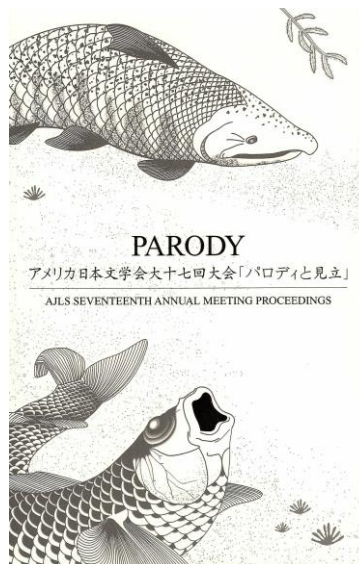


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Kokubyaku as *Bundan Parody*”

Phyllis I. Lyons 

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**TANIZAKI FIGHTS THE *WATAKUSHI SHŌSETSU*:
KOKUBYAKU AS *BUNDAN* PARODY**

Phyllis I. Lyons
Northwestern University

This essay discusses an unusual and almost unknown Tanizaki Jun'ichirō novel. It is a story of the culture of the *bundan*, that is, the literary establishment, and it involves Tanizaki, Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, and the *watakushi shōsetsu* or “I-novel.”

While in some aspects the 1928 *Kokubyaku* is like many stories Tanizaki had written up to that point, it also is quite unlike most of them. Possessed of what in the late 1920s would have been called a typical Tanizaki “ingenious plot,”¹ it is also a pointed critique of the art of fiction as practiced in Tanizaki’s world. A fictional story about a fictional story, it is also about an actual argument between Tanizaki and Akutagawa. Through the fiction of a sexual adventure and murder mystery, Tanizaki meditates on the writer’s craft, literary issues, and the complicit culture of the *bundan*; and he explores the literary values he both participated in and resisted. *Kokubyaku* wittily satirizes the conventions of Japanese autobiographical fiction in a parody of the *watakushi shōsetsu* that was being much debated at the time. *Kokubyaku* is comic—but maybe only if you find the preoccupations of *bundan* life amusing. Its failure to garner critical consideration might even suggest that the *bundan* itself was not amused at the satire. (Kōno Taeko is the only critic I have found who even discusses *Kokubyaku*, and humor is not mentioned in her commentary.)²

However, later I will speculate that *Kokubyaku* was at the same time also actually a “true confession,” a genuine *watakushi shōsetsu*, that is, a story about the author Tanizaki, and therefore not a parody at all. *Kokubyaku* is the confession of a writer who lives in the world of writers; he has made a terrible mistake, and finds that he cannot undo that mistake. The fictional author believes he is a true artist, but is under attack from the *bundan*. He desperately tried to shake off and yet is hopelessly entangled in the embroilments of the past and present: guilt, miscalculations and dependencies. That is the situation of the real author too.

¹ “Bungeitekina, amari ni bungeitekina,” *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshū*, vol. 9, (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1968), p. 205.

² *Tanizaki Jun'ichirō to kōtei no yokubō* (Tokyo: Chūō Kōron Sha, 1980), pp. 64–68.

Kokubyaku is one of three novels Tanizaki wrote simultaneously between 1928 and 1930. Its sister novels are *Manji* (*Quicksand*) and *Tade kuu mushi* (*Some Prefer Nettles*). The other two instantly became classics, and they mark a new beginning to the career of the middle-aged writer, a career that had for the most part been stalled since the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923. It is well known that Tanizaki moved to Kansai following the destruction of Tokyo, and that he remained there even when Tokyo was rebuilt. *Kokubyaku* is, in a sense, a farewell to the career Tanizaki had built in Tokyo and is set in Tokyo. The other two novels open to the future; they are set in Kansai.

Kokubyaku is linguistically driven. That is, both the very title of the novel and the plot “hook” rely on word plays. The title is two *kanji*, literally, “black” and “white” (I am currently translating it, under the title, *In Black and White*). On the title page, the author indicates by *furigana* that the “white” should be pronounced *byaku*, rather than what would seem to be the more common *haku*. (The use of *ateji* to instruct readers in special pronunciations is a device Tanizaki was using frequently at that time.) In fact, *kokubyaku* is actually the correct, or at least preferred, pronunciation for this *jukugo*. Is Tanizaki just conducting a language lesson? Well, no. To read the characters silently will not show what is at stake; but to HEAR them immediately conjures up the other *kokuhaku*: “confession.” The plot of the novel does indeed culminate in a confession; but more than that, the whole novel is a confession—in varying shades, not just black and white. The title itself slyly draws attention to a “misreading” that is not a misreading.

The plot too of *Kokubyaku* hinges on a word play, that is, a word mistake. A writer named Mizuno has written a story about a perfect murder. Mizuno’s story, “To the Point of Murder” (*Hito o korosu made*), is not autobiographical, but he has used as the model for the victim an actual fellow writer named Cojima, whom he names “Codama” in the story.³ As the novel opens, Mizuno awakens to realize that he has slipped a couple of times in the manuscript he just sent off to the press, and used the real writer’s name, “Cojima.” Suddenly he is terrified that if the actual Cojima is murdered, he will be suspected, because—given the assumptions of the *watakushi shōsetsu*-ridden literary world—readers who know Cojima will recognize him in the description of the character, Codama, and will naturally associate the murderer-protagonist with the author, especially since Mizuno has modeled that character on himself. The problem is the spelling of Cojima’s name. While “Kojima” is a

³ The reason for this peculiar spelling will become clear soon.

common name, mostly it is spelled “Little Island.” Cojima, however, spells it “Child Island,” as the writers in the *bundan* know; and Mizuno used not “Little Jewel” in the story, but “Child Jewel,” which, Mizuno realizes, sets up a strong possibility of association of the fictional murder victim with the real writer. (Hence, in my translation, the two spellings, “Kojima” and “Cojima.”)⁴ The galleys of Mizuno’s story have gone to press, and so it is too late for changes. The remaining two hundred or so pages of *Kokubyaku* recount Mizuno’s ultimately unsuccessful attempts to establish an alibi in case the actual writer Cojima is murdered. Of course, Cojima is murdered, at an hour and date and in circumstances similar to those in the story; and of course Mizuno is suspected. His real alibi guarantor, a mysterious *moga* (“modern girl”) streetwalker who was entertaining him at the time the murder took place (over fifty miles away), has disappeared. By the end of the novel, having been implicitly threatened with torture by the interrogating police (who did things like that in those days), Mizuno is about to sign a confession for a crime he did not commit, trapped ultimately not by facts and acts, but by the assumptions of his literary world. In short, *Kokubyaku* is a parodic *watakushi shōsetsu* nightmare.

Mizuno is a typical, antihero *watakushi shōsetsu* authorial persona: the “Look at the mess I have made of my life” self-presentation, with a strongly defensive undertone of “But really, I’m actually sensitive and highly misunderstood by the philistines around me” (think of Naoji in Dazai Osamu’s *Shayō*, or *The Setting Sun*). He is alternately grandiose and craven. He sees himself as a maligned “true artist.” He feels harassed and insulted by his publisher, and hounded by his two-faced editor (whose contemptuous flattery Mizuno sees through). His insistence that—despite realistic resemblances—his story is a *story*, is ignored. Several years earlier, letters of sympathy had flooded in to Mizuno’s now ex-wife from readers after he wrote a series of wife-murder stories; the *bundan* had been more interested in circulating rumors—in poking at his life—than in discussing his artistic achievement. That’s the problem inherent in the *watakushi shōsetsu*: readers and critics alike may take your fiction as fact. In *Kokubyaku* Tanizaki raises the *watakushi shōsetsu*

⁴ I am indebted to Stefania Burk, who suggested this spelling stratagem to replace the misleading “Kojima/Kohjima” system I had tentatively attempted. Either alternative is awkward for readers who know that “Kohjima”—which looks better for such readers than “Cojima”—indicates a different pronunciation from “Kojima ;” but the strangeness of “Cojima” is just what Tanizaki wants Japanese readers to recognize. And if you don’t know Japanese names, difference is what we want, and strangeness is not a problem!

stakes to the ultimate level: Mizuno will end up having to pay *with his life* for the *bundan*'s arrogance and obtuseness.

When Mizuno's latest "diabolistic" story is dismissed by critics—"What, this again?"—we hear convincing, real Tanizaki malice toward his own critics, which even included Akutagawa who had earlier criticized what he called Tanizaki's "diabolist tendency" (*akumateki keikō*).⁵ But there is in the novel an increment of intensity beyond a writer's mere irritation. In fact, at issue is the plot itself. Why would Tanizaki, a writer, write a story about a writer killing another writer through his writing? Where would Mizuno (or Tanizaki) even get the crazy notion that just because he wrote a story, a man would be murdered? Where did this obsessive and hermetic plot come from, when at the same time Tanizaki was writing such rich and vibrant stories as *Manji* and *Tade kuu mushi*? A psychological reading would tell us why: Mizuno *wants* to kill Cojima. Tanizaki wants to kill—? Whom does he want to kill? To telegraph my answer, which comes below, I propose that at its core *Kokubiyaku* is actually about Akutagawa's suicide the previous year, a suicide that occurred in a way that intensely involved Tanizaki. Tanizaki isn't apologizing for Akutagawa's suicide, because he has nothing to apologize for. He didn't do it, he didn't make Akutagawa do it. Akutagawa did it. And yet...and yet....

Accordingly, let us look at the last stage of the long-standing relationship between Tanizaki and Akutagawa to see how Akutagawa becomes part of the story. In 1927 the two writers entered into what is now known famously as the "plot debate," or *shōsetsu no suji ronsō*. Neither was known as a writer of *watakushi shōsetsu*, although both had written stories with obviously autobiographical referents, especially Akutagawa in his late writing. Rather, they were both primarily writers of intellectual, often witty, well-crafted fictions. Tanizaki also had a special reputation as an *akumashugi-sha* or "diabolist" who brought his readings of European decadent and Symbolist writers (including the "opium eater," Thomas de Quincey) into his own creative mix.

The debate was carried out over a period of five months in 1927 largely in the pages of the journal *Kaizō* in a series of dueling essays: *Jōzetsuroku* (Garrulous Record) for Tanizaki, *Bungetekina, amari ni bungeitekina* (Literary, All Too Literary) for Akutagawa.⁶ Tanizaki is

⁵ "Taishō hachinendō no bungakukai," in *Bungetekina, amari ni bungeitekina* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1972), p. 135.

⁶ Akutagawa's title of course glosses Nietzsche's "Human, All Too Human," an ominous hint that Akutagawa may have been identifying his own growing fear of insanity with Nietzsche's madness—brilliant but unstable, both of them.

usually credited with—or blamed for—starting it, but in fact his first volley was not even lobbed directly at Akutagawa, as each of them just happened to publish literary opinions in the same month but in different venues. In February Tanizaki began writing a monthly opinion column for the journal *Kaizō*; in it he made some provocative but general comments about the current fashion for what he called self-involved, meandering, boring, “stories,” that is, what were being called *watakushi* or *shinkyō shōsetsu* (“story of internal state”). Rather, he asserted, structure was important in story telling, and structure meant, “plot.” For his part, Akutagawa (in *zadankai* company with Tokuda Shūsei, Hirotsu Kazuo and others) in *Shinchō* passingly cited Tanizaki’s and his own writing as problematic, as he expressed uneasiness about highly plotted fiction. Yes, it was entertaining, but was it “pure,” he asked. Shiga Naoya was his model for the “pure artist” (*junsuina sakka*)—and they were not.⁷ Masamune Hakuchō had jocularly warned Tanizaki not to seek controversy in his new literary column: “There will be many people who will argue with you, and you won’t be able to stay silent, and you’ll respond, and it’ll become an issue in the *bundan*, and you know how *urusai* that will be!”⁸ But Tanizaki rose to Akutagawa’s bait.

The operative terms in the debate were *hanashi no suji* (story plot), *junbungei* (pure art) and *suji no omoshirosa* (plot interest). Soon Akutagawa added the most resonant of the terms: *hanashi-rashii hanashi no nai shōsetsu* (literally, “stories without story-like stories,” or as it has come to be transformed into less-tortured English, “plotless stories”). The debate has been much discussed and analyzed;⁹ but here the important thing to know is that *Kokubyaku* was written in the aftermath of what became an increasingly ad hominem discussion of literary value—that is, the core of a writer’s self-definition.

Tanizaki vigorously resisted Akutagawa, but that made him a *bundan* outrider, like the *akumashugi-sha* protagonist of *Kokubyaku*. The debate continued in *Kaizō* with Tanizaki alternating monthly with Akutagawa; and then it came to a crashing halt, when on July 24—which

⁷ Akutagawa *Ryūnosuke zenshū*, vol. 9, p. 209.

⁸ “Jōzetsu-roku,” in *Tanizaki Jun’ichirō zenshū*, vol. 20 (Tokyo: Chūō Kōron Sha, 1982), p. 72.

⁹ For only a few of the many sources that discuss the debate in English, see Tomi Suzuki, *Narrating the Self: Fictions of Japanese Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 152f; Irmela Hijiya-Kirschnereit, *Rituals of Self-Revelation: Shishōsetsu as Literary Genre and Socio-cultural Phenomenon* (Cambridge: Harvard University, Council of East Asian Studies, 1996), pp. 155–156; and Karatani Kōjin, *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 155–168.

just happened to be Tanizaki's birthday—Akutagawa committed suicide. Tanizaki was pulled into the aftermath, with requests from publishers for commentaries and memorials; he was asked only a month later to write some words of introduction to a new Akutagawa *zenshū* that was rushed into press.

Tanizaki had written relatively little of importance in the several years since the earthquake. But within eight months of Akutagawa's death, he began an unprecedented flurry of publication—three novels started in the same year, 1928, with one of them, *Kokubyaku*, even completed that year. (This means, of course, that he had to have been thinking and writing intensely during the months since his debate with Akutagawa had ended so stunningly.) Two of the novels began serialization at the same time: *Kokubyaku* and *Manji*. *Kokubyaku* was finished in only five months, having been published in the same magazine where the Tanizaki-Akutagawa debate had taken place for exactly the same time period the previous year.

We cannot say that Tanizaki was following Akutagawa's cheeky advice to find a "healthier and more humanistic" idiom that "let in more circulation of light and air;"¹⁰ but without question, these three novels mark a new energy and direction for Tanizaki's work, and if in the short run Akutagawa won the debate by closing it down (as Tanizaki himself acknowledged¹¹), in the long run Tanizaki's imagination seems to have been reignited more powerfully than ever before; and from that time on he produced the run of stories that have assured his reputation as a literary giant.

The *watakushi shōsetsu* parody, and the *bundan* satire, is obvious in *Kokubyaku*. As mentioned before, the occupational hazard of the *watakushi shōsetsu-ka* is that readers assume the "fiction" is "true." (Incidentally, the term Tanizaki used for "fiction" in his first contribution to the "plot debate" is *uso*, or "lie.") In *Kokubyaku* Mizuno is inextricably trapped in that assumption. He had been accused of spousal cruelty just because he wrote wife-murder stories. Tanizaki too was in real life accused of spousal cruelty, although the reasons had more to do with personal than professional life. (His marital situation was gossip-column fodder for years, and we might identify more than a little sense of guilt in *Tade kuu mushi*, in Kaname's uneasiness at the pain he'd caused his wife even as he continued doing just as he pleased.)

¹⁰ "Bungeitekina, amari ni bungeitekina," p. 135.

¹¹ "Akutagawa zenshū kankō ni saishite," *Tanizaki Jun'ichirō zenshū* vol. 23, p. 100.

But what about *Kokubyaku* as a real “true confession”? To get at that, we must look at a non-character in the novel. In his escalating paranoia, Mizuno had started to imagine a figure he called “the Shadow Man,” *kage no hito*, who was manipulating events to destroy him. Even before the murder took place, as Mizuno played out the deadly possibility of being convicted of a real murder he had created only in fiction, and in an effort to forestall the Shadow Man, he sketched out a sequel to his story in which the plot of “To the Point of Murder” will be shown to have been used by a real murderer, but the innocent author will be convicted and executed, and only then will the real murderer be revealed. He called the sequel, “To the Point where the Man Who Wrote ‘To the Point of Murder’ Is Murdered” (*Hito o korosu made o kaita hito ga korosareru made*). The real murderer in the sequel is of course the Shadow Man. But Mizuno’s attempt to cover himself is too late, because the murder takes place before the sequel is written. The Shadow Man wins.

Who is the Shadow Man, and what function might he play for Tanizaki? On the most prosaic level, he is of course Mizuno’s internal sense of being out of control, a paranoid figment of his imagination. He is also obviously Tanizaki-as-author, the manipulator who put Mizuno in this situation. But then, Tanizaki is also Mizuno, the abused writer, and not just his manipulator; and so the Shadow Man can be separable from Tanizaki-as-author who created him. Symbolically he could be Fate, similar to the way Shinoda Masahiro used the *kuroko* to manipulate Koharu and Jihei in his 1969 film of *Shinjū ten no Amijima* (“Double Suicide”)—the puppet play Tanizaki used to such strong effect in the contemporaneous *Tade kuu mushi*.

But there are two more possibilities for the Shadow Man, if we think of *Kokubyaku* as a representation of Tanizaki’s intellectual and emotional life. The first is, obviously, Akutagawa. As a result of Akutagawa’s “machinations”—his suicide while Tanizaki is debating literary value with him—a fellow writer, Tanizaki, is made to feel somehow responsible for the death. *Kokubyaku*, thus, is a way for Tanizaki to resist the contagion of either guilt or insecurity about his writing talent. Mizuno did not kill Cojima—the Shadow Man did. Tanizaki did not kill Akutagawa—the Shadow Man did. Akutagawa killed Akutagawa.

In one of the commentaries Tanizaki wrote soon after Akutagawa’s death, he expressed a surprisingly tender and pained recognition: “I had no idea at the time that he was under so much pressure. I was just happy to have found such a worthy sparring partner. Had I known, I wouldn’t

have been so vociferous.”¹² Only in retrospect could he—or anyone—read clearly what Akutagawa was writing. Akutagawa’s late stories, *Shinkirō*, *Haguruma* and even the seemingly entertaining *Kappa* are far more chilling when read as the thoughts of a man within months of suicide. Akutagawa’s support just before his death of the *hanashi-rashii hanashi no nai shōsetsu* is a repudiation of his entire writing career, a kind of *intellectual* suicide. The Shadow Man makes Tanizaki’s parody a much more dire parable about the dangers of literary life.

There is also a fourth possibility for the Shadow Man. This is the most risky speculation, because there is no specific, concrete evidence for it. But I propose that the Shadow Man is a concretization of Tanizaki’s instinctive recognition of his own emotions and feelings about himself and his life, some of them antisocial and unacceptable and many of them obviously not conscious, but all triggered by Akutagawa’s death. That is, he is Tanizaki himself, not as author but as the internal self-construct by which he faced the world. This last part I have yet to work out, but I’m sure it’s there and even capable of being discussed. That’s my next task.

I am reminded of an old Second City comedy routine, of Oedipus trying to evade his fate by crying out the truth: “IT’S NOT MY FAULT!” That may be true, but it’s still your fate. In *Kokubiyaku*, we see Tanizaki writing himself out of a fate that Akutagawa had threatened: Tanizaki, you’d better figure out what to do about your plots! And so he did, in the rest of his career.

¹² “Itamashiki hito,” *Tanizaki Jun’ichirō zenshū*, vol. 22, p. 227.