suijaku," *Jogaku zasshi*, no. 204 (March 15, 1890), 17; and the anonymous article "Shinkei suijakushō—sōkoshu, bunsui, kanshi, gakuhei shōkun no ichidoku oyōsu," *Taiyō*, vol. 8, no. 7 (June 5, 1902), 134-9.

⁸ Morishita Yūdō, *Shimri oyō noshinkeisuijaku hitsuyōsaku* (Tokyo: Hakkubunkan, 1909), 3.

⁹ See for example Watarai Yoshiichi, *Meiji no seishin isetsu—shinkeibyō, shinkei suijaku, kamigakari* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2003), 186-7.

¹⁰ Nagai Kafū, *Jigoku no hana* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1993), 28.

¹¹ Tayanaka Katō, "Futon," in *Futon, Ippetsotsu* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1972), 15.

¹² Nagai, *Jigoku no hana*, 18.

¹³ On Aoki's nervous condition see, among other passages, Shimazaki Tōson, *Haru* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2000), 6, 107, 136-7. That Aoki suffers from a nervous—rather than psychological—disorder complicates the distinction Michael Bourdagh's finds in the novel between the spiritually afflicted Aoki and the corporally afflicted Katsuko, a student with whom Kishimoto falls in love and who dies in childbirth. To Bourdagh's argument on the homosocial constitution of the group of young male writers and of the *lanovel* within the literary field, one could add that unlike Aoki and Katsuko, the suffering of Kishimoto, Tōson's stand-in, is purely spiritual and thus the key to his ability to escape death and write his own life. See Michael Bourdagh's,

³ Frank Norris, "Zola as a Romantic Writer," *Wave* (San Francisco), June 27, 1896, reprinted in Donald Pizer, ed., *Novels and Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1986).

⁴ George M. Beard, *American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences* (New York: Putnam, 1881), 96.

⁵ Arai Yoshitake, "Shinkei," *Kōza Nihongo no goi*, vol. 10 (Tokyo: Meiji shoin, 1983), 236-7; Kawamura Kunimitsu, *Genshi suru kindai kōkan—meishin, byōki, zashikō, aru wa rekishi no kioku* (Tokyo: Seikyūsha, 1990), 82-3.

⁶ Beard, *American Nervousness*, 22, 96-8.

too, contemplates suicide, but despite great poverty and spiritual anguish retains a belief in the possibility of salvation through literary creation that ultimately becomes his guide to life. Critics frequently observe that *Haru* operates through a re-telling of the Meiji 20s from the perspective of the Meiji 40s, particularly in its condemnation of a society whose shallow focus on success torments the young writers.¹⁴ *Shinkei suiyaku* is a key part of that retelling: Aoki's story reflects the common argument after the Russo-Japanese War that Meiji-era programs of *bunmei* and ideologies of *frühlin schuss* created a social environment that condemned society's most talented to neuroathemic decline and even death. With Tōson depicting Aoki as especially vulnerable because of his sensitive nerves, *shinkei suiyaku* is thus both an individual and a social pathology. Indeed, one of the primary attractions of *shinkei suiyaku* to naturalist writers seems to have been its ability to articulate a relationship between subject and society, suggesting that the extra-literary filiation of the naturalist school with neurology and psychiatry affected the development of naturalist mimesis.

Such extra-literary filiations also affected how writers thought of their own work and the development of the literary field. The theory of degeneration offers an example. Although this widely discussed theory was formalized by the Austrian-born psychologist Benedict Morel in his *Traité sur la Physical, Intellectual, and Moral Dégénération of the Human Species* (*Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l'espèce humaine*, 1857), which argued that crime and other deviant behavior produced physical pathologies that were transmissible by inheritance, the main channel through which writers in Japan encountered the theory was not the work of Morel but that of Max Nordau, a Hungarian-born journalist and physician who practiced in Paris. In *Degeneration* (Entartung, 1892) and other books that circulated widely in English translation, Nordau enlisted Morel, Beard, and the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso to attack Symbolist poets, Nietzsche, Wagner, Zola, and many others as agents of moral and social disintegration. Nordau held that technological developments such as railroads, the entrenchment of industrial labor, and the growth of cities with their amusement districts were pitching people in Europe into neurasthenia at an unprecedented rate. Among artists and writers, the result was a wave of "degenerate" art. Nervous exhaustion in the general public cultivated willing admirers, who transmitted their degeneracy to their offspring.¹⁵

In Japan, appraisals of Nordau by writers and critics who contributed to the rise of a naturalist school, including Uchida Roan and Hasegawa Tenkei, began to appear in 1901, with a translation of Nordau's *Paradoxe* (1895) by Masamune Hakucho appearing five years later. Other translations followed.¹⁶ Interestingly, Roan, Tenkei, and Hakucho praised Nordau for

The Dawn that Never Comes: Shimazaki Tōson and Japanese Nationalism (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 125-7.

¹⁴ Miyoshi Yukio discusses this aspect of the novel in *Shimazaki Tōson ron* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1993), 244-5.

¹⁵ Nordau explains the etiology of the condition in Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 34-44. On Morel see Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c. 1848-c. 1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 44-54.

¹⁶ Uchida Roan, "Nordau no jūkyū seiki hyō," *Shinbunsei* vol. 1, nos. 8-9 (August-September 1901), 12-4 and 28-31; Hasegawa Tenkei, "Makkusu Norudau," *Waseda gakuho*, no. 76 (November 1902), 51-55; Max Nordau, *Paradoxe*, Masamune Hakucho trans. (Tokyo: Yomiuri shinbunsha, 1906). A compilation of selections from *Conventionellen Lagen der Kulturmenscheit* (1884), *Paradoxe*, and *Entartung* appeared under the title *Gendai bunmei no hitan*, Kiryū Masatsugu trans. (Tokyo: Ryūbinkan, 1907). A complete translation of *Entartung* appeared as *Gendai no daraku*, Nakajima Motichi trans. (Tokyo: Dai Nihon bunmei

speaking against prevailing artistic taste, even though he denounced the naturalist school that inspired them.¹⁷ Japanese writers' engagement with Nordau indeed reveals several contrary responses. Kamakura Yoshinobu observes that for Tōson, Katai, Iwano Hōmei, and other young writers, Nordau's richly detailed tirades were an essential introduction to *fin-de-siècle* currents in European literature and arts. They read Nordau with both horror and fascination, learning simultaneously of the most adventurous literature of contemporary Europe and the grave threat it posed.¹⁸ In such a response these writers' attraction to the new *per se*, their admiration for the transgressive posture of the artists Nordau condemns, and their ambition to create a literature able to express their own critical attitudes toward the society before them were cut through with doubt that these very attitudes might be signs of a sickness produced by that society. The traces of this encounter with the theory of degeneration can be glimpsed in the increasing tendency, after Katai's "Futon," of these writers to meditate on their own depravity, a wretchedness that they propose is inseparable from their identities and ambitions as writers. In the appearance of the Zolaism of its early period toward the self-novelization that marks its end.

I do not want to suggest that the theory of degeneration was solely responsible for the advent of the I-novel. I do hope, however, that the example of this medical theory of social decline suggests the role that interaction with other genres for representing society played in the ongoing constitution of the literary field in Japan. The diagnostic category of neurasthenia too, I have tried to show, played a role in the development of the field greater than simply offering illustrations of mental disturbance. Because of its explicit engagement with disciplines such as criminology and psychiatry, the naturalist novel offers an extreme example of the impact of such extra-literary filiations on literary practice. Examining such filiations is not just an opportunity to be interdisciplinary. Understanding how the literary field defines itself through them can alert us to what is specifically "literary"—in historical terms—about the field at a given time. The international filiations of the naturalist novel likewise are an acute case that can instruct us as to the importance of rethinking literary history in non-national terms, free both of the notion of internal developmental necessity and the crutch of "influence" as an explanation for the relations of the historically constituted field of literature in Japan with fields elsewhere in the world. The naturalist novel in short is a methodological opportunity that is also open to us in other periods and genres. We can only take advantage of this opportunity, however, if we set aside, perhaps even abandon, a nationally defined "Japanese literature" as an object of study.

kyōkai, 1914). Most writers' early encounters with Nordau seem to have been through English translations, with the Japanese editions double translations via English.

¹⁷ Uchida, "Nordau no jūkyū seiki hyō," 247-9; Hasegawa, "Makkusu Norudau," 51; Masamune, "Yakusha iwaku," in Nordau, *Paradoxe*, 2.

¹⁸ Kamakura Yoshinobu, "Shizen shugi bungaku to Makkusu Norudau—"Daraku ron" no yomarekata," *Kokubungaku gengo to bungai*, no. 119 (November 2002), 68-73.