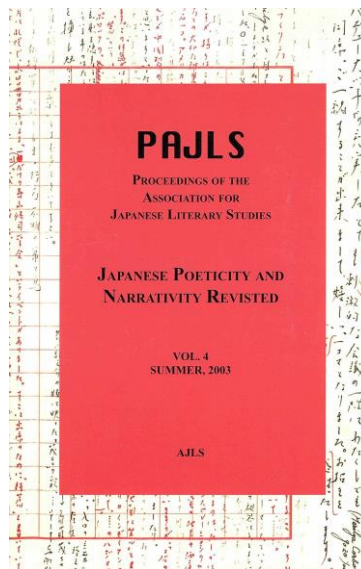


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Kunio and the Reappraisal of Realism”

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SKETCHING OUT THE CRITICAL TRADITION: YANAGITA KUNIO AND THE REAPPRAISAL OF REALISM¹

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While recent scholarship has challenged prevailing conceptions about the development of modern literary narrative in Japan, there is still little recognition of earlier criticism. Much in the way that the boundaries of *bungaku* have been determined retrospectively, so too has membership in that arbiter of modern literary style, the Meiji *bundan*. What was in fact an informal network of ever-changing allegiances to compatriots, journals and literary trends has often emerged, even in analyses critical of canonization, as a seemingly unified institution peopled by authorial figures who ostensibly embody various stages of Japanese literature's passage into the modern age.

Contemporary literary journals, which contained the critical and conversational writing that in many ways constitutes the formal record of these fealties, provide not only a context for reexamining the contemporary *bundan* understanding of narrativity, but also reveal many viewpoints that were subsequently overlooked in the urge to canonize. One such marginalized perspective is expressed in Yanagita Kunio's earliest essays, a group of short *zuihitsu* published in the literary journal *Bunshō sekai* between 1907 and 1909.

Scholars generally consider Yanagita Kunio (b. Matsuoka Kunio, 1875–1962) to be the founder of *minzokugaku* (民俗学), or “native ethnology,”² a field usually grouped with the social sciences. However, examination of any work by this prolific scholar, early or late, reveals a profound engagement with narrativity at both critical and discursive levels. In this paper, I will begin to reevaluate the scholarly precedent that categorizes Yanagita's work as outside the realm of *bungaku*, or literature.

The son of a poor but scholarly family, the teenaged Kunio moved to Tokyo in 1890 to live with an older brother, Inoue Michiyasu, a doctor and poet who deeply influenced his younger brother's career by introducing him to his literary associates. This early period in Kunio's life is characterized by a flurry of poetic and literary activity and the formation of a deep—though complicated—bond with those at the center of the contemporary literary scene. Indeed, when Yanagita enrolled in Tokyo

¹ Portions of this article previously appeared in Chapter 2 of my dissertation.

² I borrow the translation coined by H. D. Harootunian and Marilyn Ivy.

Imperial University's Law and Politics Department in 1897 and decided to major in agricultural administration, both friends—and later, scholars—would identify this decision as a turn away from the literary interests of his early youth. Nevertheless, this young Agricultural Ministry bureaucrat continued his close association with his literary peers until the end of the Meiji period—friends who would become the founding members of the so-called Japanese Naturalist School.

Examining the narrative qualities of Yanagita's writings is still a marginal pursuit in Japanese folklore studies, despite the general consensus that “what brought about Yanagita Kunio's creative, grand and yet detailed scholarship and thought was the rare combination [he had as] a man of letters, a poet, and a scientist” (Gotō, 117).³ Commentators rarely try to read Yanagita's works in the context of contemporary Japanese literature since, unlike many of his literary peers, he never produced anything commonly recognized as a novel. I argue that a closer look at this “man of letters” and his direct contributions to the *bundan* can help us explain the young bureaucrat's combative and yet undoubtedly codependent relationship with the literary.

In this paper, I launch the examination of native ethnology's literary qualities through the discussion of a small but revealing group of essays in which Yanagita provides a critical commentary on the literary developments championed by his peers. Between 1907 and 1909, Yanagita published a number of short *zuihitsu* in the journal *Bunshō sekai* (Literary World, 1906–1920), an important literary forum headed by Naturalist (and close friend) Tayama Katai (1871–1930). These essays form an important link between the impetuous *bungaku seinen* (“literary youth”) and the mature native ethnologist; more specifically, they put into relief Yanagita's increasingly unorthodox interpretation of the late Meiji debate on narrative realism.

The young author, who paradoxically defines himself in these essays as both a literature-loving bookworm (cf. “Randoku no kuse,” May 1907) as well as a *bundan* outsider with a wider societal perspective (cf. “Kanri no yomu shōsetsu,” October 1907), fundamentally supports the development of a modern literature—but favors technique and content that run counter to the prevailing trends of the late Meiji *bundan*. By doing so, he exposes with startling clarity the emerging discrepancy between an

³ Sōma Tsuneo has continued his own work on the subject: see his *Yanagita Kunio to bungaku* (Yōyōsha, 1994). Iguchi Tokio does a close literary reading of selected Yanagita texts in *Yanagita Kunio to kindai bungaku* (Kōdansha, 1996). Okamura Ryōji's book, *Yanagita Kunio no Meiji jidai — bungaku to minzokugaku to* (Akashi shoten, 1998) is probably the most recent contribution to this area.

already canonized view of modern Japanese literature and the diverse reality of narrative production in the prewar *bundan*. Demonstrating an awareness of both the complex contemporary developments in written literary style, as well as the problematic and non-inclusive nature of emerging generic requirements, Yanagita's numerous criticisms of the late Meiji *bundan* show his own developing commitment to reforming the contested landscape of narrative realism.

As Nanette Twine has discussed in her book on language reform in Meiji Japan, the Japanese written language was a source of major concern for proponents of Western-style modernization.⁴ Literary authors, in particular, felt that existing written styles constituted a major barrier to achieving the type of realism they had discovered in recently imported Western literature. *Shasei* (lit. sketch or sketching), a term initially coined around 1900 by poet Masaoka Shiki (1867–1902), was used to label an efficient style of writing that emulated the realism achieved by sketching or photography. "Sketching" is a further development in the Meiji-period *genbunitchi* movement, which strove to simplify written language so that it more closely resembled colloquial Japanese, and is usually cited as the stylistic revolution that paved the way for modern Japanese literary realism.

Writer Yanagawa Shun'yō (1877–1918) comments in 1907 that it was after the publication of Natsume Sōseki's *Wagahai wa neko de aru* (I am a Cat, 1905–6) that "what is called *shaseibun* ... greatly attracted people's attention" (36). This comment, which appears in a 1907 issue of *Bunshō sekai*, is part of a timely collection of articles that are all devoted to *shaseibun*. Other luminaries in the contemporary *bundan* also share their critiques: haiku poet, novelist and longtime *Hototogisu* editor Takahama Kyoshi (1874–1959), the "old veteran" Futabatei Shimei (1864–1909), critic and translator Shimamura Hōgetsu (1871–1918), painter and photographer Miyake Kokki (1874–1954), critic Hasegawa Tenkei (1876–1940) and poet and novelist Shimazaki Tōson (1872–1943).

Yanagita also adds to these opinions, which are remarkably varied in their estimation of *shaseibun* as a viable literary style. Yanagita, in tune with the other literati, initially comes out in favor of "sketching," which he agrees is conducive to producing realistic prose. In "Shasei to ronbun" (Sketching and Critical Essays),⁵ he discusses how *shaseibun* has

⁴ Twine, Nanette. *Language and the Modern State: The Reform of Written Japanese*. London and New York: Routledge, 1991.

⁵ Figal translates the title of this essay as "Sketching and Discourse," but I have chosen to translate *ronbun* as "critical writing" since Yanagita is using *ronbun* to refer more specifically to a (loosely defined) genre of essayistic writing.

revolutionized literary language. The simplification that this movement brought “destroyed the barriers” to expressing oneself, he asserts, so that things could be written “as one sees, as one hears, without embellishment or lies (*mitamama, kiitamama, kazarazu itsuwarazu*)” (30–31). Yanagita’s support of *shaseibun* here and its potential for realism seems to echo Tayama Katai’s claims for Naturalism, which also emphasized a simple writing style subordinate to what was being depicted.

The Naturalist pledge to represent unmediated reality goes hand in hand with contemporary characterizations, like Yanagita’s, of *shaseibun* as unencumbered by verbosity, or indeed, even form. In his now famous essay “Rokotsu naru byōsha” (Naked Description, 1904), Katai argues that because of the traditional focus on technique, even during Meiji, content has been “neglected and undervalued” (435).⁶ In fact, he depicts style as being in open conflict with content:

Today’s supporters of technique write in a style that doesn’t accompany their thoughts; they record on paper lies (*kyōgi*) they don’t feel in their hearts. Then it seems they want to call that great writing (*daibunshō*) or elegant writing (*bibun*)...I’m satisfied if my writing can just realize my thoughts ... It doesn’t matter whether it’s unskillful or clever. If one can really believe that one has written as one thought, then the objective of writing will be excellently realized (ibid. 435).⁷

Writing “Shasei to ronbun” in *Bunshō sekai* three years later, Yanagita also supports Katai’s advocacy of simplified, even artless, language.⁸ Yanagita praises *shaseibun* over *kanbun* (a highly Sinified writing style) as easier to understand. Moreover, he adds that since “*genbunitchi* style is closer to speech (*genko*), it can definitely more nearly express thought (*shisō*),” greatly assisting in the transmission of thought with as little mediation as possible (32).

While recognizing the loss of meaning that occurs in transforming thought to written word, Yanagita insists on the necessity of a practical

⁶ Katai is implicitly referring to the self-consciously ornate style of Ōzaki Kōyō and the Ken’yūsha, who dominated the mid-Meiji literary scene with their Edo-style *gesaku* pieces.

⁷ Katai uses the word *jibun* (I, or oneself) throughout the quote. I have translated it as both “I” and “one,” since Tayama clearly means to universalize his own perspective.

⁸ The term *shasei* does not appear in Katai’s 1904 essay, though the title, “Naked Description,” is often quoted as a sort of quick definition of it.

writing style that would maximize the percentage of thought accurately transferred to the page. Unlike Katai, who seems to prioritize a believable end result over concerns about the process of authorship, Yanagita instead ponders the abstract relationship of thought to writing. As the title of his essay suggests, he encourages the adoption of *shaseibun* for not only literary writing, but critical essay writing (*ronbun*) as well: “Conventionally, it has been said that if the language used in critical essays was not *bungo*, it would be unessay-like, or weakened in strength, but this is a narrow point of view, entrapped in old ways” (ibid. 31). Yanagita proposes that a writing technique developed in the literary world be applied to a genre outside that realm. On the one hand, this can be read as a criticism of the increasingly self-centered world of *junbungaku* — but his claim also implicitly supports the stylistic “realism” developed within that circle.

Two years later, in a 1909 *Bunshō sekai* essay titled “Genbun no kyori” (The Distance between the Spoken and Written Word), Yanagita amends his earlier support of *shaseibun*, but continues to build on the contemporary stylistic debate on theories about and practical obstacles to achieving realism. Again tackling the linguistic equation encompassing thought, speech and writing, he takes *genbunitchi* philosophy to task for not urging a compromise between the spoken and written word: why must the written word conform entirely to everyday speech? Direct transcriptions of spoken language (such as of lectures and other public speaking), he claims, are ample proof that “the way in which we normally speak is not fit to become written language just as it is” (170). Although he recognizes that it seems “old fashioned,” he muses that *sōrōbun* [epistolary style], a subtype of the pseudoclassical *bungo* style, is actually more “concise, dignified and unencumbered” than many of the other conventions available to writers in 1909 (ibid. 167).

Yanagita’s somewhat reactionary remarks here seem to go against his earlier ideas about rendering thought into writing, but his doubting that “*genbunitchi* style is the final development in the history of [Japanese] writing style” (ibid. 169) also shows his philosophical approach to (literary) technique. Rather than insisting on an insurmountable and inevitably imperfect hierarchy between thought and expression, he recognizes that style is in fact a flexible and malleable tool for creating *realism*, not recording reality. What critics designate as Yanagita’s increasing hostility to the *bundan* can be reread, in these essays, as an attempt to find and develop more diverse applications of the techniques developed within that community.

Aspects of style were central to the *bundan*'s discussions, but an additional challenge was the question of what subject matter should be addressed with this new (non)technique. While Katai does not mention topical issues in the quote above, he stresses that style should strive to completely negate "technique" so that the author might find fewer barriers to expressing (him)self. Certainly, it seems that the literary debate about style is always inextricably connected with concerns over content, but this was particularly true of the Naturalists' advocacy of *genbunitchi*-based *shasei*. Accordingly, the *shaseibun* essays in the March 1907 issue of *Bunshō sekai* also discuss what sort of material could, and should, be treated now that style and convention did not determine where the author's gaze was directed. Since traditional topics no longer had to be adhered to, there was a call to be adventurous.

Yanagita's critics continually point to the debate over content as the source of his eventual departure from the *bundan*. But while his objections to the overly personal material favored by Katai and others are well known,⁹ they do not simply mark a point of divergence. Among the other 1907 *shaseibun* essays, where each author reveals diverse preferences, Yanagita's anxiety about appropriate source material is no radical departure from the norm. Like his peers, Yanagita fundamentally agrees with the realist philosophy behind *shaseibun*; what is particular about his view is simply his insistence on a particular subset of "reality." As with the Naturalists, Yanagita agrees that objectivity is necessary to portray things "as they are," but notes that the author must take care to pick an object worthy of such close observation.

Adopting the conventional metonymy suggested by *shasei*'s visual origins, Yanagita writes in his essay "Dokusha yori mitaru Shizenha shōsetsu" (Naturalist Novels from a Reader's Viewpoint, 1908) that authors today have the freedom to act

[J]ust as though they are viewing a panorama while standing in the middle of a plain ... It could be in the stillness of broad daylight, whether it's the wandering of puffy white clouds, the shade of the trees or the call of the birds, that the author draws out one part, and makes it into a photograph (13).

⁹ Yanagita had nothing good to say about Katai's *Futon* (The Quilt, 1906). He writes that he found the work so distasteful that he found it difficult to hide his criticisms from the author (TYKS 23: 398).

Here, Yanagita characterizes the author's perspective as implicitly "panoramic," and the world at which he gazes tangible, limitless and readily accessible. Despite the opportunities presented by this new wide-angle view, however, he maintains that authors today are not fully exploring its potential. Elsewhere, in "Kanri no yomu shōsetsu" (The Novels Public Servants Read, 1907), Yanagita complains of the constricted perspective portrayed in many contemporary novels: "young authors ... have limited themselves to a narrow space and only strive to represent the fantasies of contemporary youth" (30). Here, Yanagita identifies, and objects to, the focus on "interiority" that is often cited as the source of his disenchantment with literature.

While Yanagita is employing the language of photography and landscape painting metaphorically, his preference for settings that extend beyond the mental space of the *bungaku seinen* is quite apparent. Certainly, the themes that have been commonly associated with Naturalist literature, such as the hero's emotional entanglements in romantic and family relationships, as well as his tendency to languish in dilapidated boarding houses or seedy cafés, are not the topology suggested by Yanagita's analogy, nor by the word *shasei* itself. One could even say that his conception of "sketching" as the impartial observation of an external landscape is more in keeping with the term's original meaning.

Nonetheless, Yanagita's poetic affirmation of the open plains is not simply a rejection of the self's inner workings. He seeks the realistic portrayal of human behavior, just as do his Naturalist colleagues; he is not envisioning the written equivalent of landscape painting. Instead, he wants authors of literature to range more widely in their explorations of human experience. In "Kanri no yomu shōsetsu," Yanagita speculates that the bad habit of focusing only on urban individuals could be prevented "if one deployed today's authors like an army to the countryside and had them make a study of portraying (*utsusu*) country people (*inakamono*), the elderly and children" (30). The image of authors as organized troops of field workers begins to suggest the direction that the future ethnologist would take in his own writings.

In Yanagita's vision, the author is transformed from an observer of (him)self into a disinterested but empathetic spectator of lives and experiences rather remote from his own. In a 1908 essay entitled "Jijitsu no kyōmi" (The Appeal of Truth), Yanagita compares Edo period rural *chirisho* (regional histories) favorably with the human sketches offered by Naturalist novels. Documents such as the *Owarishi* (History of Owari), whose accounts of people are "a complete expression of true feeling (*shinjō*)," more accurately expressed the "feelings (*kokoromochi*) of the

common people (*bonjin*)” than had any modern author (146). It was texts such as these, rather than Naturalist novels, that successfully recorded “the truth just as it is (*ari no mama no jijitsu*), without exaggeration or ornamentation” (ibid. 146). This time, Yanagita attempts to extend the applicability of the Naturalist vocabulary by applying it to a premodern, non-literary text.

In “Dokusha yori mitaru Shizenha shōsetsu,” Yanagita points out the perils of the Naturalists’ self-prescribed mission to uphold a certain kind of realism:

[F]rom a certain point of view, one must say that the Naturalist writers have gotten themselves into a really tight spot. If one writes fantasy from the start, then people are bound to accept it as fantasy. But if one says one is going to portray the truth (*shinjitsu*), and not fantasy, then one must compete with reality (*jijitsu*) (13).

If Yanagita, then, accuses the Naturalists of lacking the vision to “compete with reality,” does he offer a modern solution? I argue that though, as I mentioned earlier, Yanagita did not write anything commonly *recognized* as a novel, he did produce an unusual alternative to the developing *junbungaku* model.

While this paper has focused on an analysis of Yanagita’s *Bunshō sekai* essays, I will conclude by very briefly demonstrating how *Tōno monogatari* (Tales of Tōno, 1910), which appeared the year after he contributed his last essay to the journal, represents Yanagita’s own attempt to produce narrative realism. This work, often cited as Yanagita’s first serious foray into *minzokugaku*, appears at first glance to be a field worker’s compilation of local folklore from the Tōno area. However, considered in the context of Yanagita’s interactions with the Meiji *bundan*, its unusual style and unorthodox subject material also mark it as a uniquely literary experiment.

Yanagita challenges the already established primacy of *shaseibun* by writing the tales in an old-fashioned but elegant *bungo* style well suited to recreating a rustic storytelling atmosphere, a style much unlike the Tōhoku dialect in which they were originally told by his informant, Sasaki Kizen (1886–1933). In addition, taking his own advice about ranging far afield to find worthy subject material, Yanagita sets down tales concerned with the external landscape of Tōno and the rural community’s spiritual and emotional interaction with it. Gone is the colloquial “sketching” style, as well as the introspective *bungaku seinen* who had appropriated that style

as his own voice. Though it hardly seems to resemble the literary writings produced by his peers, *Tōno monogatari* unquestionably emerges from the same debate. In future research, I plan to explore how this unassuming work actually furnishes us with a way to reexamine membership in the Japanese literary canon and the conventional interpretations of narrative realism that have defined it.

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Note: None of Yanagita’s early essays, with the exception of “Randoku no kuse,” appear in Yanagita’s collected works or anywhere else but in *Bunshō sekai*. I am presently completing an English translation of these essays for publication.