“Writing Along with and against the Smugness of Writing: Kanai Mieko’s *A Study of the Comfortable Life*”

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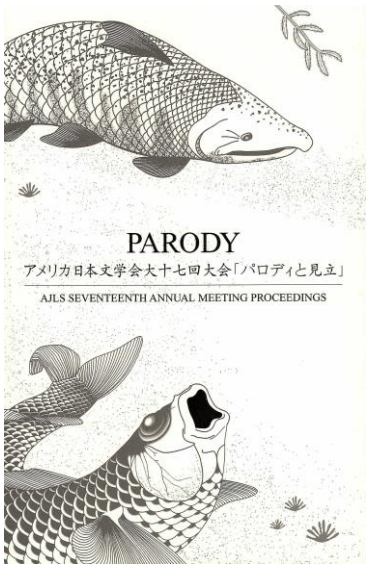

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WRITING ALONG WITH AND AGAINST THE SMUGNESS OF WRITING: KANAI MIEKO'S *A STUDY OF THE COMFORTABLE LIFE*

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In answer to the fundamental literary question: "why write?" Kanai Mieko often quotes Gotō Meisei: "because I have read" (*yonda kara*).[1] Kanai's writing certainly is rich in critical, pleasurable, and creative reading, presented often through parody in a broad sense, that is, repetition with difference (Hutcheon), or literature of second degree and palimpsest with "minimal transformation" (Genette). As is well known, the prefix *para* in ancient Greek parody is noted for its ambiguity—it can describe both nearness and opposition.[2] Kanai's texts abound in this ambiguity as well as in what Margaret Rose summarizes as the characteristics of post-modern parody: "reaffirmation of the laughter" (which, in her view, was often removed from parody in late modern works) and "complex, intertextual, meta-fictional or 'double-coded' characteristics and potential."[3] Prominent also in Kanai's parody/pastiche is gender awareness, which ridicules misogynistic discourses and gender stereotypes in a wickedly humorous and innovative manner.

This paper discusses the challenges and possibilities of contemporary literary parody through an examination of Kanai's novel, *Kaiteki seikatsu kenkyū* (A Study of the Comfortable Life, 2006). This is a complex and highly entertaining omnibus—or to use another analogy, a rich smorgasbord of parody, satire, irony, humor, pastiche, meta-fiction, quotation, and intertextuality.[4] In *Theory of Parody* Linda Hutcheon includes a diagram that shows three circles representing: irony which is marked by "mocking ethos," satire marked by "scornful ethos," and parody that can be neutral/playful, respectful, or contesting.[5] Kanai's novel contains all three elements and every possible combination of them.

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[1] "Yonda kara kaku" is used as the title of an essay, in Kanai 1984, pp. 57–61, and for a section of her *Shôsetsu ron: yomarenaku natta shōsetsu no tame ni*, Kanai (1987) 2008, pp. 147–155).
[2] Rose 1993, p. 8, citing F. J. Lelièvre.
[3] Rose 1993, pp. 271–272.
[4] Furthermore most other forms Margaret Rose (1993) cites in chapter 2. "Distinguishing Parody from Related Forms", including persiflage, pekoral, contrafact, cross-reading, cento, and hoax are used in Kanai's text.
[5] Hutcheon 1985, p. 63.

We may also note that her fiction, especially the "Mejiro series,"[6] combines meta-fiction (i.e. writing about writing) and intertextuality (writing linked to reading) with social satire and comedy. *Kaiteki seikatsu kenkyū* is a humorous novel and at the same time a caustic critique and insightful "study" of the "comfortable life" in a late capitalist, aging society.

Of particular interest here is the socio-cultural and literary smugness her writing poignantly mocks. The smugness may be found in a specific text by an existing or fictional writer, a certain literary and non-literary genre or form (such as romance, letter, book review, advertisement copy, and dictionary entry), or in selected quotidian details of the urban middle-class lifestyle. While the novel does acknowledge the vulnerability of this "comfortable life"—referring to serious issues such as domestic violence, Alzheimer's disease and other illnesses, financial problems, and unemployment—it maintains its comic and ironical tone. Moreover, it is a meta-fiction that deals with a certain smugness that can be associated with the acts of reading and writing. Kanai uses the form of omnibus novel effectively to do all of the above.

SEPARATE AND TOGETHER: OMNIBUS

The novel consists of seven independent yet linked chapters,[7] each with an intertextually intriguing title. What seems separate and irrelevant at first is in fact co-related and relevant; what looks like an obvious parody or direct reference is often no more than mere surface similarity or repetition. Kanai's long-term readers will instantly find this paradox and the omnibus format comfortably familiar—familiar and yet fresh and full of surprises. The familiarity of the format does not guarantee that the reader, even if he or she is a devoted Kanai fan, will recognize all the threads of intertextuality immediately. Neither is this recognition essential in order to enjoy the story at a primary level. Not every reader would know, for example, that the first chapter of *Kaiteki seikatsu kenkyū*, "Jun na kokoro" 純な心, is taken from the translated title of the first story

[6] *Bunshō kyōshitsu* (1985), *Tama ya* (1987), *Koharu biyori (Indian Summer)* (1988), and *Dōkeshi no koi* (1990) were called the Mejiro tetralogy as their protagonists live in the neighborhood in Tokyo. The series has continued to expand with *Kanojo(tachi) ni tsuite watashi no shitte iru 2, 3 no kotogara* (2000) and *Kaiteki seikatsu kenkyū* though in the latter the topography of Mejiro plays a much smaller role than in the others.

[7] For convenience's sake I use the term chapters here but these can be read as independent short stories. In fact, in an interview Kanai calls them "a series of linked short stories" *tanpen rensaku* (Kanai 2008, p. 220).

of Flaubert's *Trois contes*, "Un cœur simple" (A Simple Heart).[8] It is not necessary to know this connection because the chapter is by no means a direct parody of Flaubert; as discussed below, however, it includes affectionate repetition of his themes and motifs with critical, comic, or satirical transformations. Sometimes Kanai provides intratextual and paratextual hints, guidance, and discussions about various texts woven into the new text. In her interview with Taguchi Kenji,[9] Kanai mentions the Flaubert story and the parrot motif in it as well as a few other Flaubertian elements. Nevertheless it is not the case that her text requires the reader to search and study every source and link. Rather, her writing offers various layers and levels of the pleasure of reading: reading this first chapter as a social satire about aging society provides one kind of pleasure but pleasures multiply as the reader continues to discover intertextual connections with Flaubert and many other authors and then sets out to spot the differences, discrepancies, and transformations that distinguish the original text from the new one. Similarly, while this piece can be read as a comic, clever, and even deeply moving—surprisingly so—short story, when it is linked to other stories in the omnibus, the reader's pleasure increases even further.

The title of Kanai's second chapter, "Sontoku mondō" そんとく問答 (Loss and Gain Debate), is literally a minimal transformation of the title of Gotō Meisei's novel *Shintoku mondō* しんとく問答 (Debates on Shintoku[maru]). Gotō's book, like *Trois contes* and *Kaiteki seikatsu kenkyū*, consists of multiple narratives in a variety of forms and with strong meta-fictional elements. Placed before the eponymous final chapter "Shintoku mondō" are two other chapters with a variation of Shintoku (or vice versa) Shuntoku in their titles: "Shuntokumichi" 俊徳道, which is the name of a train station in Osaka) and "Nise Shuntokumichi meisho zue" 贋俊徳道名所図会 (Fake Guide to Famous Places in Shuntokumichi). Shintoku/Shuntoku[maru] refer to the celebrated hero—a beautiful boy bullied, blinded and disfigured—of a number of dramatic

[8] "Jun na kokoro" is the title of Yoshie Takamatsu's (1953) and Ōta Kōichi's (1991) translations. In *Shōsetsu ron* (Kanai 2008, p. 162) Kanai cites another title "Magokoro" from Yamada Kurō's translation for Iwanami Bunko (1940). In Murakami Kikuichirō's translation (1951) it is given as "Soboku na kokoro." Only the first title makes it possible for Kanai to play with the names of the protagonists as mentioned below.

[9] The interview entitled "'Shōsetsu' to 'futtobōru' no kageki na kankei" was originally published in the Winter 2006 issue of *Shōsetsu Tripper*, in which Kanai serialized *Kaiteki seikatsu kenkyū* from Summer 2002 till Summer 2006. The interview is included in the appendix of Kanai 2008, pp. 217–46.

and legendary texts including the noh play *Yoroboshi* 弱法師. It would be impossible and pointless to try to summarize here the complex cross-generic web and interaction of texts within Gotō's text. It is worth noting, however, that the term *mondō* (lit. questions and answers) symbolically indicates the double- or multi-voicedness of both Gotō's and Kanai's texts.

While the proper noun Shintoku/Shuntoku is rich with textual, performative, geo-cultural, and historical connotations, the common noun *sontoku* in Kanai's almost nonsensically or surrealistically comic transformation of the title abandons such cultural and traditional ties and their associated emotions and aesthetics, and instead adds a mercantile, materialistic and almost mercenary ring.[10] The majority of Kanai readers would not be aware of the Shintoku-*sontoku* transformation. However, this does not hinder their understanding of Kanai's comic-satirical story, centered in this chapter around one of the most original characters created in modern Japanese literature, a sixty-year-old woman named Akiko-san アキコさん.[11] The chapter consists of her letters. As discussed later in more detail, Kanai explores the letter form in this and many other novels and short stories. While there is absolutely no resemblance between the themes, motifs, narrators, and styles of "Sontoku mondō" and *Shintoku mondō*, they still share a few characteristics including their meandering style and extensive use of the letter form.

The third chapter in Kanai's novel is titled "Yoyū tsūshin" よゆう通信 (Leisurely Correspondence). Within the narrative this title refers to a personal newsletter of one of the characters, a semi-retired architect called E-san. It is, in a sense, *tsūshin*, correspondence, communication, epistles of a modern kind, that, from E's viewpoint, declare, represent, and describe comfortable, decent, and cultured middle-class life and

[10] In the interview Kanai explains how the idea for this chapter emerged as she was looking at the title of Gotō's book from her bed (2008, p. 224).

[11] The use of *katakana* is as deliberate as the choice of *hiragana* is for しんとく/そんとく. There may be several possible interpretations: アキコ makes the name comic and emphatic, which suit the character. It may also be to maintain certain ambiguity and pseudo-anonymity, for it does not limit the name to any specific one with specific literary or personal associations as any of 秋子, 明子, 昭子, 晶子, 章子, 亜希子 and so on would have. And yet at the same time the name shown in *katakana* can be any of these. In other words, the unique Akiko-san can be any one—even including the author and the reader ("Akiko-san, c'est moi"). In this novel some characters are called by letters of the alphabet (E さん, H・A さん, M さん, K さん etc) and some others have proper *kanji* (杉田さん, 愛子さま). 桃子, 花子 and other characters familiar from previous Mejiro series are all shown as they were previously referred to.

lifestyle. The nature of the newsletter as a manifestation of the "comfortable life" is evident not only from the subject and the writing style but also from the choice of color, font, paper, and so on.[12] From the viewpoint of many of his readers, however, these unsolicited newsletters betray the shallowness and falsehood of E and what he represents. We may also note that the term *tsūshin* is used in the title of the fashion magazine *Ryūkō tsūshin*『流行通信』and many other periodicals.[13] Each magazine "communicates," though more often simply propagates and advertises certain trends, goods, styles, forms, and attitudes. Despite E's advocacy for *yoyū*,[14] the term he chooses for the title of his newsletter after carefully tossing up between it and *yutori* (leisure, margin),[15] it is made clear—through the voices of the recipients of his newsletters—that his privileged life style is based less on any kind of decency, but on his fortunate circumstances and his shameless self-promotion and opportunism.

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[12] In his newsletter E-san elaborates in his typically sincere tone on why he has chosen paper rather than internet and on what ecological and aesthetic grounds he has chosen this particular paper—grey, 100% recycled (Kanai 2006, pp. 116, 118–120). Akiko-san also remarks about choice of writing paper and other stationeries (e.g. ibid., pp. 55–56). The reader of this novel in book form finds (as in all other recent Kanai books) detailed descriptions of the paper used for text, cover, jacket, and so on (ibid., p. 276). Sakaki Atsuko's discussion of Ibuse's *Kuroi ame* would be helpful to understand the performativity involving the act of writing, including choice of stationeries, medium, method, and other detail (Sakaki 1999, pp. 67–69).

[13] My quick search found, for example, these titles:『食べ物通信』『おりがみ通信』『刺繍通信』『カルテ通信』『お立ち台通信』『水声通信』. The second part of the title may also remind us of Mori Ōgai's column on contemporary European literary journalism「椋鳥通信」(1909–13) and Dazai Osamu's *shishōsetsu*-style short story in letter form「みみずく通信」(1941). Though there is no direct connection between Kanai's text and either of these, it is certainly interesting to "rub" these texts together "in order to release energy" (Culler 1976, p. 1387).

[14] This term, *yoyū*, though written in kanji rather than in hiragana, is what Natsume Sōseki used in his defense of literature that deals with seemingly leisurely, unimportant, and non-urgent subject matter from the attacks of the *shizen shugi* (naturalist) critics. See his preface to *Keitō* in *Sōseki zenshū*, vol. 11, pp. 551–3.

[15] E-san explains the process of selection: he went to a library and checked the definitions of *yoyū* and *yutori* in several dictionaries. Kanai often makes innovative and ironical use of dictionary entries and proverbs. The first story in this novel begins with the dictionary explanation of some names of illnesses (Kanai 2006, pp. 8–9) and Kanai's afterword includes definitions of the term *kaiteki* in five dictionaries (ibid., p. 274).

Each of the next three chapters adopts a title of a novel or a film. "*Koto*"『古都』(*The Old Capital*), with quotation marks as part of the title, obviously refers to Kawabata's novel. "Tonari no musume" 隣の娘 (The Girl Next Door) is the same as the Japanese title for Jean Kemm's 1920 film *Miss Rovel*. Likewise, "Chikashitsu no merodii" 地下室のメロディー is identical to the Japanese title of Henri Verneuil's 1963 film *Mélodie en sous-sol*. Kanai's chapters have nothing to do with Kawabata, Kemm, and Verneuil; the nouns and phrases in their titles are used deliberately as common nouns, severed from the specific cultural contexts of the preceding texts. "The old capital" simply refers to Kyoto (and its gourmet food), and "the girl next door" literally signifies the young woman in the neighboring house. Similarly, the "cellar" simply indicates a study in the basement and the "melody" refers to the sound of wood-turning which is a hobby of the protagonist of this chapter. Thus these seem to exemplify minimal repetition, so to speak, rather than minimal transformation although it is not entirely impossible to find some cryptic similarities in themes, motifs, and moods between the original texts and the new ones. Both *Koto* and "*Koto*," for instance, may be regarded as narratives consisting of coincidences. The two "melodies" could be linked by the theme of a sixty-plus man (i.e. Jean Gabin in the film and E in the novel) and his younger friend (Alain Delon and Nakano Tsutomu) launching a project together that ends in disaster.

The final chapter has the same title as the omnibus, just as in Gotō Meisei's novel. In the interview with Taguchi referred to above, Kanai explains how the idea occurred to her:

> Seibu Department Store publishes a mail order catalogue magazine called *Kaiteki seikatsu dai kenkyū* (A Grand Study of the Comfortable Life). It's a thick catalogue of furniture and other goods for living. One day our cat Torā was asleep on a copy of this magazine that happened to be in the room. Of course he doesn't need any study to have a comfortable life. Looking at him, I got this idea of writing several linked short stories under the title *Kaiteki seikatsu kenkyū* (laugh). Comfortable life… It sounds awful—so unashamedly materialistic.[16]

Removing the "grand" of the catalogue title, Kanai lays bare the ridiculous excess on which consumer culture rests and its self-centered

[16] Kanai 2008, p. 220.

contentedness. Furthermore in her afterword (i.e. a paratext) she points out that "comfort" is gained primarily through exclusion of 外敵 (foreign enemy) and insulation from the 外的 (the external), the terms that appear immediately after 快適 in dictionaries.[17] Kanai's omnibus opens up numerous fissures in the insulation, with a view to disturbing and disrupting the sense of self-satisfied comfort it is designed to sustain.

SURPRISE LINKS AND COINCIDENCES

A number of protagonists and associated characters, including both familiar ones from Kanai's previous novels and newly introduced ones, appear in separate chapters of this work, but in the end they are all connected to each other in one way or another. Just as every text is made of a number of preceding texts, each individual is related to one another. Some of these characters like gossiping and meddling with other people's business, and take every opportunity to use their interpersonal connections to their advantage, while others try to avoid contact or to keep a certain distance. As already seen in some earlier texts including *Bunshō kyōshitsu* (Creative Writing Class, 1985) and *Tama ya* (My Sweet Tama, 1987), Kanai has no compunction in using a series of coincidences to construct a story; in fact, it is very much a part of the literary challenge she sets herself and of her drive to innovate. Prompted by Hasumi Shigehiko in an interview dated July 1987, Kanai acknowledges the influence of Luis Buñuel's films in dealing with coincidences:

> Kanai: Yes, Actually, while writing this novel (*Bunshō kyōshitsu*), I saw several Buñuel's films from his Mexican period. […] I was really moved and encouraged. I've learned a bit of his wonderful cheekiness. […] Usually, as you said, coincidences are not permitted in fiction.[18]

She denies launching any grand experiment against literary conventions in the novel and insists that she just realized that she could follow Buñuel's example and apply it to fiction. Kanai also adds that these coincidences are indispensable to the progress of the plot and that coincidences may happen without the writer being aware of them.[19] All these points are certainly applicable to *Tama ya*, which had been

[17] Kanai 2006, p. 274. Quoting dictionary definitions (with comic and critical intent) is, as mentioned elsewhere, one of the devices Kanai often uses in her fiction.
[18] Kanai 1987, p. 353.
[19] Ibid.

serialized after the publication of *Bunshō kyōshitsu* and was published in book form four months after her interview with Hasumi. In *Tama ya* all of the individual characters who are presented as complete strangers at the beginning of the story turn out to be related or linked to each other in one way or another by the end. In the novel's afterword Kanai claims that the seemingly improbable incidents and relationships she used in her story were based on things she had actually observed: "without this guarantee that they did indeed happen, I, even with my impudence as a novelist, would not have dared to write about such episodes."[20] Needless to say, declarations such as those above are an expression of a certain attitude towards literature which requires that modern literary conventions be questioned. Coincidences in Kanai's works are by no means a simple *Deus ex machina.* They are used strategically as a tongue-in-cheek challenge against the cult of seriousness and the search for self that have dominated mainstream modern Japanese literature.

Kaiteki seikatsu kenkyū contains a series of discoveries of new connections and of developments within old liaisons and connections. This accelerates as the novel progresses. In the first story "Jun na kokoro" members of an extended family and an old family friend are introduced. Symbolically, this friend, who used to live with the family more than half a century before as a young maid, is named Sumie 純江, and the youngest member of the family, a girl aged about seventeen is named Junko 純子. The common character 純 not only suggests a connection across the generations (Sumie belongs to Junko's grandmother's generation) but also links these characters with Flaubert's Felicité by the suggestion that all three characters share the same simple mind and pureness of heart. The chapter does read like a complete and independent short story with comic, satirical elements and an effective and touching ending.

The characters that appear in the second story are all Akiko-san's friends and acquaintances who have no links to any of the protagonists in the previous chapter. The third story begins with yet another set of characters including Sugita-san and her husband's friend, E-san. A connection between this group of people and Akiko-san emerges in this chapter: Sugita-san starts visiting Akiko-san as a part-time cleaner cum house maid and the two women realize that they both know E-san. The fourth story introduces a couple of new characters whose chance meeting in Kyoto is one of the topics of the chapter. Much more important, however, is that from this chapter onwards the reader encounters regular

[20] Kanai 1999a, p. 194.

members of the Mejiro series, including Momoko and her friends and family (chapters four and five) and Nakano Tsutomu and his family (chapters six and seven). Not only do these old faces return but they interact with the new characters introduced in the first few chapters—typically after a chance meeting in a restaurant or through a friend's friend or through business.

GENERIC PARODY: THE EPISTOLARY NOVEL

The avalanche of ever-expanding, and constantly transforming relationships is indispensable to the narrative. At the same time it plays an important role in constructing an alternative to the convention of the closed, introspective, and self-oriented novel that has represented—so it is believed—the core of modern Japanese literature. Furthermore Kanai's text contains various generic parodies. The most obvious example is her parody of the genre of epistolary novel, about which Kanai remarks: "since the beginning of the twentieth century any attempt at an epistolary novel has inevitably resulted—regardless of the author's knowledge of literary history or his/her intentionality—in either parody or meta-fiction."[21] Kanai herself has explored both parodic and meta-fictional letters in a number of previous works. There is, for instance, a letter addressed to the personified letter, which is placed within one of her novels as a literary work written by one of its characters.[22] In another of her works numerous and at the same time identical "I's" write letters to each other, creating an endless epistolary *mis-en-abîme*.[23] Furthermore, Kanai has quoted or parodied these experiments in later texts with difference and innovation.

In *Kaiteki seikatsu kenkyū* Kanai focuses on the discrepancy and incongruity between the conventional, stereotypical or prescriptive functions and styles of letters, and the reality they purport to describe, to create comic satirical effects. Here letters are written merely to satisfy the writer's egotism and conceit rather than to communicate or exchange thoughts and ideas with the recipient. It is far from *cor*respondence or *com*munication. None of the recipients appreciates the letter they receive—unless the recipient is equally egotistic and finds a certain camaraderie in the said letter. Needless to say, irony is not new to the epistolary novel, as Kanai is acutely aware. Although she does not

[21] Kanai 2008, p. 225.
[22] "Tegami e" (To the Letter), in Kanai 1999b.
[23] Kanai, *Kishibe no nai umi*, serialised in *Umi* from December 1971 to April 1973, published in book form in 1974.

directly mention Jane Austen in this novel, Kanai has commented previously on Austen's early work *Lesley Castle*, a comic, grotesque and elegant novel, in which irony is ever present.

> All Miss Lesley can do is to boast about the genealogical handsomeness of her family and her only concern is the diminishing family fortune; Lady Lesley is indifferent to anything but money and her beauty that has peaked; Miss Lutterelle, on the other hand, is engrossed solely in her cooking even though she does make extremely observant—quite wicked—judgment when gossiping about her friends.[24]

Though letters are often associated also with romantic love, passionate romance is by no means the central subject of *Lesley Castle* or of *Kaiteki seikatsu kenkyū*. Nor do these novels concern themselves with the serious and painful search for self or for the meaning of life, both common themes in epistolary literature.[25] The obsessive letter writers of *Kaiteki seikatsu kenkyū*, Akiko and E are both in their early 60s and each represents a skillfully exaggerated type of contemporary bourgeois Japanese smugness. Akiko-san writes long letters to her "best friend." Her letters not only meander but contain many pauses and intervals—on one occasion because she falls asleep after drinking three large cups of half-and-half coffee and brandy with six sugar cubes in each cup while writing the letter. In the course of the six completely egocentric letters that make up the chapter "Sontoku mondō," the addressee, Mariko-san, suffers—not only from a series of serious domestic problems, including her husband's Alzheimer's disease and her son's large debts, but also from Akiko-san's constant reminders about painful events in the past. These include Mariko's divorce thirty years earlier because of her first husband's domestic violence. Later in the novel poor Mariko-san is hospitalized for a subarachnoid hemorrhage while Akiko-san is writing one of her lengthy letters. We learn all of this through Akiko-san's letters, though their accuracy, let alone their appropriateness, is highly questionable. Of course Mariko-san's illness and other misfortunes are not directly caused by Akiko-san. And yet one would think that the letters might aggravate her friend's condition and increase her stress rather than offering her the kind of consolation and practical advice they profess to do. In this sense Akiko-san's letters do not just lay bare, but actually

[24] Kanai 2002, p.262–263.
[25] For example, *The Sorrows of Young Werther (Die Leiden des jungen Werther*).

worsen, the problems and vulnerability of "comfortable life"—in this case the life of her "best friend." The letter writer herself at the same time is able to continue to enjoy her comfortably sheltered life—at first as an aging single woman, but then from her sixth letter onwards, as the newly wedded wife of a nice, kindly lawyer. She may be alcohol dependent, forgetful, and easily annoyed, but that is of no concern to her!

Similarly, or symmetrically, the architect E-san sends out his personal newsletter to all his "friends" and acquaintances—to the annoyance of most of the recipients. Though Akiko and E are both totally self-centered, there are clear differences between them and between their respective letter-writing habits. Akiko-san's letters show her narcissistic eccentricity while E's writing presents, at least at a superficial level, balanced, educated, politically sound, and decent views and values. Through his readers, who are victims of his egotism and impudence (especially in pecuniary matters), we know that E is a charlatan and a vulture-like opportunist. We also see through the shallowness of his manifested aestheticism and philosophy. Ironically, Akiko-san, here, is one of the victims/observers of E and her comments about him are all accurate; she is very sensitive and even almost sensible about other people's insensitivity and inanity.[26] Both E and Akiko continue to write their letters till the end of the novel.

REVIEWING REVIEWS (OF REVIEWS OF…), OR ANYONE CAN WRITE

Besides letters Kanai parodies other genres such as essays, book reviews, poetry, children's literature, and contemporary women's fiction with autobiographical elements. If not as obsessive as Akiko and E, most of Kanai's main characters either write or intend to write in at least one genre. Some are professional writers. While many are content and comfortable with their own writing, some are aware of, and wary about, certain pitfalls. Nakano Tsutomu, a familiar character from *Bunshō kyōshitsu*, is a scholar of English literature and a literary critic. He is aware of the exchangeability of his own and others' writing; he realizes that when cut out from a literary magazine, two completely different reviews of different books written by different reviewers (but printed on the reverse page of each other) can be easily mixed up. This may be partly because the writers belong to the same group, for instance, of

[26] Apart from E's case, there are numerous examples including her sarcastic comments about her friends' calligraphy (too artistic to decipher) and pictures (a rabbit looks like a pair of long johns and a cat and a butterfly look rather like a puppy and a buscuit).

"numerous epigones created by the name called 'Hasumi'."[27] Despite his complacency and intellectual snobbery, Nakano is neither an eccentric like Akiko nor a charlatan like E; in many respects he is quite sensitive and sensible. While his wife, Sakurako, remarks that a novel written by her friend is "exactly as it actually happened," he responds: "It can't be 'exactly as it actually happened' because it's clearly written as a novel. Besides, her seemingly confused style is in fact based on her meticulous planning."[28] His moderate and expert views on fiction, however, have no impact upon Sakurako or her mother, Ema. We recall that Ema (a partial parody of Emma Bovary), as the heroine of *Bunshō kyōshitsu*, was taking a creative writing course at a "culture center." Now it is Sakurako, who is inspired and convinced by her friend's novel that she can write something like it herself. As a moderate and decent (and non-sexist) person with expertise, Tsutomu responds just as she expected:

> […] his nervous, surprised expression changed into a faint smile: "Maybe you're right, sure, anyone can write," he said, subconsciously reorienting the topic towards criticism of the general state of contemporary fiction and thus annoying Sakurako with his unbiased literary critic's discourse and making her reconfirm her conviction that *she* can write […].[29]

The final chapter of the novel consists of another set of letters from Akiko-san, including one addressed to Ema, who, we and they discover, was a senior student at Akiko's old school. Enclosed in this letter is a review that Akiko has cut out from a newspaper, accidentally leaving out the title or the author. But the letter writer is pretty sure that it is the writing of Tsutomu. The novel concludes with a brief postcard written by Tsutomu to Akiko, explaining that the author of the review must be Maruya Saiichi:[30] "I suppose I should regard it as an honor that you

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[27] Kanai 2006, p. 236. The phrase is actually taken from Nibuya Takashi's review of Kanai's *Yawarakai tsuchi o funde* (Nibuya 1998). Hasumi of course refers to Hasumi Shigehiko. Kanai extensively used this kind of fragmented and often deliberately anonymized quotations in her earlier novels, particularly in *Bunshō kyōshitsu*.

[28] Kanai 2006, pp. 252–253.

[29] Kanai 2006, pp. 254–255. In Kanai's original text the entire paragraph which is double the length of the quoted passage consists of one long (though by no means especially long by Kanai's standard) sentence.

[30] Maruya's review of the Japanese translation of Laurie Lynn Drummond's *Anything You Say Can and Will Be Used Against You* was published in the 26 March 2006 issue of the *Mainichi shinbun*.

thought this was my writing. But I'm sure he would find it otherwise."[31] The moderately sensible and sensitive scholar then adds a sentence: "I am not a misogynist in literature or in real life," which he erases, however, with a white marker "feeling that it's quite pointless."[32] Of course this is a fictive character writing and then erasing his personal comment, but some might find it rather courageous of the Asahi Shinbunsha to publish this final scene of *Kaiteki seikatsu kenkyū*, given its subversive intent. Tsutomu's reading of (Akiko's reading of) Maruya's review is strongly critical of the reviewer's lack of gender awareness, proof of which lies in the well-composed, erudite, condescendingly gracious tone of the text, which the novelist quotes in full for her readers' pleasure. Kanai's fans will recognize this as another skirmish in her ongoing battle against the blatant gender discriminations commonly found in contemporary Japanese culture and society.

Her skill at satirical parody is much more subtle than it may seem at a glance—even when it involves fierce criticism. Kanai herself simply and jovially boasts thus in her "Afterword":

> *If* my novels have any weakness at all, it might be that my love for my own fictional characters and my meticulous concern for style and detail make my invective, which is known for its *accuracy* as in *Mejiro Miscellany* and other essays, somewhat too subtle.[33]

Again, this is very much a part of the novelist's transtextual manifesto in which she both states her literary stance and at the same time performs it. To return to the final line of the novel, Nakano Tsutomu erases with a white marker his statement that he is not a misogynist in literature or in real life, "feeling that it's quite pointless." This can actually be regarded as a parodic variation on the device of *misekechi* (showy erasure)[34] used by Maruya in the final section of his novella *Toshi no nokori* (The Remains of the Year, first published in 1968). In the novel the adolescent

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[31] Kanai 2006, p. 272.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Kanai 2006, p. 275, also used in the blurb.
[34] Inoue Hisashi cites this as a fine example of the writer's challenge against linear progress of narrative time (Inoue 1987, pp. 180–181). There is also a brief but interesting discussion between Yoshiyuki Junnosuke and Maruya (quoted in Noro Kuninobu's "Kaisetsu" in Maruya, 1975, pp. 266–267. One could also connect this further to verbal erasing, canceling and re-writing within the text such as Shiga Naoya's "Kozō no kamisama."

boy Masaya erases some sections in his rather inane diary:

> Friday 17 November
> Returned home at 4. ~~Quarrelled with sister. She is so stupid. She is terrible.~~ There's nothing in particular to record. ~~Mr Gotō Masaya was feeling depressed~~.[35]

Interestingly, in her 1987 interview with Hasumi, Kanai's "ambivalent feeling" about Maruya's work is mentioned. Kanai acknowledges that she always reads Maruya's fiction and criticism with interest and that works of Maruya and Nakamura Shin'ichirō triggered a new direction in her fiction writing.[36] Nakano Tsutomu's whiting out may well be regarded as a respectful tribute to Maruya's previous fictional experiment. Ironically, however, *Toshi no nokori* contains enough misogyny to confirm Nakano's (and Kanai's) point.

ALTERNATIVES TO SMUGNESS

As we have seen, Kanai presents a comic satirical parody in *Kaiteki seikatsu kenkyū,* that works at several different levels, being all at once social commentary, literary criticism, entertainment, and ultimately, a celebration of writing. Kanai's characters, particularly Akiko-san and E-san, exemplify the blatant narcissism (*don na jiko ai*) that lies at the heart of the "comfortable life."[37] As mentioned earlier, however, Kanai's text is not always meant to be scornful or mocking. She uses parody and allusion with respectful intent quite frequently and extensively in the novel. In "Jun na kokoro," for example, the theme of a simple but loyal housemaid and the motif of a parrot[38] are lovingly repeated, with difference. In this chapter Sumie-san, who used to be a maid in Junko's grandmother's house, is now suffering from Alzheimer's disease. Grandma Momoyo, two years Sumie's junior, has heart trouble and other physical problems but is determined to look after her old friend Sumie, since Sumie, as a young woman, showed Momoyo so much care and affection. There is a scene in the novel in which Sumie, now in her old

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[35] Maruya 1975, p. 80.
[36] Kanai 1987, pp. 327–328.
[37] See her interview with Taguchi (Kanai 2008: 235–37).
[38] In Flaubert's story the pet bird given to the maid by her mistress is loved and idolised not only when alive but when dead and stuffed. In *Kaiteki seikatsu kenkyū* a parrot appears as a picture in gold and green lines on a red celluloid compact that Sumie gave as a humble present to Momoyo more than half a century before.

age and confused, mistakes Momoyo's granddaughter for the young Momoyo and gently remonstrates with her. Here we have a "delicate" and moving transformation of the housemaid with a "simple heart"; unlike Flaubert's Félicité, Sumie does not have to live in the attic all alone in her old age. She will be looked after by her former mistress's daughter and her granddaughter Junko, the one whose name shares with Sumie's, the character for "pure" 純 (sumi/jun). We might note that this character, though quite similar to the "blatant," "insensitive" 鈍 of 鈍な自己愛, is actually its antithesis. We can see a very subtle carnivalesque reversal as well in Kanai's version of the maid. In so many novels the victim of lecherous male desire, the maid in this incarnation is neither poor nor lonely and miserable. The hierarchical reversal involving a maid is repeated in later chapters with variations and with reference to other texts such as Kōda Aya's *Nagareru* (Flowing, 1955).[39]

Similarly, Gotō Meisei's *Shintoku mondō* (1995) and *Kubizuka no ue no adobarūn* (1989), Ishii Momoko's translation of *Winnie-the-Pooh*,[40] Ōoka Shōhei's *Musashino fujin* (1950), and many other texts are made use of, with respectful or affectionate intent, in various chapters of Kanai's novel. We might recall that Flaubert, Gotō Meisei, and Ōoka use letters effectively in their novels, though not necessarily in the particular texts referred to above. Moreover, each of these writers makes extensive use of parody, pastiche, and intertextuality. Kanai's text joins and celebrates this venerable tradition of "literature in the second degree."

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[39] In the interview with Taguchi Kanai also mentions Tanizaki's *Daidokoro taiheiki* and Fukazawa Shichirō's short story "Bonjon." Though not mentioned in the interview or in the novel itself, this must surely be an alternative to a series of stories of idealized loyal female domestic servants (e.g. Kiyo in Sōseki's *Botchan* and Take in Dazai's *Bannen* and *Tsugaru*), but it is also tempting to juxtapose more contemporary representations of "maid" in popular culture, including the hugely popular television drama series *Kaseifu wa mita!* (The Maid Saw!, 1983-ongoing) and the "maid café" and associate manga, fashion, and other cultural products.

[40] Kanai has often expressed her admiration for Ishii's creative and translation work for children. In *Kaiteki seikatsu kenkyū* there is also an interesting example of gendered reception. Sugita-san, who now works as a part-time maid, used to read classic books including Ishii's *Kuma no Pū-san* to her little son, who later was killed in a traffic accident. She remembers how he loved Pooh and called himself the same name and sang a song out of the story with improvised music that is different each time. Years after the boy's death, her husband tells her that he did not realize that the nickname came from the book; he thought it was simply for the round, puffed feature of his son. Mrs Sugita, on the other hand, did not know until her husband tells her that in Ōe Kenzaburō's novels there is a handicapped son called Eeyore, also named after a character in Milne's stories.

However, this is repetition with clear differences. In her *Kaiteki seikatsu kenkyū* and other Mejiro novels the comic elements are much stronger than in they are in the work of Flaubert, Ōoka, or Gotō. Another crucial difference between Kanai and the writers to whose work she so playfully refers is the degree of her gender consciousness. Her text relies on and reveals gendered readings and exposes the gendered nature of textual consumption to an extent never evident in the "first degree" texts from which she draws her inspiration.

To conclude this study of the "comfortable life," I should like to consider a perpetual question concerning the reception of parody and more generally of culture and literature of this complexity. Here the perennial concern is whether it is vital or essential for the reader to recognize all the hidden, implied, and transformed texts within Kanai's text, and others like it, in order to enjoy them. To which the answer is a definite no. Even without any knowledge of Flaubert, Gotō Meisei, or Winnie-the-Pooh, a contemporary reader can understand and enjoy Kanai's novel as a particularly astute and skilful social critique of the smugness of middle class life. This is not to say that one cannot increase the pleasure one takes from the text by taking the time to discover the threads and motifs woven into it. In fact Kanai invites and encourages the reader to explore these, by helpfully scattering hints as to how to find them within the text and paratexts, in the form of titles, afterwords, and interviews. Despite her persona as the master of "accurate invective," Kanai is in this sense kind and generous—that is, unless one is unfortunate enough to be the target of her acid tongue.

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