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Ōgai's Antiquarianism: Parting with History

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In a curious essay, “*Rekishi sono mama to rekishi banare*” 歴史其儘と歴史離れ (History as It Is and History Abandoned), published one month after *Sanshō Dayū* 山椒大夫 in January 1915, Mori Ōgai 森鷗外 muses about the status of his historical fiction. “There has been considerable discussion,” he begins,

as to whether or not my recent works, which deal with actual historical figures, are really fiction. . . . Certainly, the kind of work I’m now writing doesn’t resemble any one else’s fiction. As a rule, fiction involves freely picking and choosing among facts and pulling everything together into a coherent whole. My recent works have none of these features. . . . [Although I used to write in this way] I completely reject such methods nowadays.

“Why? My motives are simple,” he declares. To write in a “fictional” manner would violate the integrity of historical sources. As he composed his historical tales, he came increasingly to value the “reality” (*shizen* 自然) he discovered in old records and “wantonly changing that reality seemed distasteful.”

The bulk of the essay is therefore taken up with the question of how much fictional distortion is permissible in dealing with history. Ōgai offers what he terms a “frank, behind-the-scenes look” at how he rendered history into fiction in “*Sanshō Dayū*.” As one might expect, given Ōgai’s professed aversion to “fiction” (at least as practiced by others), his concerns focus on the liberties he took with the original tale. He notes how he changed the ages of the main characters, dropped a couple of minor characters, and fiddled with dates—all in order to make the story cohere. He also admits to “antiquing” the language of the story so as to achieve a period effect: he used archaic terms for clothing and other furnishings and introduced old-fashioned phrasings into the speech of certain characters.

Ōgai defends these alterations of the original material by claiming that they make the story more plausible. Nonetheless, that Ōgai felt he needed to comment at all on what were, after all, trivial alterations of the original—of an original, moreover, that was itself a folktale, not a factual account—indicates that something rankled. Despite his defense of the ways he “fictionalized” the story, he clearly seems to prefer taking history as it is. In the long-running debate on the status of history and fiction, Ōgai evidently sides with those who place history on the side of reality and characterize fiction by its “wanton” and arbitrary tinkering with reality. Ōgai thus poses his historical fiction on the same uncertain terrain this genre has occupied ever since Walter Scott’s day. In setting fiction against history, falsity against fact, he implicitly raises the questions that, as Ina Ferris notes in her discussion of Scott’s *Waverley*

novels, have been asked of historical fiction these last 200 years: “what will count as history? what are the limits and rules of historical discourse? . . . what is it to which history must be true?”¹

History and Historical Fiction

This is of course a well-worn path, as much in Japan as in Europe. The relationship between the “history” and “fiction” in historical fiction has long been an issue of contention, a contention long focused on fiction’s supposed infidelity to historical fact and, from the other side, on the adequacy of history to represent the real world of lived experience. Almost exactly a year before the appearance of “History as It Is,” for example, Ōgai raised precisely this question about his treatment of Ōshio Heihachirō’s rebellion: “My interest in Ōshio Heihachirō began when I happened to borrow a manuscript from Suzuki Honjirō. . . . The manuscript contained a number of eyewitness reports [of the rebellion]. Much of the material in the manuscript seemed mere rumor; as I attempted to pick the historical facts from among these reports, I found the pickings to be very slim. But, because the reports were full of holes, I found that my imagination was greatly stimulated.”² But the most sustained investigation of the relationship comes earlier: in Takizawa Bakin’s defense of his historical romances and (a generation later) in Tsubouchi Shōyō’s complicated assessment of Bakin in *The Essence of the Novel* (*Shōsetsu shinzui* 小説真髓).

Interspersed throughout Bakin’s great historical tale *Chinsetsu yumiharizuki* 椿説弓張月 (Crescent Moon, 1806–10) are prefaces and postscripts that defend the fiction in historical fiction—along with episodes drawn from the life of a genuine twelfth-century hero, Minamoto Tametomo; manifestly unhistorical battles with dragons, monstrous snakes, and demons disguised as beautiful women; and other things that properly have no place in a tale set in the twelfth century, including ritual disembowelments and Edo-period currency.

Bakin, for instance, goes to some length to justify a further career for his hero—one that takes place after what most histories regard as Tametomo’s death. Though, as Bakin admits, evidence for Tametomo’s survival and further adventures “cannot be found in any of the military histories or chronicles of our land,”³ he scours Chinese histories, roots out legends about Tametomo’s sword, tracks down the annals of shrines associated with his hero, and draws on other sources to extrapolate from them the possibility that Tametomo may have made it to the Ryukyus, and there to have married the daughter of a local chieftain and sired what would become the royal line of the Ryukyu kingdom.

The implausibility of much of what happens in his novels notwithstanding, Bakin struggles to maintain a certain kind of plausibility. In this instance, instead of simply admitting that he was making up a set of further adventures for his popular hero, he seems determined to prove that Tametomo could indeed have had a second career in the Ryukyus. To further the effect, he supplies copious amounts of detail about time and place—he prefaces the first sequel to *Crescent Moon*, for example, with a guide to the geography and customs of the Ryukyus.

Bakin’s fiction presents us with a puzzle. He seems at once excessively devoted to history and excessively cavalier about it. His method, he writes at the end of the second part of *Crescent Moon*, is to offer “half truth, half fiction”—this in contrast to “those picture books,

which make up everything without discrimination."⁴ In the preface to the third sequel, he elaborates:

Historical fiction (*haishi*) attempts to explicate what appears in official histories and make their contents widely available to the general public. Vulgar histories (*bōkan yashi*) by contrast follow the wind and seize the shadows, deluding the public. There is no question which of these [*haishi* or *bōkan yashi*] is erroneous and groundless, or which confuses people. Although *Crescent Moon* is a work of fiction, it draws on historical records and is faithful in every respect to the official histories. It does not contain clever fabrications. . . . It does not mislead or confuse the reader.⁵

Elsewhere Bakin provides more specifics.⁶ His method, he writes, is to take genuine figures (*seimei*) from history, to be meticulous about times and dates (*nengetsu*) and the general sense of the age (*jidai*). But instead of repeating what the official histories say, he “weaves [these elements] into a wondrous tale.” He describes himself as “fleshing out the historical record,” “introducing a measure of drama, yet without losing sight of the old records.”⁷ While humbly representing himself as simply adhering to the historical record, Bakin in fact implies that his “half truth, half fiction” is much to be preferred. Official histories, he indicates, are too stuffy, too narrowly conceived, to be of wide appeal. Only an imagined history, of the carefully circumscribed sort he himself wrote, could capture the imagination of a broad populace.

Nonetheless, shadowing Bakin's defense of his fiction is the argument from the other side, which faults his novels for the liberties they take with history. This attitude dominates, for example, Tsubouchi Shōyō's discussion of Bakin's works in *The Essence of the Novel*, a seminal work in the academic study of literature in Japan. Tsubouchi acknowledges Bakin's importance to Japanese literature (“every novel published recently has been a reworking of Bakin”), even as he takes Bakin to task for violating just about every rule he sets out for the novel.⁸ Tsubouchi delivers a series of backhanded compliments, revealing a deep ambivalence about Bakin and his work. His *Hakkenden* is a “great work,” even though its heroes “cannot be described as human beings” (25, 67). Similarly, while characters in novels should be drawn true to life, “The eight heroes of the *Hakkenden* . . . are wizards who encounter no difficulties and never die. . . . Inue no Masashi, in particular, does not die even though he is killed. . . . Thanks solely to Bakin's literary talent, this defect goes unremarked throughout the novel. Any other author would have had the reader yawning and throwing the book away by the eighth or ninth chapter” (85, 155). Or, on the “grave fault in a historical novel” of anachronism: “How unfortunate it is that even a great writer like Bakin not only sinned frequently in this respect but made no attempt whatever to reform” (93, 168–9).

Tsubouchi seems to be of two minds about the subject of historical fiction itself. At times, history and fiction seem allied. “Both,” he writes near the beginning of *The Essence of the Novel*, “arise from a common source” (13, 38), and it is “difficult to distinguish between novelist and historian solely on the grounds that one writes fiction and the other fact” (89, 163). Both novelists and historians are prone to the same errors: like historians, writers of historical novels must avoid “chronological inconsistencies, factual errors, and misrepresentation of customs” (92, 167). Historical fiction serves as a supplement to history. It affords readers a way to fill in the gaps in history, to bring to light those matters that cannot

be known for a fact:

[the novelist] begins with a time and place of no particular importance and proceeds to fill in the full picture by stages, luring the reader ever onward toward a marvellous climax and causing him to feel that past events have come alive before his eyes. . . . That is the forte of the novel! (91, 165)

Elsewhere in the same work, however, Tsubouchi describes history and fiction as opposites. History, concerned with the “surface” (*omote*) of things, with facts, differs fundamentally from historical fiction, which is properly concerned with the “inner recesses” (*ura*) of history, those things which “cannot be known to true history (*seishi*)” (91, 166). Nor does it seem possible for the two to coexist in the same body: “an aptitude for writing history being essentially different from a talent for writing poetry or fiction, those who have a talent for writing fiction are never those with an aptitude for history, while those whose aptitude is for history will never have a talent for fiction” (89, 161). The chapter Tsubouchi devotes to the historical novel ends up with a distinctly mixed-up account of the genre. Historical fiction, as a genre that necessarily requires a talent for both history and fiction, would seem to be an impossibility. Ultimately, Tsubouchi relies on tautology to distinguish the two: history is factual, fiction fictitious. History is concerned with “narrating events,” and historians must “substantiate every incident” (163, 90). Writers of historical novels, by contrast, are under no such obligation. In exploring that which “cannot be known to true history,” the novelist is free to exercise his imagination in order to “supply the missing facts” (90, 163-4).

I’d like to call your attention to the familiarity of this debate: for it is exactly the debate opened up by the publication of Scott’s Waverley novels in the West. In the reaction to Scott we can find the same positing of history and fiction as binary opposites, with history aligned with rational qualities like accuracy, argument, and so on. Fiction by contrast is associated with frills and mannerism, with artifice.

Still, history and fiction have enjoyed a very long association; the adversarial relationship has more than a little flavor of sibling rivalry. Scott and his supporters defended his novels as a superior form of history: they pointed repeatedly to orthodox histories’ inability to address how it *felt* to live in the midst of social upheaval, and they suggested that only fiction could adequately chronicle the experience of historical change. And when Scott’s critics decried his novels for the damage they might do to an unwitting public, they assumed that the novels could and would be read as histories: “The guides of public opinion cannot be too jealous in guarding against the encroachments of the writers of fiction upon the province of true history, nor too faithful in pointing out every transgression, however small it may appear, of the sacred fences by which it is protected.”⁹ Such protestations only suggest that the sacred fences are perhaps rather too easily breached.

But more to the point (and to shift the focus to the ways historians nowadays operate), it has become a commonplace that history is both a fiction and the antithesis of fiction. Nearly thirty years on since Hayden White’s *Metahistory* (1973) and the ‘linguistic turn’ many historians seem quite willing to admit that their work is emplotted and troped, that the history they write about is over (past) and present only in the form of complex discursive objects (sources) that are themselves plotted, troped, etc. And yet we’ll also insist that there’s

an irreducible kernel of reality in our sources that dictates against certain representational strategies (let's call these fiction). Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, for example, argue in their recent *Telling the Truth about History* that artifice necessarily plays a role in the writing of history, but also maintain that

History is crucially distinguished from fiction by curiosity about what actually happened in the past. Beyond the self—outside the realm of imagination—lies a landscape cluttered with the detritus of past living, a *mélange* of clues and codes informative of a moment as real as this present one.¹⁰

We are still, evidently, caught in the same rut, trying to ascertain where history ends and fiction begins (or vice versa), worrying about how much imagination may be brought to reconstructing the past, and, while admitting that the two are perilously similar, but insisting nevertheless that they can be prised apart. Nor, indeed, have the terms of the debate shifted much in the last two hundred years. For most historians, the debate between history and fiction still unfolds as a contest between the reality of history and the irreality of fiction. Writers of historical fiction stressing, just as Scott did, the amount of research that underpins the fiction and asserting that they are as true to the past as any historian.

Ōgai and the Problem with Fiction

I remarked at outset that Ōgai's "Rekishi sono mama to rekishi banare" is a curious essay. This is so for several reasons. The foremost oddity may well be the choice of "Sanshō Dayū" as a vehicle for thinking about history and fiction. For the story isn't a rewriting of actual events—as was case with his other historical fiction—but a retelling of a story from the past. Ōgai's "Sanshō Dayū" is distilled from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century redactions of a family of legends and tales that date back to the sixteenth century or earlier. The "historical reality" that Ōgai seems so anxious to respect just isn't to be found. The work is fiction, based on other fictions, and therefore doubly (triply?) removed from any sort of "reality."

Second, despite defense of his "fictionalization" of the story, Ōgai is not really interested in upholding fiction as an alternative to history. Unlike Scott or Bakin, he doesn't stand up for historical fiction as a more accessible or more complete kind of history; he doesn't make the argument that he's offering a kind of history—the history of manners, for instance—that official history is ill equipped to deal with. At the same time, interestingly, he isn't really an advocate for history either. As he researched and wrote his historical tales, he found himself, he says, increasingly and "unknowingly" "bound by history" (*shirazu shirazu rekishi ni shibarareta* 知らず識らず歴史に縛られた). It's with the idea of escaping those bonds that he wrote "Sanshō Dayū." When he admits at the end of the essay, in what he terms a "true confession," to being disappointed with the results achieved in the story, we might, I think, do well to wonder what exactly it was he hoped to accomplish. Fiction doesn't seem to be an antidote to the feeling of being "bound" or "choked" (*aegikurushinda* 喘ぎ苦しんだ) by history. On the other hand, respecting historical reality and refusing to change the historical record—these don't seem very satisfying ways of proceeding either.

Ōgai, it would seem, has a different set of problems in mind. It's not the fiction/reality binary that really exercises him, as a closer inspection of "Sanshō Dayū" will reveal. The first

thing to note is that Ōgai isn't at all forthcoming in "Rekisho sono mama" about the ways he's reworked the story. The changes he admits to are the least consequential of the alterations he's made to the original tale. He emphasizes, as I noted earlier, his fiddling with the facts, (which is essentially meaningless, n.b., with respect to "Sanshō Dayū"), but says nothing about more profound ways he's changed his source materials. As Carole Cavanaugh notes, Ōgai reworks the Sanshō Dayū legends into "the unrealistic structure of a fairy tale."¹¹ (This includes manufacturing a happy ending for the story, "powerful talismans, separation from parents, parallel but gender-specific experiences, the repetition of the number three, coping with strange surroundings and unfamiliar tasks, the attainment of practical knowledge through the assistance of older strangers.") The "original" legends came out of the *sekkyō bushi* tradition, and scholars have identified dozens of didactic and religious tales as possible sources for "Sanshō Dayū." Ōgai's immediate source, a seventeenth-century compilation of Buddhist parables and sermons, orders and edits these loosely connected legends into something approaching a coherent story, but it still retains some crucial *sekkyō bushi* features, including the narrator (i.e., the voice of the one delivering the sermon). In addition to telling the story, this narrator offers a running commentary on the story as it unfolds, mentions alternative plot lines, and in other ways makes his presence known. Perhaps the greatest change Ōgai made to the story was to recompose it according to the conventions of modern, realist narrative.

This suggests that Ōgai's problems with "Sanshō Dayū" have less to do with what he identifies in "Rekisho sono mama" as the issue—that is, altering the sources—as with another feature of fiction. Ōgai defined fiction as a practice that involves "freely picking and choosing among facts and pulling everything together into a coherent whole" (*jijitsu o jiyū ni shusha shite matomari o tsuketa narai* 事実を自由に取捨して纏りをつけた習い). It's this trick of tying everything together into a neat conclusion, in short narration, that truly vexes him.

Ōgai as an Antiquarian

Of course this trick, which Ōgai explicitly identifies with fiction, applies (as he surely knew) just as easily to history. Though he doesn't articulate it in "Rekisho sono mama," his sense of escaping from or overthrowing history develops along a different axis from the typical history vs. fiction debate. Even as he was writing historical fiction like "Sanshō Dayū," he was beginning to write the "historical biographies" (*shiden* 史伝) which would "crown" his career. These are stupendous, flabby, massive things, compounded of undigested source material and digression upon digression. Their most obvious characteristic is that they consciously resist narration, story-telling.

In the introduction to *Izawa Ranken*, Ōgai lays out his "method":

Since I am only a novice historian, I intend to take certain liberties with my use of source materials. It will not much matter if I happen to lose my way. And if it turns out that I end up hopelessly lost, then I will simply lay down my pen. A random, hit-or-miss plan, to be sure, something that I should like to term a "posture of posturelessness" [*mutaido no taido* 無態度の態度]. Navigating one's course by such a planless plan may well appear perilous and foolhardy to the casual observer. But

the novice historian is also an incurable optimist. I picture him lost in aimless meandering, when suddenly the path opens out onto an unanticipated vista, broad and stunning.

Pursuing this “planless plan,” Ōgai offers readers reams of undigested source materials and tidbits of poetry, biographical data, indeed any information that came to hand, as he wanders through the web of relationships—intellectual, familial, etc.—in which his subjects are enmeshed.

Though he describes his goals in the language of fact vs. fiction—e.g., midway through *Izawa Ranken*, he avows that

In my writing I have devoted myself entirely to transmitting facts and have studiously avoided crossing over into imaginative narration. I have sought a secure foundation in what is objective; indulging in the subjective has not interested me. Those instances where I appear to have violated this rule are mere touches of imagination that supplement deficiencies in the factual record. If I were suddenly to cross over into critical or evaluative commentary, . . . I would inevitably overindulge myself in subjectivity. There would be no way to prevent my imagination from running off at full gallop. This sort of thing I absolutely reject—

his real aim is to avoid any suggestion that there is someone “behind” the material, organizing it and shaping it into something coherent and meaningful. In works like *Izawa Ranken* and *Shibue Chūsai*, Ōgai reveals that the “historical reality” he so respects has two characteristics. First it is thoroughly materialist: Ōgai is interested in sources, not interpretations, ideas, or the like. Second, and more important, it is purposeless by design: “As I have said many times, it does not interest me to debate whether or not these works serve any useful purpose. I write them because I want to, and that is all.”¹²

In these respects, Ōgai seems very much the antiquarian: enraptured by his materials, which he pretends to have stumbled across, determined not to pull them into some semblance of order, but to revel in their randomness and their distinctiveness, their ability to resist ordering. He resists as well the temptation to “unmask” his materials, to reveal them to stand for something else. It would be relatively easy to convert *Ranken* and *Chūsai* into emblematic figures. As intellectuals living through the tumults of the bakumatsu period, when the orthodoxies of Tokugawa rule came increasingly under question, their lives and struggles might be read as symptomatic of the twilight of the shogunate; alternatively, since he stresses the ordinary and everyday, Ōgai, were he to operate as a historian, might find in the ordinariness of their lives a lesson about the ways political turmoil translates (or fails to translate) into the realm of everyday life. Ōgai, however, declines to look past his characters to the “real” political or economic context. He resists the historical imperative to turn them into exempla; he refuses to make their lives meaningful in the ordinary way.

Antiquarian knowledge has for these reasons been ridiculed by historians as being excessive and fundamentally deranged; but there is a method to the antiquarian's madness. The insistence that there is something valuable to the thing in itself—not in the narratives in which it is made to play a part or in the arguments for which it serves as data—comprises a double rebuke to our conventional practice of history. On the one hand, it accords materials

that are not readily included in historical narratives a place and a value. Much of daily life and material culture—or in Ōgai's case, the everyday lives of insignificant scholars—falls within the category of things easily overlooked by history, either because they don't seem to change or because they can't be connected with bona fide events (such as the French Revolution or the Meiji Restoration). Second, antiquarian practice turns to the very material out of which history builds its narratives to obstruct that fundamental propensity of the discipline. To historians, who insist that the past can be explained, that we can adduce beginnings and endings, that the material of the past is significant because it can be shown to lead somewhere, antiquarians like Ōgai seem to respond, "No, there's just stuff, fascinating stuff that's of no practical value." Ōgai's *shiden* highlights, indirectly to be sure, the most fictional aspect of historical practice: the belief that history coheres, that it isn't just one damn thing after another. Walter Bagehot objected to Macauley's *History of England*, "It is too omniscient. Everything is too plain." One can imagine Ōgai concurring. ("We want historians to confirm our belief that the present rests upon profound intentions and immutable necessities. But the true historical sense confirms our existence among countless lost events," Foucault says in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.")

Coda: History and Antiquarianism

The long collaboration between anthropology and history mimics, at least from a historian's perspective, the division of labor between historians and antiquarians (without, I hope, quite as much of the condescension). The study of material culture and everyday life, of structures, and other things that stubbornly resist change (and therefore the narration of change) has by and large been left to anthropologists. At the same time we historians have been plagued by the suspicion that anthropologists are onto something important, that we might be missing something by not paying attention to the realms they investigate. Hence, I suspect, the vast and long-lasting interest in Clifford Geertz and "thick description." (Far more important, I'd guess, in history than in anthropology; even the much heralded return to narrative of the past decade is emphatically post-"thick description." Simon Schama's narratives are rife with the kind of telling moments Geertz made famous. In Japan, Amino Yoshihiko's widely influential style was born out of a long encounter with anthropology.) Here was a method that bridged anthropology and history, allowing one to attribute significance to the seemingly random eddies of daily life (for, of course, thick description showed them to be far from random or insignificant). By such means, cat massacres could be connected to the French Revolution or *eejanaika* carousing to the end of the Tokugawa order.

One wonders whether historians will ever be similarly moved to pay attention to the products of antiquarians knowledge. A love of old things is supposedly fundamental to historical study, yet our desire to assign greater meaning to these things can easily lead to our forgetting the fact that they didn't arrive ready-made with significance. It takes something of an antiquarian sensibility to put objects (events, social movements, etc.) into their true context, in which their meanings were not certain, in which they could play a part (or none at all) in a plurality of possible futures. History as a discipline is altogether too interested in explaining why things had to turn out the way they did; it takes something of the antiquarian to remind us that things might have been otherwise.

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NOTES

¹ Ferris 1991, p. 137.

² *Ōgai zenshū*, v. 6, p. 229.

³ Takizawa Bakin, *Chinsetsu yumiharizuki*, NKBT, 60:227.

⁴ Ibid., 60:411. See also Ishikawa 1988, pp. 40–51.

⁵ Takizawa Bakin, *Chinsetsu yumiharizuki*, 61:129. I have slightly modified the translation of the passage found in Suzuki 1996, p. 17.

⁶ In *Haichi shichi hōsoku*, 1835. For a German translation, see Woldering 1993. Tsubouchi Shōyō discusses some of these rules in *Shōsetsu shinzui* (1936), pp. 90–95; in English, see Tsubouchi 1981, pp. 75–77.

⁷ Takizawa Bakin, *Okame hachimoku*. Quoted in Ishikawa 1988, pp. 44–45.

⁸ Tsubouchi 1981, p. 2. For the Japanese original, see Tsubouchi 1936, p. 11. Subsequent references are to these works and appear in parentheses in the text.

⁹ These are the words of one Thomas McCrie, Presbyterian clergyman and author of biography of John Knox. Quoted in Ferris 1991.

¹⁰ Appleby et al. 1994, p. 259.

¹¹ Cavanaugh 2000, p. 14.

¹² *Kanchōrō Kanwa*.