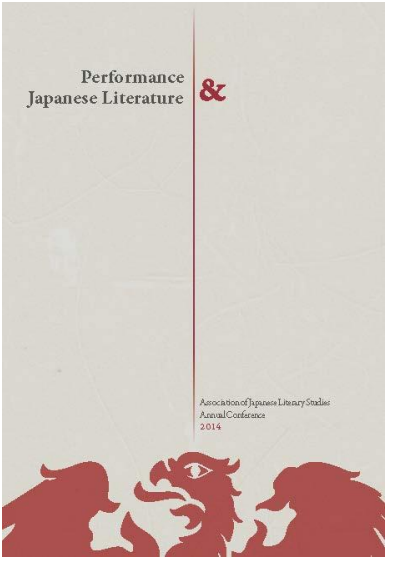
“Performative Writing: Kōtoku Shūsui and Revolutionary Community”

Robert Tierney

Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies 15 (2014): 11–17.



PAJLS 15:
Performance and Japanese Literature.
Ed. Michael Bourdaghs, Hoyt Long, and Reginald Jackson

Performative Writing:
Kōtoku Shūsui and Revolutionary Community

Robert Tierney
University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign

Although he is best remembered for his alleged participation in a plot to assassinate the Meiji Emperor in the High Treason case, Kōtoku Shūsui (1871-1911) made his mark primarily as a writer and translator. Besides authoring *Imperialism: Monster of the Twentieth Century* (*Teikokushugi: nijūseiki no kaibutsu*, 1901) and *The Essence of Socialism* (*Shakaishugino shinzui*, 1903), he wrote scripts for the new militant theater and political novels set in the Russian Nihilist milieu. Indeed, he concerned himself with questions of literary composition throughout his life.

Kōtoku's contemporaries considered him a transcendent stylist. A journalist for the Yomiuri Shinbun wrote of *Imperialism*: "The composition is powerful and concise, the style cutting and razor sharp, the logic has a truly living power."[1] Osugi Sakae recalled in his autobiography, "(When I read the Yorozu Chōhō News), the articles signed with the name Shūsui especially astonished me....Brandishing his pen as exactly as if it were the naked blade his penname implied, he cut his way wherever his beliefs led him. Kōtoku's *The Essence of Socialism* set my mind on fire."[2]

In a diary written in 1889 at the age of eighteen, Kōtoku reflected on his insatiable desire to read: "Morita Shikan wrote, 'Since long ago I have acquired an odd habit. If I happen to like a book for a while, I am so intoxicated that I feel that there are no other books in the world than that one'.… I myself have a similar habit… I do not read from necessity but, from my earliest years, I read only to divert myself. I often warn myself not to fritter away all my time with pointless reading, but it seems as though this is a type of sickness and no matter what I do, I am unable to give it up."[3] Kōtoku described reading as a "sickness" by which he meant a pointless infatuation with written words that attached itself in a serial way to a succession of objects and caused him to fritter away time. Perhaps through his reflections on the reading experience, he came to see the book as a model for the world, which also demands to be read properly. Whatever the case may be, he never sought any treatment for this sickness nor envisaged the possibility of a cure. Indeed, the only cure for his sickness was to steep himself in the power of the written word and to master it.

---

[1] Yomiuri Shinbun, April 7, 1901, reprinted in *Shoki shakaishugi kenkyū* (Studies of Early Socialism) 14(2001): 46.

[2] Ōsugi Sakae, *Autobiography of Ōsugi Sakae*, translated by Byron K. Marshall, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992) 97-98, 122.

[3] Kōtoku Shūsui, diary entry of April 30, 1889, *Kōtoku Shūsui Zenshū* (hereinafter KSZ) Vol 9 (Tokyo: Meiji Bunken, 1972), 18-19.

In his 1907 "The Three Necessary Elements of Composition," he argued that language is not merely a tool to express ideas but rather a vital stake in social conflict since it furnishes the basis for communities of insurrection. He wrote: "A real work of genius must not aim only to *convince* readers but rather to *move them to action*. It is not sufficient to inspire *emotion*, but rather the readers should be *enthralled and paralyzed* by what they read. Far from seeking to *win their praise*, one should seek to bring them to *a sense of oneness with the writer* (my italics)… When the members of the audience clap their hands and cheer after a speech, they have not yet transcended the speech itself. The essence of eloquence is reached when, without clapping or cheering, speaker and listeners forget that they are different and become one. Similarly, the ideal of composition is attained when readers no longer see the paper or the words, forget themselves and become one with the writer."[4] Just as the voice of the speaker enters the ears of his listeners and makes them forget who they were, the writer's words penetrate to the minds of readers and transform them.

Kōtoku's theory of composition describes a performance art rather than a communicative one. The writer does not translate ideas into words. He does not aim to "convince," to "move" or even win respect from the reader. Rather he aims to influence the reader in a more direct and bodily way, as expressed by terms such as "move to action, enthrall/ paralyze, reach a sense of oneness with the writer." On the one hand, the writer aims not so much to change the opinions of readers, as to generate powerful affects and rouse them to action. On the other, he seeks to create communities that do not pre-exist the act of reading among the atomized and dispersed readership. In both respects, writing is a performance art in which the writer aims to change, transform and even convert the reader.

Kōtoku's performative theory of writing is founded on a certainty that language possesses a magical power. It acts at a distance, abolishes memory, cancels difference, and traverses the reader. Like the religious preacher, a consummate writer marshals words to tear down the barriers that separate people, summons them to start anew, and establishes a new community. To acquire this power, a writer needs three vital elements: "fullness of spirit, clarity of mind, mastery of the written word." In the first place, he "needs to have a firm belief in his views and arguments. He must have an unshakeable determination if he hopes to persuade and influence readers by writing. The firmer the belief, the more unshakeable will be his determination, so that when he faces the paper brush in hand, his determination will drive out every distracting thought or delusion, and he will be filled with an intrepid spirit."[5]

The atheist Kōtoku went on to narrate a short anecdote that, however problematizes his certainty that "fullness of spirit" is the first element of literary

[4] Kōtoku Shūsui, *Ronbun no sanyōken* (The Three Necessary Elements of Composition) KSZ 6:346-55.

[5] Kōtoku, "The Three Necessary Elements of Composition," 348.

greatness: "I once read a book by a man well regarded in religious circles. I have not many times felt so moved to action, overwhelmed by the fierceness of his soul and the power of his spirit. However, when I had the opportunity to actually meet him, I must confess to my disappointment. I wondered how this man could have written such a work. However, there was nothing strange at all about this situation. As a general rule, the man had trouble writing because he suffered from weakness of faith and lack of resolution. And it was difficult to look at him in his customary state of despair and disorder. However, when he could summon his faith and stiffen his resolution, he was filled with thoughts and faced the desk with ferocity. He became a different man from his ordinary state, a thoroughly principled, sincere, noble, and great human being. His mind was filled with the spirit of god. And his composition acquired an extraordinary power to move people. Some people would call him a hypocrite when they compare the man and his writing, but they are mistaken. He became a truly great and honorable man when he wrote."[6]

How was it possible for this ordinary man to overcome his customary "weakness of faith" and "lack of resolution"? If the purpose of writing is to transform readers into a fervent community of belief, the writer must begin by transforming himself. Kōtoku's description of the religious writer "filled with the spirit of god" may resemble the romantic visionary filled with divine madness, but on closer examination it says the exact contrary. We must never mistake the author for the biographical person whose body he cohabits and whose name he shares, but whom he in no way resembles. Rather, it is the actual praxis of writing that provides a vital impetus for the formation of the writer's own subjectivity. Before they intoxicate the reader, words must possess the magical power to "intoxicate" the subjectivity of the writer and to transform the ordinary self in his[7] "customary state of despair and disorder" into a "thoroughly principled, sincere, noble, and great human being." Through the praxis of "facing his desk with ferocity," the ordinary hypocrite becomes extraordinary. Kōtoku accordingly suggests that the writer cultivate certain intensities of feeling as a preparation for writing. The first step for the writer is to become saturated by the power of the language himself. This powerful self-transformed writer has in turn the power to infect others with his thoughts, transform them, and create a revolutionary subjects roused to action.[8]

---

[6] Kōtoku, "The Three Necessary Elements of Composition," 349.

[7] I employ the masculine pronoun here because Kōtoku certainly presupposed masculine authorship and readership.

[8] However, no matter how much fullness of spirit writers possess, they will never succeed in producing a fine essay unless they possess clarity of mind: "this demands a brilliant mind and wide learning…To develop clarity of mind, one must gather philosophical concepts and scientific knowledge…and refine these by experience, observation, deductive ability, supposition, analysis and synthesis in order to write an essay with an organized and tightly structured thesis." He also recommends that the budding writer master one or two foreign languages, since "if one cannot read foreign journals or papers, one does not have the qualifications to be a writer in the Japan of the future." Lastly, the writer must have the ability to choose the appropriate form of expression, a

If writing was a magical means that enabled writers to transform themselves and to create communities, how did Kōtoku envisage this process of self-transformation in practice? How did he see his relationship to the community he addressed? At the end of *Imperialism,* Kōtoku called for a revolution in the name of "scientific socialism." But who would lead this profound transformation of society? Like many contemporary anti-imperialists, he excluded from the outset any role for the colonized in the abolition of imperialism; accordingly, he limited himself to addressing his fellow countrymen. Comparing the spread of imperialism to the plague, he writes: "The time has come for righteous and honorable men (*shishijinjin*), who are still healthy and untainted with the illness, to mobilize their numbers and to minister to the sickness of nation."[9] In effect, he expected the *shishijinjin*, the exceptional men of virtue and justice who had led the Meiji restoration to be "good doctors" to the ailments of the nation. In his early works, Kōtoku sought to rouse this moral vanguard to action through a rhetoric of indignation and a language of hyperbole.

At the same time, however, Kōtoku discovered in Mencius' statement "I refuse to yield even if millions oppose me if to yield is to betray my conscience" a basis for redefining the role of the traditional man of virtue.[10] He held that Emile Zola, defender of the innocent Alfred Dreyfus, embodied the Mencian man of conscience.[11] Just as Zola used his authority as writer to expose the crimes of the French government, Kōtoku defined a new social identity of the radical intellectual who resists government policies on behalf of universal values and thereby acts as a catalyst in the creation of a new society. During the so called "horse-shoe ingots incident," he first assumed this role in an important media campaign that denounced the theft of Chinese silver ingots by Japanese military officers during the Boxer War.

Perhaps the best illustration of Kōtoku the radical intellectual occurred during the Russo-Japanese war. Kōtoku and Sakai Toshihiko, both popular reporters for the *Yorozu Chōhō*, resigned from the newspaper when the editor of

---

capacity to appreciate the power of words and to wield them with precision. This ability can only be acquired through wide reading and needs to be developed by extensive practice. Kōtoku, "The Three Necessary Elements of Composition," 351-352.

[9] Kōtoku Shūsui, *Teikokushugi: nijūseiki no kaibutsu* (Imperialism: Monster of the Twentieth Century) (Tokyo: Iwanami Bunko, 2004), 116-17.

[10] Kōtoku, *Teikokushugi*, 73.

[11] In 1894, Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish officer in the French Army, was falsely accused and convicted of espionage for the German General Staff. The subsequent debate as to his innocence polarized French and European society for the next decade. Emile Zola interceded in the Dreyfus affair with his famous article "J'accuse," in which he accused the senior officers of the French army of fabricating the case against Dreyfus and demanded a retrial. In his obituary to Zola, published in *Yorozu Chōhō*, October 3, 1902, Kōtoku describes Zola as both a "socialist who sought to solve social problems using scientific principles" and as a benevolent man who "sacrifices himself so that benevolence is realized (*sasshin jōnin*)." By standing up for Dreyfus, "innocent victim of the corruption of the French army" and combatting a million "demons" in defense of simple righteousness, he not only saved the life of one man but he also rescued the reputation of France from a terrible humiliation. Kōtoku, "Zora o nakasu" (In mourning for Zola), KSZ 4, p 137.

the paper adopted a position in support of the Russo-Japanese War and founded the *Heimin Shinbun*. The *Heimin Shinbun* was a radical pacifist press organ that confronted the government throughout its prosecution of the war. As writer, Kōtoku addressed himself to the *heimin*, a term that denoted the quasi totality of the Japanese population. He drew a line between the *heimin,* who had no interest in the war, and national elites that declared war in the name of the *kokumin*. To the extent that they were *kokumin* or constituent parts of the nation, the Japanese people were the targets of constant interpellations to support the nation at war, to form a sacred union, to sacrifice and to pray for victory. By contrast, the *heimin* detached the *kokumin* from the nation and defined a new basis for individual and group identification outside the framework of the nation-state. Since the *heimin* transcended differences of nationality and race, the Russian and Japanese *heimin* were not in a state of war.

In the wake of the Russo-Japanese War, Kōtoku led the radical, anarchist wing of the socialist party. Whereas he had earlier held that an intellectual vanguard would serve as the main agent of revolutionary change, he came to believe that the masses acting independently of leaders or organization would carry out revolutionary change in Japanese society. At this time he held that the "revolution does not need geniuses and will be effected by direct action of the workers united as a single force."[12] In this final case, the community he envisaged was the united working class that fused together to overthrow the capitalist order.

Although he changed his views on the nature of the community of insurrection, Kōtoku remained faithful to the written idiom of Sino-Japanese (*kanbun kundoku* or *yomikudashibun*) throughout his career.[13] Significantly, he differed from other prominent socialists such as Sakai Toshihiko, Ōsugi Sakae, and Arahata Kanson who switched early on to a more colloquial style of writing during a period of revolutionary change in the Japanese written language. In 1901, Sakai proposed that newspapers immediately adopt the colloquial style in *Genbun Itchi: Futsūbun*, a pamphlet which included a practical manual on how to write in this new style, and he implemented this change in his own practice as a journalist.[14] By contrast, Kōtoku wrote in a style that became archaic even as he championed ever more radical views about the community of his readers.

One explanation for this seeming contradiction is that he was a liminal figure who embodied the old and new temporalities that coexisted in the crucial

---

[12] Letter to Ishikawa Sanshirō, cited in Ōhara Satoshi, *Kōtoku Shūsui to taigyaku jiken*, (Kōtoku Shūsui and the High Treason Case) (Tokyo: Aoki Shoten, 1977), 126.

[13] Saitō Mareshi has shown that *kundoku*, though originally derived from *kanbun*, gained independence from the latter and became the lingua franca of intellectuals from the 1880s, relegating *kanbun* to a specialized idiom. Much as *kanbun* had been for earlier generations, *kundoku* served as a gateway to older texts, as a medium for dialogue with literate individuals across East Asia, and as vehicle for the introduction of new ideas and literary forms into Japan. *Kanbunmyaku to kindai nihon* (Modern Japan and Chinese Writing) (Tokyo: NHK Books, 2007).

[14] Sakai Toshihiko, *Sakai Toshihiko Zenshū*, Vol 1 (Kyoto: Hōritsu Bunkasha, 1971), 493-532.

transition period of the Meiji period. Indeed, one may say that he registered this temporality with uncommon sensitivity in his style of composition. In 1901, Kōtoku wrote an essay "Vernacular Writing and the Newspaper"[15] in which, as a proponent of socialism, he advocated that newspapers adopt the vernacular written style to "broaden their impact on society as whole." He lamented that few historic periods have used written styles as "varied and complicated" as Meiji Japan and compared the use of *kobun* (classical style) to write about contemporary realities to "looking at flowers through a screen or speaking to a foreigner through an interpreter."[16] As a solution, he proposed that newspapers adopt the unified writing style to put an end to linguistic anarchy, but unlike Sakai, he advocated that the reform be implemented gradually, starting with the lighter (*nanpa*) local news and human interest stories and only gradually extending the practice to more formal (*koha*) editorials.[17]

It will be helpful to explore how he used these different styles in his actual praxis as a writer. Three years prior to writing this article, Kōtoku experimented with the vernacular style, but "because of my own lack of talent and the various difficulties I encountered, I did not achieve rapid success and changed course."[18] Notwithstanding his own attempts to write in the vernacular from 1898 to 1899, he used Sino-Japanese to write his famous article "The Causes of Social Corruption and their Solution." After lamenting that Japan's "economic and political problems" have cast Japanese society into "the extreme of decadence," he addresses his appeal to the *gijin sōshi*, the righteous men in Confucian morality, who will prevent the rot from spreading further and rescue the dying nation.[19]

In Jan 20, 1899, he wrote an article in the vernacular about the tragic state of Japanese workers in which he denounced recent police repression to break up a meeting held by members of a metal workers' union to celebrate their first anniversary. Workers, he writes, are "forgotten" by society, even "despised and neglected."[20] However, Kōtoku never addressed this appeal to workers or regarded them as agents of social change. At the end of the article he writes, "Today, as the worker problem has become increasingly pressing, we must feel apprehension and pain to see the truly appalling effects of forgetting, despising and oppressing the workers. They are raising their voice to reach sympathizers

[15] Kōtoku Shūsui, "Genbunitchi to shinbun," first published in *Yorozu Chōhō* 1:2 (May 20 1901), reprinted in KSZ 3:391-396.
[16] Kōtoku, "Genbunitchi to shinbun," 393.
[17] His reason for opposing changing the more formal style of political editorials is interesting: they are too far removed from the spoken language, and to change it suddenly to a colloquial style would likely only have the unfortunate effect of confusing the reader. That is, by attempting to make the style more accessible and easier, he would perversely make the reader lose his concentration and focus on the sudden change of style rather than the content of what he is reading.
[18] Kōtoku, "Genbunitchi to shinbun," 394.
[19] Kōtoku Shūsui, "Shakai fuhai no genin to sono kyūsai" (The Causes of Social Corruption and their Solution), KSZ 2:149-50.
[20] Kōtoku, "Awarenaru Rōdōsha," KSZ 2:170.

among passers-by and society in general." In fact, he sought to make the workers the objects of compassion for others, who would champion their cause and act on their behalf.

But why did Kōtoku never adopt the unified writing style and continue to write in a style he judged archaic? Was it that he was too impregnated with *kanbun* culture as result of his education? Nakae Chōmin, his teacher, had his students read Mencius, whom he considered the first democrat of East Asia, and Zhuangzi, saying that "unless one understands the rules of Chinese writing, how can one compose a text? One who aspires to write well needs to read many Chinese texts."[21] Or did he think that this archaism possessed a contemporary function and served as a medium to translate radical Western thinkers? As noted, Kōtoku believed composition should aim at writer's self-transformation and forge a unified community. He sought to create a revolutionary subject through his writings and to rouse that subject to action. Even after he no longer referred to this community by the term "righteous men of good will," he continued to adopt a style that would appeal to this imagined audience. It would appear that he could only make his appeal to this subject by using an idiom that they understood and that resonated powerfully with them, a magical language with abundant rhetorical resources. Indeed, he continued to adhere to this medium even after he had reconceived the agent of revolution as *heimin* or working class.

[21] Kōtoku Shūsui, Chōmin Sensei, *Chōmin Sensei Gyōjōki* (Iwanami Bunko, 1960), 31-32.