

History as it is or history ignored? The search for a “new” Historical Fiction in Meiji Japan

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I. *The Historical novel in Japan: a plethora of possible definitions over an apparently simple phenomenon.*

The tradition of writing historical records, which traces back to the *Classic of Documents* (*Shu Jing*) emerged in China since the times of the Han dynasty (206 b.C.E. – 220 C.E.), and extended its influence on the literary output of Asian countries surrounding the Chinese empire, where Classical Chinese prose came to be revered as the highest expression of both learning and literary skills throughout the centuries. The beauty of passages such as those that narrate the biographies (*Lie Zhuan*) of prominent historical figures or the subtle, elusive reasoning of thinkers such as Zhuangzi retain the distinct literary quality that makes these works appreciable as fine narratives, often constructed around an impressive amount of historical documentation.

Japanese scholars admired and imitated such manners of writing down history in what they may have perceived early on as a distinctively “Chinese” fashion, to the point that they allegedly strived to rethink that model – perhaps to surpass it – and devise their own concept of “writing down” history in what is perhaps the most ancient complete document of Japan: the collections of Japanese mythology known as *Kojiki* (*A Record of Ancient Matters*, ca. 712 CE). This first great history of Japan may point to a “Japanese” perspective on the custom of historical interpretation by means of literary retelling: the chronicle undoubtedly was meant to deliver a contribution to the preservation of legends and traditions of Japan that the Chinese records had left out, and it is in this respect that it stands as a masterpiece of Japanese antiquity. Since the time of this first great example, a fiction based on what was often thought to be historical evidence spread throughout Japan, from ancient times up to the beginning of the Modern Era.

In the XIXth Century, the florid tradition of writing history took the form of historical fiction (*rekishi bungaku*). The modern eye introduced, or perhaps reaffirmed, the need to shift the focus from “recording historical matters as these have been passed over” to “interpreting history by means of fictionalization”, a process that may have contributed to a more nuanced conception of writing down “things past” (*ko-ji*) for artistic purposes. The Japanese of the Pre-modern era, too, had a tradition of fiction depicting past manners and events, for which, though, historical accuracy was not considered as important as didacticism, or the eagerness to entertain a public with a narrative that indulged in exoticism and fancy. Modern fiction resumed the controversy over faithfulness to the sources which invariably comes along all forms of fiction treating historical materials.

Once again, it needs to be emphasized that the importance of Chinese historical tradition that Japan had inherited, which had modelled a concept of literature, informed the practice of writing down history for the refined (*kanbun*). Putting out a version of historical matter in “Japanese” style (*wabun*) may be looked at, in this respect, as a process of popularization of both history and fiction. The spread of an epic tradition, traditionally associated with medieval bards in the Kamakura (1185-1333) and Muromachi (ca. 1336-1574) periods is also, in a sense, a part of this process. The main difference is that the *enacting* of historical facts perhaps leaves no room for critical reasoning about the sources, whereas these are often implicitly – sometimes, as we shall see, even overtly – discussed in the historical novel. Epics, in other words, originating as a performance, produced and passed on orally for generations before being laid down in written form, mark no real difference between history and interpretations of history, a traditional performing arts in Japan tend to be conservative.

It is worth noting that one iconoclastic author of historical novels, Ishikawa Jun, who also produced a modern interpretation of the *Kojiki*¹¹ is credited to have stated in the '50ties that there is no real "history", but only "interpretations of history". This assumption may be intended to be provocative, yet, Ishikawa hits the point implying that the aim of writing a "historical novel" does not lie in sticking to the facts. In this respect, verifying to which extent an author of historical fiction is respectful of historical evidence may rank second in importance, especially in Japan: real or alleged faithfulness to the sources was the hallmark of the Chinese classical tradition, the Japanese one being more oriented to the "legendary" (*denki-teki*) variation on the theme, though this perception may not apply to Japanese epics as consistently.

Generally speaking, then, it is not difficult to recognize that historical romance in Japan has extolled a major interest in the literary establishment for centuries, and that Japan can count many examples of interpreting historical sources – particularly, but not exclusively, written sources – by means of artistic reworking. The practice of carving elaborate narratives out of historical materials and records is long and deeply rooted in the cultures of both Japan and China. In spite of this flourishing, the modern scholar can sense that defining the significance of writing a "historical fiction" in Meiji Japan will not reveal such a simple, descriptive task.

II. *The Historical Novel in the Modern Era*

Literature in the Meiji Era (1868-1912) has been a subject of such a variety of researches, yet, one feels the lack of a proper, clear, straightforward definition of "historical fiction" not only in the secondary literature about Meiji Japan, but even in more general studies on literary genres in general. Some of the most remarkable efforts of the Meiji literati were directed toward delivering a true, innovative concept of *historical romance* (*rekishi shōsetsu*), and indeed most fiction inspired by historical sources ranked among the finest products of the modern era. Moreover, the debate over the value of prose writing as a means of poetic expression which took place with the first important critical essays conceived after the introduction of European literary theories in Japan included a reevaluation of historical fiction. "Historical fiction" in this context pointed both to the romance sagas that were so popular in the preceding Tokugawa (or Edo 1600-1868) period², and the more new examples grounded on historical records, closer to historiography. The balance between actual history and fictionalization of history heated a debate from the first decades of the Meiji period among literary circles, each promoting a different concept of history, fiction, and the relationship between the two. Sometimes, as we shall see with more detail, one author reconsidered more than once in his career the relationship between factual history, historical recordings or evidence, and the process of writing fiction³. It is clearly mostly a matter of personal taste; yet, this controversy do seem to reveal a methodological paradox⁴.

Usually a necessary framework for literary research, the search for a definition of "historical fiction" in Meiji Japan is something that puzzles the researcher, confronted with a variety of efforts that could be encompassed in the umbrella category of the "historical" novel, and the plethora of theorizations that these often underline⁵. A more "globally oriented" approach, that of comparative literature, which could consist, for instance, of confronting Meiji Japan's historical fiction with that of Scott or Iser⁶, two writers much renown in modern Japan, may reveal useful, but in this case not crucial. Much like the style of Mori Ōgai's first attempt at the "Romantic" *novella*, the so-called "German Trilogy" (*Doitsu Sanbusaku*) ends up showing closer connection to Japanese antiquity than to any European model, or the Japanese "Naturalist" movement reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of Zola's theories, and the *shishōsetsu* (I-novel), a medium of expression in its own respect, Japanese writers

¹¹ The *Shinshaku Kojiki* (*Newly edited Kojiki*), Tokyo, Chikuma Shobō (1960).

² Cfr. Kornicki (1981).

³ More general remarks on this are offered by Brodine (1988) and Demos (1998).

⁴ I was more than a little relieved to find hints of a similar outlook on historical novels in both Ryan (1966) and Cushing (1992), the former dealing more specifically with Japanese fiction.

⁵ Seidensticker (1966) offers a closer perspective in this respect.

⁶ Over which one may consult Stein (1981) which poses a surprisingly similar question on the relationship of the writer and the public as those that we shall discuss about Kōda Rohan, see below.

have often tended to adopt western models in a unique manner that defies easy categorization. The somehow “scientific” notion of what writing “historical” fiction implied in modern Japan in a comparative perspective does not give the impression to fit a more objective frame. Professor Alastair Fowler’s normative study may as well complete this framework with his plain admission of the uncertainties of the grounds on which to base a “theory” of literature itself, touched upon in his *preface*⁷.

Given the broadness of the Meiji literati’s learning (*sekigakun*), working out the sources reveals, in earnest, a painstaking experience for the scholar of Japanese fiction; the most productive to assess the importance of Japan’s successful tradition of historical writings may be working on the particular while carving out an overall perspective. Reduction and reworking of the source materials is a recurrent expedient that Meiji writers employ because they share with each other an impressive amount of scholarship. Consequently, their access to a variety of subjects for fiction, originating in a tradition of written sources that lasted for centuries, is rather unlimited. One has to look to all the implications of choosing a period or an historical figure for a modern rendering, as the historical recordings that constitute the source of most Meiji fiction more often than not provide more “facts” and details than the Meiji authors, concentrating on their artistry, would later deliver in their own reinterpretation of them.

III. *The Meiji Historical Novel as seen by a “Classicist”: Rohan’s attempt at “non-fiction”*

One of the most revered classicists of his age, although little known outside Japan, the novelist and exegete Kōda Rohan (pseudonym of Kōda Shigeyuki, 1867-1947), offers a striking example in this respect. Rohan’s fiction has not received, besides two or three noted exceptions, due attention by Western scholars, his works have not been translated and as widely read as some of his contemporaries; the difficulty of his prose could account for much of this, as Rohan’s prevalent mood of expression lied in a *pastiche* clearly moulded after Chinese and Japanese classics. Rohan had a mastery command of such “classical” stylistic models. A closer look at what has been termed the literary output of a “nostalgic” nevertheless suggests evidence that the respect professed by Rohan for Chinese and Japanese antiquity had not, in any case, prevented the author from innovating the concept of “fiction” with original choices of content.

Reading closely what had been classified as Rohan’s masterpiece of historical fiction, the “novel” *Unmei* (*Destiny*, 1919), which proved on his part a fairly unsurpassed success of both critics and public, one runs into so many personal remarks consistently breaking the main plot, to question whether the author had intended to write a *novel* at all. In spite of the remarks of well-known authorities such as Donald Keene, claiming *Unmei* to be a masterpiece of “fiction”, the reader counts regularly passages in which the author openly explains his usage of the sources, to conclude that *Unmei* portrayed such a definite identity of his author as to elicit the more satisfactory definition of “critical historiography”. The essay has both the quality of a fascinating novel and the discussion of the sources which pertains to a domain largely alien to that of fancy. The story herein deals with the struggle for imperial succession in the early Ming dynasty, and is based entirely on Chinese historical records. Once in a while a non-learned reader will have no trouble locating them, as the author declares every reference throughout the work, pushing himself to the point of justifying the insertion of sources he himself declares apocryphal⁸, for the sake of artistic purposes. Thematically, the work deals, as has been promptly noted, with questions concerning inevitability, justice, and the conceptions of fate (i.e. whether there is a preordained destiny, which is a clear rendition of some important traditional Buddhist conceptions). Yet, when one manages to sort out through the author’s elegant, erudite, and extremely difficult style, *Unmei* seems to contain much more than that. Published along with the first issues of a newly edited magazine, *Kaizō* (*Reconstruction*), the work, combining a secure erudition with such personal reflections on historical sources, elicits at every page the opinion of even the least literate of readers. It is, in other words, a historical *workshop*, brilliantly conducted by an informed writer, eager to make passionate connoisseurs of

⁷ Fowler, *Kinds of Literature*, Harvard University Press (1985)

⁸ Especially in the *afterword* to *Unmei* which the author delivered some twenty years after completing the novel.

Chinese history out of his readers, a task that Rohan accomplishes through the overtly didactic remarks he carefully intertwines his plot with.

This is a point of major interest over which we shall return later on, that writers of the Meiji period such as Rohan and Ōgai could have been experimenting with a literary genre that is a precursor of the so-called “non-fiction” well earlier than their most noted Western counterparts, in order to complete that process of *popularization* of the historical tradition which had counted so lasting examples in the culture of East Asia.

IV. *The first important literary critic in Meiji Japan: Shōyō's attempt at a theorization of genres.*

Remarkable as it may have been, Rohan's late effort had come out seven years after the splendour of Meiji Era literary achievements had faded, at a stage in which the author himself had wilfully withdrawn from the literary scene for almost a decade; neither would he regain the status of a mainstream writer for the twenty years to come, which Rohan spent delivering academic essays on various subjects (mostly classical literature or Buddhist thought), all of which retained some of the flavour of his attempt at non-fictional *popular* historicism in the aforementioned *Unmei*. A critical approach to such diverse texts elicits the problem of a systematic theorization about Japanese historical fiction, an issue that, as we have noticed, keeps popping up.

The history of the modern novel in Japan begins with a rather vague definition. One can somehow grasp this definition in the painstakingly complex essays put forth by the Japanese literary magazines of the 1870's and 1880's, the first attempts at literary criticism from a modern perspective, which are traditionally considered the cradle of all new ideas introduced in Japan mostly from the West. The first critical essays are sprinkled with remarks about a possible definition of what “historical fiction” is. The uncertainties about this definition puzzle the critic that fails to revert, in the first place, to the origin of Japan's modern literary theorization: Tsubouchi Shōyō (Yūzō, 1859-1935)'s essays. Though not much of a writer himself, Shōyō is credited by literary historians of both Japan and the West as having exerted a profound influence over the reform of fiction in Meiji Japan, mostly through his seminal essay *Shōsetsu shinzui* (*The Essence of the Novel*), which he began publishing in 1885 and through 1886. The author had been presented by the English translator of his early work, Doctor Nanette Twine, as:

...a literary critic, translator of Western literature, and novelist who had a profound influence on the young writers of Meiji Japan, most notably Futabatei Shimei (1864-1909). He began to formulate his ideas for changing the face of Japanese fiction while a student of Western literature at Tokyo University. *Shōsetsu Shinzui* (*The Essence of the Novel*), published in nine parts between September 1885 and April 1886, was an attempt to present a then radical view of the true novel, drawn from study of Western novels, as an art-form in its own right, and, by so doing, to expose the deficiencies of the Japanese novel and open the way for its reform⁹.

Though Dr. Twine's statement that Shōyō had been successful in exposing the deficiencies of the Japanese novel up to this point may readily meet agreements, her remarkably beautiful English rendering of the work, compared to the original text of *Essence of the Novel*, may involuntary impair the reader's perception of the vagueness of the Shōyō's theses, which by the way have been promptly noted by Peter Kornicki¹⁰, and the many hindrances to a straightforward view of literature that sprung out of his archaic vocabulary and wide reliance on classical syntax.

Shōyō's essay came up to a point of Japan's literary history in which a thoroughly reform of the very medium of literature, written language, had not yet been carried out (the first proposals were bound to be delivered some years later). That given, Professor Kornicki's remarks that “it goes without saying that *Shōsetsu shinzui* is of course a major work of literary criticism but this is quite separate from the matter of its contemporary impact and influence, which may have been as great as it usually claimed but

⁹ Nanette Twine Gottlieb, *The Essence of the Novel* (*Shōsetsu shinzui*), *Occasional Papers*, University of Queensland, Department of Japanese (1983), now online at <http://archive.nyu.edu/html/2451/14945/shoyo.htm>

¹⁰ Peter F. Kornicki, *The reform of fiction in Meiji Japan*, Ithaca press, Oxford University, 1982.

which have never been documented”¹¹ proves remarkable in defining more clearly the context of these speculations, which in fact emphasize the importance of the historical novel (Shōyō wrote more short treatises focused on the *rekishi shōsetsu*, such as *The Dignity of the Historical Novel*¹²).

Therefore, although it has been customary in both Japan and the West to adopt a retrospective approach and treat Shōyō’s first important essay as an epoch-making work largely responsible for the development of the “modern novel” in Meiji Japan, the essay in itself, though impressive in some respect, shows its limitations in terms of constructing a theorization of the novel form. It is meaningful that Shōyō would be puzzled at the realistic depictions of actual life that Futabatei Shimei put forth for his novel *Ukigumo* (*Floating Clouds*, 1887-89), which Futabatei had clearly derived from his extensive readings in contemporary Russian fiction. The style that Shōyō suggests for the new novel, a mixture of classical syntax for the narration and modern spoken Tokyo dialect for the dialogues, is also adopted by Futabatei in the first place but discarded early on in his novel, whose style turns completely to the modern dialect. Yet, Shōyō is usually referred to as the critic who laid down the theoretical framework in which Futabatei’s concrete attempt at recreating the novel genre would be rooted, and we also have evidence of the fact that Shimei sought Shōyō’s advice more than once in order to undertake the task of creating his “new” novel¹³.

In fact, Shōyō may not have been such a sound advocate of psychological introspection as a ground feature for fiction: his first essay is rather concerned with rejecting the didacticism of some of Japan’s literary legacy – a legacy that the essayist himself values in other respects – and reaffirming another principle that was a clear feature of Japanese’s fiction of the past, that of adherence to a realistic depiction of “human feeling” (*ninjō*), by which, if we have to give credits to the few novels which Shōyō himself produced shortly after *Essence...*, the critic intended mainly romantic love, in its platonic sense as well as sensual implications, such as longing, and desire for one another. Though the shift from depicting behaviours to that of portraying the characters’ *inner* feeling is evident in Shōyō’s prose, this is still a far cry from the innovation that Futabatei introduced with his heavy reliance on psychological introspection of the *whole* world of the characters, the absolute subjectivity and uniqueness of this world in a Proustian sense. The few novels that Shōyō produced in the four years after his first important essays were criticized by some of his contemporaries; this may account for Shōyō’s decision to quit writing fiction altogether in 1889. From that point onwards Shōyō went on as a literary critic of relevance, and in fact produced a series of essays which expanded his views on literature, carrying on some important reflections on historical fiction among others. At the time of *Essence of the Novel*, Shōyō’s indebtedness to the flourishing tradition of fiction of the preceding Tokugawa period was still evident in his advocacy of *ninjō* as an aesthetic principle of the utmost importance in fiction.

In my opinion, a point of major interest here is that historical (*rekishi-teki*) accuracy may be interpreted as means that subsequent authors employed to counter excessive reliance on this aesthetic principle of *ninjō*: great writers of the Meiji period did in fact show a tendency toward history in their mature writings that could be accounted for by their disillusion with Shōyō’s outlook that had become so popular decades earlier. The model represented by European fiction, whether of a Romantic or more realistic fashion, may play a smaller role in this process than what has been traditionally accounted. Particularly when it comes to discuss in detail the style suitable for the so called “new” Japanese novel, back to the time of his first essay, Shōyō’s reliance on the fiction of popular *gesaku* writers such as Tamenaga Shunsui (1790-1844) becomes striking: though a student in English literature, Shōyō almost exclusively discusses the style of Tokugawa period fiction, to the point that one author harshly criticized for his didactic view of literature, Takizawa Bakin (1767-1848), is clearly depicted as a novelist that Shōyō admires nonetheless for his epic sagas. When discussing into some detail the subgenre of historical fiction, Shōyō only briefly cites Walter Scott, which he states to be a great master of this genre. And so again, in challenging the theoretical grounds of Meiji Japan’s most revered work of criticism, one may need to question not only the definition of a *historical* fiction, but also the very concept of *fiction* that it carves out. The traditional definition of Meiji literature as a turning point in Japan’s cultural history, if looked through this perspective, which grounds on a close, thorough rethinking of the sources, noted or

11 Kornicki, *The reform of fiction in Meiji Japan* (1982: 26).

12 *Rekishi shōsetsu no songen*, see *Meiji Bungaku Zenshū*, vol. XVI, Tokyo, Chikuma Shobo, 1969; also see below.

13 Keene (1998: 108-109).

neglected, merges altogether into a potpourri in which Tokugawa fiction, traditionally regarded as the product of a culture that developed mostly on its own, exerts considerable influence on what would otherwise be called Japan's *Westernized*, modern literary output.

Shōyō did actually make a point when he dealt with historical fiction in this and subsequent essays; on the specific problems of historical fictions he produced two more papers, "On Historical Fiction" and "The Dignity of Historical Fiction" (both published on the *Daily Yomiuri* in October 1895), as well as an "Again on History as It is" of closely related interest. His views here are clearly derived from his former training as a scholar of English literature, and he seems quite at pains dealing again and again with the supposed "historicism" of writers such as Bakin, which used to mix social depictions of the past with more overtly contemporary elements. His critical body of literature is, as a whole, more a useful tool for evaluating the extent to which some important theories and models of the historical novel circulated in early modern Japan than it is for gaining an overall valid knowledge about the features of the new literature that was about to circulate shortly thereafter. It needs to be emphasized, though, that Shōyō's advocacy of the dignity of the novel as a literary genre actually fostered the collapse of the old conception that "fiction" (a term that had been promptly translated by its Sino-japanese equivalent, *shōsetsu*, literally "little discourse" with a pejorative nuance) was not a proper medium of high literary expression. In this respect, Shōyō was the first advocate of the novel form as the best expression of literary concerns.

V. Mori Ōgai's ideals of the Novel: historical fiction as a counterpart to Japanese Naturalism?

One of the most striking feature of Meiji Japan's literary scene is, perhaps, the contrast between the trend of adopting "all things western", which spread well up to the end of the 1890's, some thirty after the opening of Japanese ports, and the proposals of some pre-eminent writers of the period, which would engage, as soon as the 1895's, in restoring, by means of their literary criticism, the importance of Japan's peculiar cultural background for defining a national identity. The same task they would subsequently undertake in the field of original fiction from the period 1905-onwards. This identity was founded mostly on a revaluation of the country's cultural past, and it mostly expressed itself through historical novels. Important writers such as Rohan, Natsume Sōseki – perhaps the most appreciated Meiji writer in the West – and Mori Ōgai, another interesting intellectual which I shall return to shortly, had never yielded uncompromisingly to the Western trends. Great modern Japanese writers did share a common interest in both the Western and the Eastern literary tradition; it was the exceptional quality of their education, which encompassed both the old *curriculum* based on Chinese and Japanese classics, as well as the innovations of Western thought, the distinctive element that would enable them to write their own works deriving themes from both the past and the present. In this respect it could be that the Meiji literati did with Western literary models what they had previously done with their Chinese counterparts: they took the aspects that suited most their own spirit, leaving the rest virtually untouched upon. It has to be noted that this is also the first time in Japanese history in which the theories of Positivism informed the intellectuals, enabling them to apply to historical documentation the rigorous critical standards of modern philology.

The cultural dimension of Meiji literature shows its close connections with a more sociologically-oriented outlook, that comes along with a critical reliance on historical sources, in that particular conceptualization that informed the literature of one more important writer, the Japanese translator, essayist and novelist Mori Ōgai (Rintarō, 1862-1922). To many, Ōgai has always been a complex entity to deal with. Born in Shimane, the son of a doctor serving in the Tsuwano Clan, Ōgai was one of the first graduates from the University of Tokyo in 1881, and subsequently became an army surgeon. He was officially sent to Germany (Leipzig, Dresden, Munich and Berlin) to study hygiene from 1884 to 1888. During this time, the young Ōgai also developed an interest in European literature which fostered the impressive body of translations from Western literature he would have produced over the years. Meanwhile, he also attempted to revitalize modern Japanese literature and published his own literary journals (the first of which is *Shigarami zōshi*, 1889-1894)

Although Ōgai did little writing from 1892, before resuming original fiction, he continued to edit a literary journal (*Mezamashi gusa*, 1892-1909). He also produced translations of the works of

Goethe, Schiller, Ibsen, Hans Christian Andersen. While criticism was clearly one of the main concerns of Meiji intellectuals, the first attempts at it had revealed, as we have seen, all the limitations implied by the conflicting aesthetics of Tokugawa fiction that still held their own, in the eye of the Japanese intellectuals, against newly imported European models. Even a connoisseur of western literary trends such as Ōgai often derived his views from imported models, with no particular originality, in the first place. It is in the debates (*gappyo*) recorded and published on literary magazines of the mid-Meiji period that Ōgai instituted a modern literary criticism, less based on the aesthetic theories of Karl Von Hartmann that had inspired his early attempts. The latter had included a 1889 essay, “On reading the recent Theories on the Novel”, in which Ōgai repeatedly borrowed from and quoted Shōyō’s critical works. In discussing his early literary theories, both Shōyō and Ōgai had shown a tendency to employ terms clearly derived from the Classical tradition in a somewhat broader sense; in the debates of the 1890’s, the authors made one step further towards a new concept of fiction in that they focused on actual works rather than theory. Yet, the focus was still somehow oriented toward a rejection of “didactic” fiction and the acceptance of the “human feelings” as the core of literary portrayal. In the meanwhile Ōgai, whose early fiction had included the popular “German trilogy” which recounted for his fondness of German Romanticism, had temporarily stopped writing fiction in the period from 1892 to 1905. When he reverted to fiction he produced a series of short stories, three novels and, from 1912 onwards, a collection of historical short stories that would later come to be regarded as some of the highest achievements of this era.

Ōgai is traditionally regarded as having provided the best reflections on writing historical fiction in his well-known, although extremely short essay *Rekishi sono mama to rekishi banare* (*History as it is and History ignored*, January 1915). Though apparently an anecdotic reflection in the manner of the comments Rohan himself would sprinkle his masterpiece *Unmei* with more than twenty years later, *History as it is and History ignored* indeed proved the true harbinger of a new concept of “historical fiction” in Meiji Japan. The simple definitions advocated by Ōgai herein, which are, that fiction may adopt History as it is (*Rekishi sono mama*) or departing from it (*Rekishi banare*), and his profession of fondness for the former, did in fact echo Shōyō’s somewhat unsatisfactory definition of the novel as the genre depicting human nature “as it is” (*ari no mama*). If one has to read Ōgai’s historical literature as a whole, though, it may be of no use doing what some critics have done up to this point, that is, ascribing all of his stories to one of the two aforementioned categories, history “as it is” or “departing from” that: in Ōgai’s mature work in fact there is more than one decade in which an apparently “fictional” attempt at history reveals based on consistent, though undeclared written sources, such as in *Kanzan Jittoku* (*Han Shan and Shi Te*, 1916), which if we have to take literally its author’s words, should be no more than the record of an oral legend; and there are also short stories such as *Gyogenki* (*Yu Xuanji*, 1915), which, in spite of the almost complete reliance on the few extant written sources that the author openly listed at the end of the novella as “references” (*sankō bunken*), clearly depart from historical evidence in the reconstruction of two or three key episodes. This shift is a peculiarity that cannot be fully understood outside the contest of the debate around the new novel.

Earlier on Shōyō had stated, though in a rather clumsy fashion, that the model of the psychological novel which had its most important parallels in Western masterpieces was the best model of “new novel”. To the point where Ōgai’s interest shifted to history, there were the so-called Japanese “naturalist” school (*shizēnshugi*) had temporarily gained a hegemonic literary position, stealing the scene with a “confessional” literature which had gained its heights in 1906-10. The “Naturalists” arouse frequent scandals by supposedly confessing controversial autobiographical details in a self-declared attempt to show the “truth” of the individual self. The bare prose of the confessional I-novel, preferring this “truth” to artistry even in linguistic expression, had been heavily criticised by writers such as Rohan and Ōgai, which obviously didn’t agree to a conception of “didactic” literature either. This criticism was so pivotal as to inspire a psychological novel such as Mori Ōgai’s *Vita Sexualis*, of 1909, which is often interpreted as a parody of the Naturalists’ obsession with sex and self-indulgent anguish. By the time Ōgai put forth his historical fiction, the debate was heated over the value of the novel as a form of art with no didactic purposes, and the main point it revolved around was, should literary representation be *moral*. This popularity of the *Shizēnshugi*, in Ōgai’s view, was a clear backtrack from the new grounds that the new Japanese novel had uncovered.

The model offered by the psychological novel had been the first endeavour to contrast the Japanese Naturalists’ earlier attempts at reforming fiction their way. The historical fiction of Mori Ōgai’

can be thought of as a new step in this direction, that is, as a true alternative to the “I-novel”, that the author provided when the psychological novel had proved an unsuitable model as regards to adherence to “truth”. Thus, true “dignity”, in Ōgai’s view of the novel genre, was found in reverting to history. This was a view that Ōgai maintained when he adopted the model of Chinese historical chronicles upon which he, and most intellectuals of his era, had based their first literary training. Ōgai’s sudden shift from historical fiction to historiography, in his late biographies of Tokugawa period men (*shiden*) showed a style closely resembling that of the great Chinese chronicles, though based on modern syntax, and this shift would be echoed in Rohan’s scientific approach to historical materials; by reverting to complete truth both authors could be assumed to have welcomed a last incarnation of their ideals as literary journalists who had, after many an attempt at artistry, relinquished any will to revere “beauty” in a more romantic sense; yet, it is the *beauty* of truth that they sensed in their shift from contemporary portrayal of fictional characters to faithful depiction of past living models of their cultural history. This beauty was the same that had shaped the ancient chronicles, these had represented, as we have noted in the beginning, not only the most important historical documents, but also the true incarnation of both beauty and truth in prose form. This peculiar conception of historical literature is overtly suggested in “History as it is and history ignored”, whose informal tone should not lend to a superficial overlooking of the powerful remarks it contains:

“There has been considerable discussion, even among my friends, as to whether or not my recent works that make use of actual historical figures can be considered as fiction. At a time when there has been no shortage of scholars who, under the aegis of an authoritarian ethic, insist that novels should be written in some particular fashion or other, rendering a judgment becomes rather difficult. I myself recognize in the works I have written considerable differences in the degree to which I have taken an objective point of view about my own material. (...) The kind of work I am now writing does differ from the fiction of other writers. I have not in my recent historical works indulged in the free adaptation and rejection of historical fact common to this type of composition. (...) Why? My motives are simple. In studying historical records, I came to revere the reality that was evidenced in them. Any wanton change seemed distasteful to me. This is one of my motives. Secondly, *if contemporary authors can write about life “just as it is” and find it satisfactory, then they ought to appreciate a similar treatment of the past.*¹⁴ Questions of literary workmanship aside, my works differ in a variety of ways from those of others, but the real basis for all those differences lies, I believe, in what I have written above.¹⁵

We have briefly stated earlier that more often than not, the material Ōgai employed for his historical fiction, which maintains by the way an overall impressive degree of accuracy, was rearranged and occasionally provided with brief personal statements crucial to clarifying the author’s own interpretation of the truth within history. This applies particularly to Ōgai’s portrayal of known and often less known historical characters (the aforementioned *shiden*). It may well be the case, reflecting on this essay’s statements, that this “truth” is a feature that the author regards as more valuable than the “half-truth” of fictional characters portrayed in the psychological novels that the Japanese had praised over a decade earlier. Shaping his historical reconstruction on undeclared fonts, Ōgai applied a framework that justifies a fictional rendition of historical materials; this makes recollecting historical anecdotes a process similar to that unconscious reusing old models and previous patterns voicing one’s originality that any gifted writer can be accounted for: there is no contradiction. Apart from “History as it is” or “History ignored” then, these inbetweens are what marks the “historical novel” of one great Meiji author.

In a period where psychological portrayal was a still the main concern and the debate around the value of the novel as a form of art per se, with no didactic or moral restrictions, was still open, Ōgai’s masterpieces of historical fiction draw the necessary outline to the construction of a modern historical novel. Sticking to the facts does not justify a historical fiction, as that is the domain that clearly pertains to history “as it is”, which is, historiography. By contrast, a reworking of history by means of a novel must necessarily have an artistic purpose, which the author demands to a reinterpretation of the “truth” of historical figures in his biographies. Historical fiction is, in other words, a more realistic portrayal than that of conceived fiction about fanciful characters. This makes Ōgai’s historical novellas a means to counter the popularity of the Japanese naturalists that he so harshly criticized for alienating fiction from realistic portrayal of the truth of human heart. In Ōgai’s attempt then, two layers are applied on a more

¹⁴ The italics are not the translator’s but my own.

¹⁵ See Rimer and Dilworth (editor), *The historical fiction of Mori Ōgai*, University of Hawaii Press, 1991, p. 180

general concept. That is what is difficult to grasp in the first place, and that is also the reason why the significance of his historical works cannot be assessed by locating the sources, or checking every reference, which would result in the less learned be left behind. The point is how the author interpreted history as a means of artistic purposes, to the benefits of his readers. The “big picture” about the peculiarities of Meiji Japan’s historical fiction includes as a pivotal element this intent of criticizing the mainstream of Japanese literary trends.

In my opinion, then, the search for a definition of “historical fiction” in a specific moment of Japanese’s cultural history, that of Meiji Japan, should thus encompass both pre-existing definitions of “historical novel” that entered Japan through the open gates of the Modernization, and give proper due to the cultural heritage and specific conditions that arouse within the framework of Japan’s specific cultural achievements; the historical fiction of Meiji Japan’s may ultimately represent an effort to preserve the country’s cultural achievements while correcting superficial trends of that time’s literary fashions.

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