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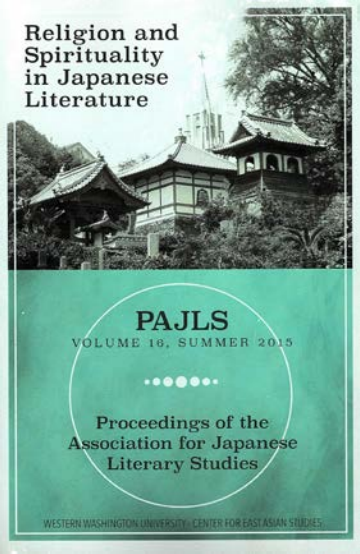

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"A Superfool Constantly Dreaming of the Future": Christ as Poet in Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's "Saihō no hito" (1927)

Pau Pitarch Fernández
Queens College of the City University of New York

This paper will look at Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's "Saihō no hito" ("The Man from the West," *Kaizō*, August 1927) and "Zoku Saihō no hito" ("The Man from the West: The Sequel," *Kaizō*, September 1927). Through fifty-nine fragmentary vignettes, these two texts present an idiosyncratic retelling of the life of Christ. They occupy a special place in Akutagawa's work, as "Saihō no hito" was the last piece he published during his lifetime, and "Zoku Saihō no hito" was the last text he wrote before taking a fatal dose of the barbiturate Veronal on the night of July 23, 1927. Existing scholarship has interpreted them almost universally as documents that diagnose the author's mental state in the last days before his suicide, and has attempted to discern from them how genuine or orthodox was Akutagawa's interest in Christianity.[1] In my paper I want to propose an alternative reading of these pieces, focusing on how the figure of Christ in "Saihō no hito" is employed to embody Akutagawa's ideal of the artist as morbid genius, and what that ideal gains from its connection to the Passion narrative.

In "Saihō no hito," Akutagawa not only qualifies Christ repeatedly as a "poet" and "journalist," but also refers to authors such as Strindberg, Goethe and Poe as "christs that came after him." This connection is established through the deployment of 19th-century "genius theory" (an attempt to find a scientific explanation for perceived connections between mental illness and artistic creativity) in order to identify the Holy Spirit with the mental pathologies that were associated with artistic genius. Christ becomes thus an example of the misunderstood artist, a "superfool" (*chō-ahō*) who pays with his life and sanity for his superhuman creativity. At the same time, artistic labor gains a spiritual dimension in the "eternal search for transcendence" that Akutagawa discovers in the life of Christ and his artist followers.

Akutagawa opens the first section of "Saihō no hito," "Ecce Homo," with the following declaration: "About ten years ago, I was artistically in love with Christianity, especially Catholicism" (ARZ 15:246).[2] The adverb "artistically" (*geijutsuteki ni*) has prompted many discussions on whether Akutagawa was genuinely interested in Christianity as a religion, or merely as a superficially decorative backdrop for his fiction. In my reading of the text, I want to try avoid viewing aesthetics and religion as an exclusive duality in which the presence of one element must imply the absence of the other, and instead try to understand them together. It is precisely by reading the life of Christ through the prism of 19th-century "genius theory" that Akutagawa can put forward an understanding of both art and religion as a total experience for the artist.

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[1] For a review of the current scholarship on the piece, see Kevin M. Doak, "The Last Word?: Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's 'The Man from the West,' " *Monumenta Nipponica*, vol. 66, no. 2, 2011, pp. 247-255.

Akutagawa's particular understanding of "the Holy Spirit" is the key to connecting the life of Christ with the "morbid genius" narrative. In the third section of the text, he describes it as follows:

> The Holy Spirit is not necessarily that which is called "the sacred." It is simply that which eternally seeks transcendence. Goethe was in the habit of referring to it as the Daemon, and he always added a warning not to allow oneself to become possessed by this Holy Spirit. But the children of the Holy Spirit—all christs—run the risk of being possessed by it. The Holy Spirit is neither a devil nor an angel. And it certainly is something different from a *kami*. Sometimes we catch a glimpse of it passing along beyond good and evil. Beyond good and evil—yet Lombroso, for better or worse, discovered the Holy Spirit in the brains of the mentally ill. (ARZ 15:248)

To begin with, Akutagawa makes an explicit point to expand the definition of "the Holy Spirit" beyond what is conventionally considered "religious" ("the sacred"), and extend it to the idea of "seeking transcendence." By following this with a mention of Goethe, he gestures as well towards two implications: that artists (and in particular writers) also have concerned themselves like Christ with this "search for transcendence," and, conversely, that Christ is being interpreted not only as a single unique individual, but as a paradigm that a particular kind of artists ("the children of the Holy Spirit—all christs—") have followed. The section ends by referring to the theory that genius is a form of mental illness made famous by Italian criminal anthropologist Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909), implicitly equating "the Holy Spirit" with genius.

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[2] *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshū*, Iwanami Shoten, 1995-1998. Indicated after each quote as (ARZ volume:page). Translation by Kevin M. Doak and J. Scott Matthews, "The Man from the West" and "The Man from the West: The Sequel," *Monumenta Nipponica*, vol. 66, no. 2, 2011, pp. 257-280. All other translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

Lombroso had popularized this idea in his monograph *Genio e follia* (*Genius and Madness*, 1864).[3] Building on the work of French psychiatrist Joseph Moreau de Tours (1804-1884), whose theory of "neuropathy" was based on the principle that genius and madness shared the same organic conditions,[4] Lombroso collected a copious amount of historical and biographical anecdotes on artists, politicians and scientists throughout Western history, to attempt a complete empirical picture of the many forms taken by the morbidity of genius throughout human history. Lombroso's work paints a deeply ambiguous image of geniuses: elevated by their unique creative power, but also cursed by the physiological infirmity that is a natural compensation for the superhuman development of their creativity.

Lombroso's investigations sparked a Europe-wide fascination with the idea of genius as mental illness, and renewed interest in the connections between heredity, intelligence and creativity.[5] His ideas received another boost of popularity in the 1890s, when Budapest-born polemist Max Nordau (pseudonym of Simon Maximilian Südfeld, 1849-1923) developed Lombroso's model into a general critique of modern European art in *Entartung* (*Degeneration*),[6] which caused an even bigger sensation world-wide. Alarmed by the ambiguous admiration towards the morbid that permeated *Genio e follia*, Nordau set to unequivocally denounce what he considered dangerous "unhealthy" trends in the European artists of his time, describing them as "morally insane," overly emotional, and prone to inane reverie, mysticism and hysteria.

Even before the publication of their complete Japanese translations in 1914,[7] the works of Lombroso and Nordau were widely read in Japan in English translation, and popularized the use of medical terms to discuss the particularities of modern artistic activity. The notion that modern artists were psychologically abnormal gained traction in Japan thanks to the wide dissemination from the early 1900s of the discourse of neurasthenia (*shinkei suijaku*) as an illness of "people of culture."[8] Neurasthenia, or nervous weakness, was a nebulously-defined medical condition that was considered to be the inevitable result of intellectual workers experiencing the full brunt of modern civilization.[9]

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[3] Further expanded editions in 1872, 1877, 1882, 1888, 1894. *Genio e follia* was translated into Russian (*Genial'nost' i pomyeshatel'stvo*, K. Tetjushinova, S. Peterburg Pavlenkov, 1885), Polish (*Geniusz i obłąkanie w związku z medycyną sądową, krytyką i historyą*, Jan Ludwik Popławski tr., Warsaw: skł. gł. w Księgarni Gebethnera i Wolffa, 1887), French (*L'homme de génie*, Colonna D'Istria tr., Paris: Félix Alcan, 1890), English (*The Man of Genius*, Havelock Ellis tr., London: Walter Scott, 1891) and German (*Der geniale Mensch*, M.O. Fraenkel tr., Hamburg: Verlagsanstalt und Druckerei AG, 1890).

[4] Joseph Moreau de Tours, *La psychologie morbide dans les rapports avec la philosophie de l'histoire, ou l'influence des névropathies sur le dynamisme intellectuel*, Paris: Victor Masson, 1859.

[5] In the bibliography to *Genie: Irrsinn und Ruhm* (München: Erns Reinhardt, 1928), German psychiatrist Wilhelm Lange-Eichbaum (1875-1949) collects more than a hundred and fifty books published on the topic between 1865 and 1925.

[6] Berlin: Duncker, 1892-1893, 2 vols.

[7] *Entartung*'s Japanese translation came out as *Gendai no daraku* (*The Decadence of the Present*, Nakajima Kotō tr., Dai Nippon bunmei kyōkai, 1914), with a foreword by

Since the artists and writers Lombroso and Nordau diagnosed were being canonized in early 1900s Japan as "modern classics," the connections these works established between artistic activity and mental abnormality soon became a cornerstone of the Japanese image of the "modern artist." One would not be taken seriously as an artist, it seemed, unless one could claim to suffer from a properly artistic form of mental pathology. In a 1923 article titled "Bungaku seinen no shinri" ("The Psychology of Literary Youths"), critic Itō Ken (1895-1945) complained that "to affect the airs of a genius and a misfit (*hen'isha*), is for literary youths like a particular pleasure and emotion. If one meets with many of them, it almost seems that they read literature to affect being bizarre. That is the extent to which they pretend to be misfits and regard themselves as geniuses."[10] If abnormal behavior could serve as a tool for young aspiring writers to project "the airs of a genius," it was because it allowed them to insert themselves in the genealogy of "morbid geniuses" that Lombroso and

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respected Shakespeare scholar and author Tsubouchi Shōyō. Lombroso's work first appeared in Japanese in 1898, when Kuroyanagi Kunitarō published a partial translation of *Genio e follia* with the title *Tensairon* (*On Genius*, Fukyūsha, 1898). The full work would not be translated until 1914, when two different translations appeared: *Tensairon* (*On Genius*, Uetake shoin), by Tsuji Jun, and *Tensai to kyōjin* (*Genius and Madman*, Bunseisha) by Mori Magoichi, with a foreword by novelist Mori Ōgai, then serving Surgeon General of the Japanese Army. Tsuji's translation became an instant best-seller in Japan, going through over twenty editions in a short time. It was later re-edited as *Tensairon teisei* (*On Genius. Revised Edition*), at least five different times until 1940: San'yōdō shoten, 1916 (5 editions); Sanseisha, 1920 (9 editions); Shunjūsha, 1926; Kaizōsha, 1930 and 1940 (both in the popular pocket-book collection Kaizō bunko).

[8] Matsubara Saburō, "Shinkei suijaku no gen'in," *Shinkeigaku zasshi*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1914, pp. 1-9. Quoted in Kitanaka, Junko, *Depression in Japan: Psychiatric Cures for a Society in Distress*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012, p. 60.

[9] For the development of ideas about neurasthenia as a cultural phenomenon in the Meiji era, see Watarai Yoshiichi, *Meiji no seishin isetsu: Shinkeibyō, shinkei suijaku, kamigakari*, Iwanami shoten, 2003.

[10] Itō Ken, "Bungaku seinen no shinri," *Hentai shinri*, vol. 12, no. 1, July 1923, p. 79.

Nordau's diagnoses of 19th-century European art had popularized.

Akutagawa's reading of Lombroso was thus not uncommon for Japanese intellectuals of his time. As many of his favorite Western authors, like Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893), Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), or August Strindberg (1849-1912), had had spectacular experiences with mental illness (experiences that featured prominently both in their fictional works and in the biographical narratives of the authors circulated after their deaths), the "morbid genius" discourse provided compelling causal explanations for the links between their psyche and literary production.

In a section titled "Hysteria," from his collection of critical essays "Bungeiteki na, amari ni bungeiteki na" ("Literary, All Too Literary"),[11] Akutagawa offers a compact summary of this narrative:

> When I hear that a therapy for hysteria is to have the patient write or say whatever they are thinking, I consider seriously that hysteria may be responsible for the birth of literature. [...] Everybody is hysterical to some degree. Poets in particular have significantly more hysterical tendencies than the rest of people. They have been suffering from this hysteria for three thousand years. They either die from it, or they go mad. But it is because of it that they sing their joy and their sadness. (ARZ 15:216)

The switch in the causal connection between artistic genius and mental abnormality is clear: while Lombroso argued that mental illness was an unfortunate side effect of the abnormal growth of the creative faculties of the genius, Akutagawa takes morbidity as the starting point instead and makes hysteria "responsible for the birth of literature." The same hysteria that Nordau denounced as dangerous in the art of the 19th century is here for Akutagawa the very source of all literary expression. Poets pay a tragic toll for their unique faculties, but without their hysterical qualities they would be unable to "sing their joy and their sadness." Akutagawa continues, offering specific examples:

> If among martyrs and revolutionaries one can find a form of masochism, among poets there is probably no shortage of hysteria patients. [...] Otherwise we would not have works like *Le plaidoyer d'un fou* (Strindberg).[12] What is more, this hysteria is a powerful presence of the times. *Werther*[13] and *René*[14]

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[11] Serialized in the journal *Kaizō* from April to August 1927.

[12] Written in French and published in 1893, this is a fictionalized account of Strindberg's marriage to his first wife, Siri von Essen. The premise of the book is that the narrator and protagonist Axel is writing an account of his marriage both to refute his wife's accusations that he is mad, and also to prove that she has been unfaithful to him.

[13] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, 1774.

[14] François-René de Chateaubriand, *René*, 1802.

> are also born out of this hysteria of the age. One could add to them the Crusades that swept all of Europe, but that is not the subject of "Literary, All Too Literary." Epilepsy was called "the divine malady." In that case, we should call hysteria "the poetic malady."
>
> It is funny to think of Shakespeare or Goethe suffering a hysterical attack. Imagining that might be considered a big offense to their greatness. But what made them great was their powers of expression, besides this hysteria. How many times they suffered hysterical attacks is a question for psychologists. Our concern is with their power of expression. Writing these lines, I imagine an anonymous poet of old having a violent hysterical attack in the woods. He is the laughingstock of his fellow villagers. However, the results of the powers of expression that this hysteria quickened will emerge later, like an underground spring.
>
> I do not worship hysteria. The hysterical Mussolini is no doubt an international danger. But if nobody had ever experienced hysteria, we may have far less of these literary works that we like so much. This is the only reason I want to defend hysteria. It has somehow become an exclusive of females, but the truth is it is possible in anybody.
>
> The literature of the last century suffered without a doubt from hysteria. In Strindberg's *A Blue Book*[15] this hysteria of the times is called "the work of the Devil." I obviously have no way of knowing if it is the work of the Devil or the work of God. At any rate, poets do suffer from hysteria. According to Biriukov's biography,[16] even the brawny Tolstoy went half mad and left his house (*shukke*). It does not change much from what the newspapers reported recently about a certain hysterical woman. (ARZ 15:216)

While returning to the creative power of hysteria for artistic expression, Akutagawa highlights another feature of the morbid artist that he will come back to in "Saihō no hito" as well: the stigma of mental illness (the reason why imagining classic writers suffering from hysteria would "be considered a big offense to their greatness") makes morbid artists a target of derision by his "fellow villagers," who are incapable to understand that it is hysteria what quickens their artistic powers of expression.[17]

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[15] *En blå bok* is a collection of essays and journal entries published in 4 volumes between 1907 and 1912.

[16] Pavel Biriukov, *Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoi: Biografiia*, Moskva: A.P. Pechkovskii, P.A. Bulanzhe, 2 vols., 1906-1908. This biography of Tolstoy was translated into Japanese three times, from the 1911 English version: (1) tr. Mizushima Kōichirō, Naigai shuppan kyōkai, 1912; (2) Souma Gyofū, Shinchōsha, 1917; (3) Hara Hisaichirō, Shinchōsha, 1926-1928, 3 vols.

[17] Compared to other Japanese writers of his generation, Akutagawa is rather unique in actively attempting to re-claim the term hysteria from its conventional understanding as a "female malady." Nordau often qualifies "degenerate art" as "hysterical" and "feminizing," but these motifs are rarely used in positive terms by Japanese writers and

The same underlying narrative prompts an interesting exchange at a May 1927 event in Niigata,[18] on his way back to Tokyo after a series of lectures in Hokkaidō,[19] at the mention of Vincent van Gogh's (1853-1890) short career:

> Akutagawa: Saitō[20] said van Gogh suffered from mania.
> Shikiba:[21] There are many theories. Since it's part of my job, I think epilepsy is one of the theories that makes more sense. Epilepsy has a strong hereditary character. Riese[22] and others say it is a form of the epilepsy described by Kleist.[23] Jaspers[24] says it was early onset dementia, others say paralytic dementia.
> Akutagawa: Is that so? What did Strindberg have?
> Shikiba: People say paranoia.
> Akutagawa: Maupassant was a textbook case of paralytic dementia, right?
> Shikiba: Exactly. We have a diary of his illness.
> Akutagawa: And Nietzsche was also mentally ill.
> Shikiba: Yes, many geniuses are.
> Akutagawa: In that case, rather than preventing mental illness, we should do our utmost to promote it. Saitō also said that I could develop early onset dementia. Lombroso's theories are weird (*okashii*), right? (428)

"Many geniuses have tragic endings," adds Akutagawa not much later in the conversation. Besides being a testimony of how up to date Japanese psychiatrists were on the latest "pathographies" produced in Germany on 19th-century Western artists, the dialog shows the facility with which Akutagawa connects cases as different as van Gogh's, Maupassant's, Strindberg's and Nietzsche's,

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critics, who otherwise attempt to re-evaluate Nordau's criticisms as descriptions of a properly modern artist.

[18] "Niigata de no zadankai" appeared in the local journal *Geijutsu jidai*, no. 3. Quoted from Kuzumaki Yoshitoshi (ed.), *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke mitei kōshū*, Iwanami shoten, 1968, pp. 421-433.

[19] Akutagawa had been touring together with fellow writer Satomi Ton (1888-1883), to promote the recently-launched series of "one-yen books" (*enpon*): *Gendai Nihon bungaku zenshū* (*Complete Works of Contemporary Japanese Literature*), Kaizōsha, 63 vols., 1926-1931.

[20] Saitō Mokichi (1882-1953). Psychiatrist and *tanka* poet. He treated Akutagawa and other authors like Uno Kōji (1891-1961).

[21] Shikiba Ryūzaburō (1898-1965). Psychiatrist and author of *Van Gogh no shōgai to seishinbyō*, Jūrakusha, 1932, 2 vols.

[22] Walter Riese (1890-1976), *Vincent van Gogh in der Krankheit: ein Beitrag zum Problem der Beziehung zwischen Kunstwerk und Krankheit*, München: Bergmann, 1926.

[23] Karl Kleist (1879-1960), *Episodische Dämmerzustände: ein Beitrag zur Kenntnis der konstitutionellen Geistesstörungen*, Leipzig: Thieme, 1926.

[24] Karl Jaspers (1883-1969), *Strindberg und van Gogh: Versuch einer pathographischen Analyse unter vergleichender Heranziehung von Swedenborg und Hölderlin*, Bern: E. Bircher, 1922.

and how quick Shikiba is to recognize the "morbid genius" narrative that the series of names is pointing at. More interestingly, Akutagawa proposes an explicit re-evaluation of morbidity as a positive feature for the artist, by calling for a "promotion" of mental illness as a means to create more artistic geniuses. It is interesting how Akutagawa timidly inserts himself into the genealogy of morbid artists, by remarking how his psychiatrist had warned him of the possibility of developing similar disorders, only to half-dismiss himself immediately by calling Lombroso's model "weird."

Later, discussing the subject of hallucinations (*sakkaku*), Shikiba explains that "children have them the least often, then normal adults, then mental patients. Some people say intelligent and creative individuals have just as many." Akutagawa replies: "That's probably true. One could say mental patients are the most evolved humans." Reversing the implicit fear of regression and degeneration that motivated studies like Lombroso's, Akutagawa creates a narrative in which the facility of mental patients for hallucination, for abnormal perception, ties them in with "creative individuals" as a mark of higher evolution. At no point does he refute the pathological conditions of these unique modes of perception, embracing rather their morbidity as a proof that these abnormal features are the proper mark of a genius.

"God has descended from billowy clouds into the intricacies of our nervous systems" (ARZ 15:258), declares Akutagawa in "Saihō no hito," establishing a direct link between his interpretation of the "morbid genius" and the role of the Holy Spirit. The same delicate "nerves" that mark the neurasthenic as a "man of culture," and serve as proof for the morbidity of the artistic genius, are the site of Akutagawa's mode of transcendental experience. This is also what makes it possible to talks of writers as "christs" as well. Besides Poe and Strindberg, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), Walt Whitman (1819-1892) and Lev Tolstoy (1829-1910) also receive this appellation.

Conversely, Christianity is described as "the morally edifying literature created by Christ" (ARZ 15:282), and Christ is also referred to as a writer:

> He was a journalist as well as a character within journalism—he was the author of short stories called "parables" while also serving as the protagonist of the novel-like biography that is called the "New Testament." We are likely to discover that this kind of thing is also true about many christs. Christ was one of those writers who cannot help putting their own lives in the index of their works. (ARZ 15:282-283)

As this quote shows, Akutagawa uses "journalism" as a synonym for literature. In his late critical writings, like the aforementioned "Bungeiteki na, amari ni bungeiteki na" or "Bungei zatsudan" ("Literary Miscellany"),[25] Akutagawa often uses "journalism" paired with "poetry" to refer to literary writing in general. A section of "Bungeiteki na, amari ni bungeiteki na" titled simply "Journalism" explains the connection as follows:

> No matter how much I write, I will not run out of things I want to say. In this sense I think I am like a journalist. That is why I consider professional journalists my siblings. [...] In the end journalism is nothing more than history. [...] History in the end is biography (*denki*). And biography does not differ much from the novel. There is no clear difference between an autobiography and an "I novel." If we forget for a moment Croce's theory and take lyrical poetry and the like as exceptions, literary writing is journalism. (ARZ 15:178)

A later section in the same series titled "The Call of the Wild" goes further in his use of the term, calling himself a "journalist" as well: "I do not create my works to perfect my character. Neither do I create them to reform the current social system. I create them simply in order to complete my inner poet. Or rather, I create them to complete my inner poet-*cum*-journalist" (ARZ 15:203-204). Qualifying Christ as a "journalist," then, does not separate him but rather connects him to the world of artists.

Like the morbid geniuses of Lombroso, Akutagawa's "christs" pay for their unique expressive abilities with a shorter life span than normal. The section titled "A Man of Life" describes Christ as living his life "most quickly [...] like a candle trying to burn itself up. His deeds and journalism were, in a word, the wax tears of this candle" (ARZ 15:277). In the same manner, the lives of other "christs," "like the lives of all who have genius," are also lives that "burned with passion" (ARZ 15:272). By reading the short intense lives of "christs" against the backdrop of the Passion, Akutagawa is giving a symbolic meaning to the evolutionary narrative that underlies Lombroso's model. An early death is not proof of biological unfitness, but of a qualitatively different life. It is because of the fact that Christ did not grow "into an old prophet in the shade of some giant fig tree," but suffered his violent Passion instead, that "Christ reveals to us his eternally young face" (ARZ 15:277). As in the case of the morbid aspects of genius, this feature is interpreted as an essential source of expressive power for these "christs," ultimately a source of unique value for their lives and their works.

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[25] *Bungei shunjū*, January 1927.

Reading Christ as a morbid artist, however, does not mean limiting the interpretation of the biblical narrative to a mere "aesthetic" surface. Akutagawa recognizes the revolutionary potential of the New Testament, highlighting both in his narrative of Christ and of future "artistic christs" an essential conflict with the society of their times. According to the section "The Child of the Holy Spirit," Akutagawa's Christ is a "bohemian of the ancient world" whose "way of life trampled on the social conventions of the day," while "his enemies [...] had no way to size up his genius"[26] (ARZ 15:254). In a different section, Akutagawa goes so far as to call Christ a "communist" whose "genius took flight and he had no concern for the things of tomorrow" (ARZ 15:278). Other "christs" are described in similar terms, like Edgar Allan Poe, "certainly better received in France than in America," proving that "all christs have been unwelcome in their hometowns" (ARZ 15:259). August Strindberg's rebellion "against his own family" is described as "both his misfortune and, at the same time, his happiness. With Christ too it was likely no different" (ARZ 15: 251). Like the mad poet imagined in "Hysteria," "christs" become the laughingstock of their "fellow villagers" who cannot understand their unique powers of expression. Being shunned is their "misfortune" but also their "happiness," because it contributes to their tragic lot, while also reinforcing the idea that their visions have a unique value that is beyond the comprehension of common people.

It is ambiguous to what extent Akutagawa deviates here from the understanding of Christ as a figure with a universal appeal. He calls his "journalism" "a source of consolation for the poor and the enslaved" (ARZ 15:289), but he also laments that in the temples built to Christ after his death one "can still hear his sigh [...] 'Why do you not understand?,' " a fate he shares with "all the christs who died wretchedly after him" (ARZ 15:284). The question is ultimately left open, as it perhaps must be, since the "morbid christ" narrative is built on this essential separation of the genius from conventional life. Akutagawa's paradoxical explanations seem to imply that Christ's message, while potentially universal, is available in its full value only to those who are, "just like the travelers on the road to Emmaus, unable to live without seeking

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[26] Doak and Matthews consistently translate the Japanese word "tensai" as "heavenly gifts," reading the characters that compose it literally as "heaven-bestowed talent." I have chosen to render "tensai" as "genius," in order to highlight the connections of the text with Lombroso's theories.

Christ, who sets our hearts on fire" (ARZ 15:289).

All these features lead Akutagawa to describe Christ, and by extension "all christs," as "a superfool constantly dreaming of the future" (ARZ 15:279). The term "fool" (*ahō*) appears often in Akutagawa's late work, like in "Aru ahō no isshō" ("The Life of a Stupid Man," *Kaizō*, October 1927), or in "Kappa" (*Kaizō*, March 1927), where Magg's collection of aphorisms, "Words of a Fool," is made of lines from Akutagawa's own "Shuju no kotoba" ("Words of a Dwarf," *Bungei shunjū*, January 1923 to November 1925) (ARZ 14:139). It is then not strange that "Saihō no hito" would refer to the artist-Christ it portrays as a "fool" as well. Upgrading him to a "superfool" (a play on the Nietzschean idea of "superman") is for Akutagawa a way to point out the contradictory duality of the morbid genius: a "fool" because of the mental abnormality that the genius is doomed to suffer, but a "superfool" because it is this abnormality that sets the genius on a unique creative path unattainable to the "healthy" common folk.

I want to close this paper with a brief look at the presence of the morbid artist in Akutagawa's fiction. Many of his most celebrated works, such as "Jigokuhen" ("Hell Screen," *Ōsaka Mainichi shinbun yūkan* and *Tōkyō Nichinichi shinbun*, May 1 to 22, 1918), "Kappa," or his posthumously published works "Aru ahō no isshō" and "Haguruma" ("Spinning Gears," *Bungei shunjū*, October 1927) deal with artists who suffer from some degree of mental abnormality. His little-discussed story "Numachi" ("The Marshland," *Shinchō*, May 1919) offers a poignant illustration of the "christ-like morbid genius" and its continued significance for the author.

The text opens with the narrator visiting an exhibition of Western-style paintings, where he finds a small oil painting titled "The Marshland" by "an artist of no consequence." Depicting "turbid water and the damp ground tangled with dense vegetation" painted in yellow tones, the painting "couldn't possibly have attracted even a casual glance from an ordinary viewing crowd" (ARZ 4:237).[27] The painting is then unique not only by its odd choice of color, but also by staying unnoticed by the common public, except for the narrator. Even though the picture is "hung forlorn in the exceptionally ill-lighted corner, and in a wretched frame at that," the narrator can feel "a terrible power lurking in the painting," that comes from "the pathetic (*itamashii*) pose of an artist intent on gripping nature; and from its yellow marshland vegetation, as from all superb art works, I experienced a sense of sublime ecstasy. In fact, I found none of the paintings of all sizes displayed over the place as powerful as this piece" (ARZ 4:238).

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[27] Translation by Beongcheon Yu, "The Marshland," *Chicago Review*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1965, pp. 60-62.

Several motifs are highlighted and symbolically intertwined in this opening scene. The painting presents a non-mimetic representation of nature that remains beyond the comprehension of the "ordinary viewing crowd." The painting's peripheral position in the exhibition, almost hidden in an "ill-lighted corner" reinforces this motif of heterodoxy and lack of public success. At the same time, only the narrator is able to see in the artwork "a terrible power" whose unique artistic energy seems to depend as much from its singular coloration of the natural scene, as from the "pathetic pose" of the artist that the narrator thinks he can see in its yellowish hues. The "sublime ecstasy" of the viewer stems both from the painting's aesthetic qualities, and from the fact that nobody else seems to think it worthy of any attention.

While the narrator is admiring the unique artwork, an art reporter approaches him and seems amused by his interest in it. Upon hearing the narrator call the painting "a masterpiece," the reporter bursts out laughing and tells him dismissively that he is viewing the work of an insane painter who has recently died. "Who else but a mad man would use such a color?," he observes (ARZ 4:239). Not only the public, but also the critical establishment (represented here by the reporter) seems to be unable to appreciate the power of the unique painting.

Unsurprisingly, the narrator feels only disgust at the reporter's dismissive tone, but, more interestingly, the revelation that the painter had died mentally insane strengthens even more his sense of awe:

> Awestruck, I stared at this marshland piece for the second time, and once again discerned on this small canvas the pathetic image of an artist tormented with terrible anguish and insecurity.
> "As I understand it, he lost his mind because he couldn't paint the way he hoped to. For that at least we could perhaps give him credit."
> The reporter's brightened face smiled an almost gleeful smile. Such was the only reward one of us could win from the world at the cost of his life. With a strange tremor shuddering, running through my body, I looked into this mournful painting for the third time. There between the darkling sky and water stood the reeds, poplars, and fig trees all in wet yellow ocher, throbbing with the compelling force of naked nature itself....
> "Yes, this is a masterpiece."
>
> I repeated it defiantly, looking the reporter straight in the face. (ARZ 4:240)

It is only after he has heard of the madness of the painter that the narrator identifies explicitly with him, viewing him as "one of us" who sacrifice their lives for art. It is not the reward of "the world" that these artists seek (for the audience has ignored it, and the reporter only deigns to grant it a disdainful smile), but the "force of naked nature itself" that can only be expressed after having endured "terrible anguish and insecurity." It is unclear if Akutagawa would go as far as qualifying the unknown painter as a "christ," but the effect his work has on the narrator seems to stem from the same "morbid artist" narrative that "Saihō no hito" develops.

Akutagawa's retelling of the life of Christ is built upon the discourse of the "morbid genius," a discourse it enriches with new meaning through the model of the Passion. By identifying the Holy Spirit with the pathological qualities of the artistic genius, Akutagawa both creates a distinctive narrative of Christ as an artist, and adds a new dimension to the lives of the "christs that came after him," whose sacrifices take on a revolutionarily spiritual meaning. Far from opposing each other, religiosity and artistic creation find a common space in the figure of the "morbid christs" who throw themselves into their poetry and "journalism" as total experiences, and who guide the few "travelers on the road to Emmaus" who understand their value.

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