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The Noble Art of Procrastination: Writer's Block as a Motif in *Watakushi Shōsetsu*

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Introduction

As any avid reader of the so-called *watakushi shōsetsu* genre of I-fiction will have noticed, the protagonist's inability to write is subject matter that features often within the genre. Such subject matter may take various shapes and perform different functions, ranging from supplying a leitmotif for a certain work to constituting the very theme of another. This essay aims to highlight the motif of *writer's block* as it appears in a range of selected I-fictional works in order to delineate a few of its functions. Needless to say, depiction of this phenomenon is by no means restricted to the genre of *watakushi shōsetsu*—in fact, many a writer across time and space has dabbled with the theme—but it seems that it came to the fore in this genre which held sway for a couple of decades in early twentieth century Japan. Of this phenomenon Tanizaki Seiji has pertinently noted that, “The Taishō period was a curious age in which a story about writer's block was perfectly acceptable. The image of an author bewailing his loss of creativity appealed to readers . . . *Bundan* [literary circles] writers actually gained popularity by revealing how difficult it was for them to write.”¹ According to Hirano Ken's typology, I-fiction writers may broadly be divided into a self-destructive type (*hametsu gata*), representative of *watakushi shōsetsu*, or conversely, into a harmonious type (*chōwa gata*), typically found in the so-called *shinkyō shōsetsu* type of novel.² This essay opposes the quintessential self-destructive writer Kasai Zenzō (1887–1928) with the harmonious type par excellence, Shiga Naoya (1883–1971), in order to illustrate a few literary approaches to the predicament. My aim is to steer clear of ontological questions about the ‘I’ of I-fiction—much has already been written on this theme—and instead highlight how different approaches to writer's block function to shape the image of the persona behind the pen.

The Case of Kasai Zenzō: Self-Vilification as Creative Impulse

Tanizaki Seiji has further noted that while there is virtually no Taishō era author who has never written a self-referential novel (*jiko shōsetsu*), Kasai Zenzō stands out as a radical I-novelist in that his works are all based on himself and his surroundings, with the exception of two or three pieces.³ In the words of Odagiri Hideo, furthermore, Kasai is the author of the “most watakushishōsetsu-like watakushishōsetsu.”⁴ Reflective of his self-destructive leaning, Kasai's manifold, often rambling, explorations of his inability to compose appear on the page in the overall context of his paranoia and persecution complex, spurred on by a chaotic life situation. As has been observed, unless Kasai

¹ Quoted in Fowler, 264.

² Hirano, 25–26.

³ Tanizaki, 376.

⁴ Odagiri, 24.

inflicted pain upon himself to the utmost degree in real life, the creative impulse would simply not stir in him.⁵ Interestingly, though, this tormented mental state neither reflects nor generates self-contempt; on the contrary, Kasai often shows signs of great self-confidence. Despite the agonies he purportedly goes through, the tone of voice is not infrequently cheerful, bordering on the hilarious. One example of this is the short story “Furō” 浮浪 (Adrift) published in 1921, a work in which the inability to write triggers the entire narration. In the opening, the I-narrator declares to his younger brother that he is going away somewhere to write (*doko ka ni itte kaite kuru tsumori da*, 131), in order to escape loans incurred in his Kamakura neighborhood. The brother, though, who knows only too well that similar attempts in the past have ended in failure, cannot conceal signs of unease as he wishes him good luck (*umaku kakeru to ii desu ga nē*. . . , 132). Incidentally, the brother’s unease is shared by any experienced reader of Kasai’s works. Leaving his son in the care of a maid, the protagonist sets out for the ocean resort of Ōarai to stay at an inn where he has previously spent half a year.

The piece that Kasai has set his heart on writing is to deal with a recently deceased cousin, intended as a sequel to an unnamed previously published unfinished manuscript. As we learn, he has completely lost the urge to write it, but now he has compelling (read financial) reasons for not prevaricating any further; no matter what, he must return from his sojourn with twenty or thirty pages of manuscript (*kondo wa donna koto o shite mo, nijūmai demo sanjūmai demo kaite kaeraneba naranai to omotta*, 135). On the evening of the third day he finally resolves to set aside his habitual drinking to face the writing desk until after two at night, producing six or seven pages. The reader, however, cannot dispel doubts about this newfound energy. In Kasai there are thus always plot elements designed to derail the hero’s creative activity. The narration of these plot elements detailing what keeps him from writing then becomes the text we are holding in our hands. And sure enough, when the landlady brings his breakfast on the following morning she begs him to settle the bill, today being the last day of the year according to the lunar calendar. The hero, who is out of money, as usual in Kasai, is left with no choice but to bargain with the woman for a respite of five or six days until he has finished his work. As the innkeepers persist the hero pleads with an acquaintance living nearby to intervene on his behalf, assuring him that he will definitely make rapid headway with the manuscript from now on. The respite is granted and the narrator continues unhampered on the manuscript until the fifteenth page during two all-night sessions, until the pen abruptly stops (*pattari to fude ga susumanakunatta*, 138). Not accustomed to setting aside the nightly drinking habit to work into the wee hours instead, his mental and physical states have fallen into turmoil. After gazing at the writing desk absentmindedly for a couple of days the hero tears the manuscript to pieces in disgust! Once again he now has to assure his supportive friend that, although he is thoroughly fed up with the present manuscript, there is no

⁵ Tanizaki, 378. On this point, Kasai is reminiscent of August Strindberg (1849–1912), whom Kasai had read and apparently been inspired by. According to one view, Strindberg purposely staged his own life crises in order to obtain material for writing. See, for instance, Evert Sprinchorn: “Strindberg created his experiences in order to write about them. Interested in exploring the frontier where jealousy encroaches on madness, he set up a model of the terrain in his own home. . . . But Strindberg could not step out of his role without being called a fraud. He had to play the game for real even if it meant injuring himself and others.” (xiv). Moreover, Kasai’s persecution complex is a literary theme that appears as strikingly *Strindbergesque*. At one point, in “Adrift” for instance, we read: “it also felt like an admonition of the Gods to sink lower into the depths” (*yahari motto soko made ochikome to no kami no imashime ka to mo omowareta*, 157). This line could have been drawn from Strindberg’s novel *Inferno* (1896–1897).

need to worry: as he cannot return empty-handed he will most definitely produce another in the next few days.

The next morning he wakes up early for a change and finds himself in the mood to confront the writing desk once more. The clear sky and sparkling blue ocean infuse him with fresh resolve to write (*Konna kimochi nara kakeru zo!* 139). He imagines the life of his unfortunate cousin who lived gratefully day-by-day and is filled with a feeling of sympathy for his humility. He has now found the right state of mind in which to honestly write the life of the cousin (*Kore de ii no da kō iu kimochi de sunao ni kakeba ii no da*, 139), and he puts down the title on a fresh sheet of writing paper. He realizes that the reason he has been unable to continue on the manuscript in the first place was not merely a matter of technique but rather his guilty conscience, a more fundamental shortcoming. He sits down to write a few pages in his newfound honest and humble attitude. But in the afternoon the friend who has negotiated with the owners of the inn returns to tell him that they refuse to extend their forbearance on the payment for nothing and are demanding that he pawns his belongings. Naturally, this course of events throws our hero off track yet again. Because this occurs precisely when he has attained a new mood of serenity, he is all the more inclined to see it as the intervention of an ironic twist of fate (*Senkoku no kōfukuna kibun no sugu ato datta dake ni, jibun ni taishite hinikuna kimochi o kanjinai wake ni ikanakatta*, 141).

In the remainder of the story the hero moves from cheap lodging to cheap lodging while bargaining to borrow money from various persons and coming up with schemes to have publishers in Tokyo transfer him advances. The one thing he cannot do is to return to Tokyo without a manuscript in hand (*kondo wa dōshiteno kakazu niwa kaerenai yōna jjō ni natte iru*, 149). At one point, while waiting eagerly for a money transfer from his brother to arrive, it seems for an instant that the much-coveted manuscript will eventually materialize. The sunny, neat and pleasant room he manages to find puts him in the mood to get on and write ten to fifteen pages worth of manuscript. But his resolve only lasts for five or six pages (*yahari gorokumai kaku to ato ga tsuzukanakatta*, 154). While deliberating whether to seek help from the police or even pawning his fountain pen as a last resort, the money transfer finally arrives. Infused with fresh courage our hero contemplates making one last try at the manuscript while wiring for more funds from elsewhere but in the end decides to return to Tokyo on the advice of the landlady. Towards the end of the story the protagonist admits defeat but immediately sets his mind on the next journey. As he tells the maid that has been looking after his son, it is now or never (*kondo koso wa kitto ishūkan gurai de kakiagete kane o motte kaette kuru kara*, 163). Incidentally, three and a half years later, Kasai published a short story with the title of “Itoko” 従弟 (Cousin).

While “Adrift” at times reads like slapstick comedy, there are also ominous, more agonizing sides to Kasai’s writer’s block. “Jakusha” 弱者 (The Oppressed One), published in 1925, is a long musing on what exactly it is that is thwarting the narrator. Here, the inability to write is inscribed in the text in a literal sense, inasmuch the narration is the product of dictation by Kasai, structured in the form of a monologue directed to an interlocutor in the second person (*kimi*).⁶ Interestingly, the text retains traces of its provenance in a monologue: ‘What on earth is it I want to say, intend to say?’

⁶ Kasai describes the chaotic circumstances under which the dictation took place in another of his dictated pieces, his 1927 “Suikyōsha no kokuhaku” 酔狂者の告白 (A mad drunk’s monologue), 329.

(*Jibun wa ittai nani o, shaberitai tsumori nan darō, shaberu tsumori nan darō?*, 230). Throughout the monologue he strives to set the addressee right about his state of mind defying the addressee's various past accusations against him. Due to (financial) circumstances and neuralgia he has been unable to hold a pen for over half a year. According to his established reputation, handed down by friends, he is suffering from persecution complex, but 'today' he has read in a certain journal that within the definition of paranoia there is a subdivision of depressive paranoia (*yūutsu mōsōkyō*, 227), and he believes his case to be closer to this disorder. Accordingly, while he might be subservient and passive and exaggerating his helplessness and uselessness, he is not suffering from the kind of superstition that would arise from a lack of knowledge and understanding. His greatest fear, though, is that of losing his mind (*jibun wa kichigai ni dake wa naritakunai*, 236). Yet, while exposing himself to self-accusation, he cannot resist the temptation to insert some self-irony: "Coward, weakling—in other words, the story becomes more interesting" (*Ikujinashi, jakusha,—tsumari, hanashi ga omoshiroku-naru*, 226). In interior monologue form, the protagonist oscillates between hope and resignation: 'I might still be saved. I still have something left within me. I can still go on working' (*Jibun wa mada sukuwareru kamo shirenai. Mada jibun niwa, nanimono ka ga nokotte iru. Jibun wa mada shigoto o shite ikeru*, 237). But then, only a few lines later, he relapses into resignation: "But after all I'm a weakling" (*Tokoroga, yahari boku wa yowamushi da*, 238).

Kasai's "Kohan shuki" 湖畔手記 (Lakeside Memoirs), published in 1924, is another of his pieces written under duress at the Yumoto hot-spring resort over a two-month period. Kasai here tones down his trademark eccentricity to deliver a more subdued and lyrical prose in what Tanizaki Seiji considers as the only work where he honestly lays bare his innermost feelings.⁷ As Kasai reveals in the story, he originally intended to address his words in a regretful tone to his wife—whom he invokes throughout the text—as he outlines the circumstances surrounding his lover, but that it somehow managed to turn into some sort of weird novel (*benna shōsetsu meita mono*, 156) without him noticing. Even so, he must turn the account into remuneration as soon as possible before he can descend from the mountain resort. Yet again, the narrative revolves around his deteriorating health and inability to work, a nightly drinking habit being his only relief. What is inhibiting him in this case seems to be a sense of profound regret—caused by a guilty conscience towards his wife and over squandering his life in general—that puts him in a state of self-pity: "Work, just like everything else, proves useless. Being abandoned by friends and life alike. . . you fool, fleeing from place to place as you wail miserably. I cannot stand gazing at my own miserable figure." (*Shigoto no hō mo dame, mina dame na koto ni naru no da. Kōshite subete no yūjin kara mo suterare, seikatsu kara mo suterarete . . . mijime na himē o agetsutsu nigemawaru odorokamono yo! Jibun wa jibun no sono, mijime na sugata o gyōshi suru ni taenai*, 122). For a while Kasai finds solace in the peaceful surroundings, but even that does not last long. Although the reader will be familiar with most features of his interior monologue from other works, his agony here leaves a sincerer impression. Rather than inflicting pain on himself so as to spark the creative impulse, the I-narrator appears genuinely resigned to his fate.

⁷ Tanizaki, 382.

The Case of Shiga Naoya: In Search of Emotional Equilibrium

Similarly to Kasai Zenzō, writer's block is a frequently occurring motif in the I-novels of Shiga Naoya. In his case, though, the motif does not belong to an overall scheme of self-inflicted pain and exploration of the self's wretchedness. As with Kasai, writers' block in Shiga is subjected to exploration of varying profundity depending on the story. In a work like the 1914 "Ko o nusumu hanashi" 児を盗む話 (A Tale of Stealing a Child), the I-protagonist's idleness provides the narrative situation for the unfolding of the (imagined) snatching away of a little girl. The narrator has fled Tokyo after falling out with his father and rents a house perched on a mountain slope facing the sea in a small town (Onomichi) along the Inland Sea coast. The change of environment initially brings him joy. After resting for some time in a settled state of mind he commences on a long work, writing through the night until dawn. In the dead of night he manages to bring his whole system to a pleasant state of excitement. At such a depiction of ease behind the pen, the experienced reader of Shiga senses a premonition of danger. Sure enough, the protagonist's 'writer's high' was not meant to last for long: "When these nights had continued for about half a month I gradually grew exhausted. I felt heavy in the head, my shoulders became stiff and a somehow disagreeable mood took hold of me. Falling into sleep at dawn I started moaning from bad dreams. I just could not get a good sleep any longer" (*Konna yoru ga hantsuki hodo tsuzuku to watashi wa dandan ni tsukarete kita. Atama ga omoku kata ga kotte nan to naku fukigen ni natte kita. Akegata no netsuki niwa yoku unasareru yō ni natta. Jukusui to iu koto ga maru de dekinakunatta*, 102). Enduring displeasure and fatigue he yet endeavors to complete the half-finished manuscript, but to no avail: "But I gradually grew dissatisfied with the result. More and more I started lying around in the room in distraction (*Shikashi sono dekihae wa dandan ni ki ni iranai mono ni natte itta. Watashi wa bon'yari to beya no naka ni korogatte iru koto ga ōkunatta*, 104). As the pleasant excitement has now completely disappeared, the work becomes increasingly irksome. On top of it all, his vaguely unsettled mind will not permit him to sit still, forcing him to abandon writing: "In the end I decided to suspend working. After that I started spending my time aimlessly loafing about day after day" (*Watashi wa tōtō shigoto o chūshi suru koto ni shita. Sore kara wa bura bura to mui ni sono hi sono hi o sugosu yō ni natta*, 104).

It is in this listless mood that the narrator one night spots a charming six-year-old girl accompanied by family at a *rakugo* performance. His attitude starts changing after fantasies about the girl and about stalking her miraculously break his deadlock. Spotting her on a second night at the *rakugo*, the narrator's fantasies escalate to snatching her away and making her his possession. Since the girl does not appear a third time, though, he ends up snatching another girl of similar age and bringing her home with him. The narrator's reckless act creates a tension within him that he has not experienced in a long time, and this becomes a catalyst for him to start to write again:

I finally managed to do it. I managed to pull off a dreadful thing. I praised myself for having succeeded in carrying it through. Now there is no turning back anymore. Now I only have to see it through. For the moment I don't know how to go about it. But in any case, I've managed to do something that I hadn't done or wouldn't have succeeded in doing even if I tried, until now. Within me there is a far too delicate solicitude. I have now conquered that solicitude.

(Tōtō yatte noketa. Osoroshii koto o yatte noketa. Sore no yarikireta jibun ga ureshii. Mō koto o kaesu koto wa nai. Ima wa saki e denukeru dake da. Sore wa dō sureba ii ka wa ima wa shiranai. To mo kaku mo ima made ni yatta koto, yarō toshitemo dekinakatta koto o yatte noketa. Jibun ni wa amari ni yowayowashii koryo ga aru. Sono koryo ni jibun wa uchikatta, 115).

What this example shows us is how the imagined stealing of a child becomes a sort of displacement for the protagonist's quest to overcome his mental deadlock to start writing again.⁸

Shiga's most intriguing exploration of the *kakenai shōsetsuka* theme is undoubtedly his famous 1917 novel *Wakai* 和解 (Reconciliation). The story commences on July 31, the first anniversary of the death of the I-narrator's first child. A short while into the narrative we learn that the narrator has a manuscript to finish by August 19. He starts writing at ten o'clock on a certain night but finds the material somehow difficult to treat (*zairyō ga nandaka toriatsukainikukatta*, 327). He changes the initial title of the story from *kūsōka* to *musōka*, both words translating roughly into dreamer or daydreamer. He endeavors to write about his unhappy relationship with his father that played out around the time when he was living alone in Onomichi six years earlier. However, out of misgivings about writing down personal grudges against his father in one of his creative works, and because of his complicated state of mind, he hesitates. He tries twice but fails both times, as he understands that he lacks the ability to look at his experiences accurately and judge them impartially. As time is running out he sees he has no choice but to change subject matter. Now the writing runs surprisingly smoothly and he manages to complete the manuscript by the sixteenth.

Further along the narrative, though, he decides to give *The Daydreamer* another go. At this point the narrator gets involved in an intricate disquisition on the complexities involved in writing reality (*jijitsu o kaku*, 334). Especially when writing about the discord with his father he becomes acutely aware of these difficulties. In addition, the aforementioned reluctance to put his personal grudge down on paper hampers the flow of the pen (*fude no susumi o nakanaka ni jama o shita*, 334). The narrator is torn between conflicting emotions of grudge against and sympathy for his father, something that further complicates putting them into words. Next, the narrative takes a surprising turn when the narrator reveals that the displeasure that the father is now expressing against him has nothing to do with the old grudge that the narrator feels unable to write about (*Shikashi chichi ga ima akirasama ni jibun ni tsuite itte iru fukai wa sore de wa nakatta*, 335). Then he goes into great detail about an incident that occurred the year before last in Kyoto, when the father had visited him intending to defuse the discord that had arisen between them. The narrator obviously feels better at ease behind the pen in detailing this instance of discord with his father. Moreover, in the remainder of the narrative we find inserted various incidents from the past involving the father that have resulted in discord between the two and cast a disagreeable shadow over their relationship. In a sense, the narrator is writing down what he has just declared himself unable to write.

As the narrator famously reaches reconciliation with the father towards the end of the narrative, the impetus to treat the subject matter involving the discord with the father—although this is what

⁸ Shiga has explained that half of the novel is true but that the section about stealing the child is based on fantasies (*kūsō*), although he seriously held those fantasies. Further, even though he might have been far from carrying them out in reality he depended on such fantasies. See *Shiga Naoya zenshū*, vol. 2, pp. 632–33.

the novel is basically all about—dissolves into thin air together with the plans for *The Daydreamer* (*Jibun ni wa mō chichi to no fuwa o zairyō toshita “Musōka” o sono mama ni kakitsuzukeru ki wa nakunatta*, 413). In contrast to his original plans, the narrator by the end of the novel decides to write about the reconciliation with his father, the topic that occupies his thoughts the most at the moment (*Jibun wa yahari ima jibun no atama o ichiban shimete iru chichi to no wakai o kaku koto ni shita*, 418). This is to all appearances the novel we hold in our hands. After all, the narrator was obviously unable to write about the discord with his father—or was he?

Conclusion

Kasai Zenzō’s inability to write is part and parcel of his self-destructive behavior, paranoia and urge to portray himself as a wretched, hounded creature. Given the portrait of himself that he endeavors to conjure up for the reader, he cannot possibly appear to be at ease behind the pen. If he cannot write what he wants, he can at least write about not being able to write, on those rare occasions when he is seemingly released from the block. This is the narrative situation conjured up by his stories. How are we, then, to understand Kasai’s frequent adaptations of the motif? In the above, I discussed narrative elements in Kasai designed to derail the narrator and throw him off balance. Edward Fowler has discussed such derailing elements in terms of ‘narrative deflections’ that make out the frame of a story. By default, this frame itself becomes the story.⁹ Hence, Kasai’s writer’s block is akin to a sort of fictional ploy, a vehicle that carries the narration forward. This point is made eminently clear in a marginal piece like his 1922 “Asa mairi” 朝詣り (Morning Pilgrimage), where the narration is driven by the efforts of the *kakenai shōsetsuka* to evade a messenger from a publisher who is pestering the narrator to deliver a previously solicited manuscript. In this story we find inserted an account of his visit to Tokyo during the end-of-year festivities a short while earlier. Yet, returning back to the here and now of the first narrative, the narrator declares: ‘I thought I would throw up a smokescreen by writing about those end-of-year incidents, but I just couldn’t do it (*Sō shita toshikure no koto demo kaite ocha o nigashitai to omotta ga, dōshiteno kakenai*, 318).

Shiga Naoya’s various explorations of the *kakenai shōsetsuka* predicament, on the other hand, carry different implications. Overall, Shiga’s self-confidence and control behind the pen do not lend themselves to fashioning an image of the writer as wretched. Gone, too, is the impression that fictional ploys are being used to propel the narration. Although Shiga in effect wrote several works where the exploration of the inability to write becomes the story itself, the function of the motif here rather appears to lend the narration an aura of sincerity by conjuring up an image of the author struggling pen-in-hand.¹⁰ In his self-reflective oeuvre Shiga is constantly in search of mental equilibrium that will allow him to treat his subject matter in a manner that is faithful to his state

⁹ Fowler, 265.

¹⁰ Of *Reconciliation*, Fowler has observed: “In a literary culture that defined realism specifically in terms of authorial ‘presence’ rather in terms of verisimilitude, Shiga actually gained more credibility by making a show of reticence than he ever would have by making a ‘full’ confession” (212). In general, it might be argued that writer’s block, in being self-reflective, serves as a metafictional device that would work against the kind of sincerity that *watakushi shōsetsu* aspires to. In this Taishō predilection for the motif, though, the irony of metafiction appears to be totally lacking.

of mind, without unnecessary embellishment. In the image of the writer that the text calls forth, it appears as though the quest for equilibrium is what matters to him while the narration itself is a mere by-product in the process. Moreover, contemporary readers would surely have been more disposed to accept Shiga's various aspirations to sincerity than today's readers. After all, the works discussed in this essay were written long before 'suspicious' reading practices became mandatory, at least in academic circles. What this initial probing of the terrain has shown us is that when the narrators are not taken as identical to their writers, their narratives open up more possibilities of interpretation. It suggests to us that the motif of writer's block was one of the vehicles used by authors to help shape their image in the eye of the reading public.

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