“Politics of Writing: Nakano Shigeharu and *Tenkō* Literature”

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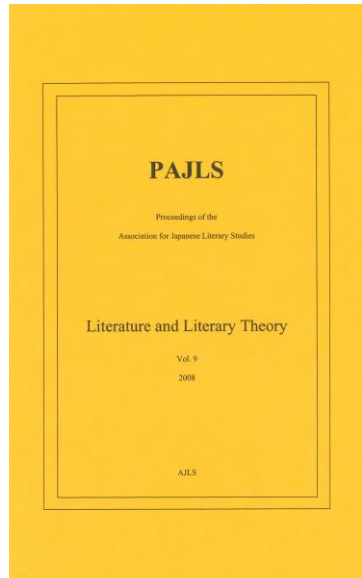

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Politics of Writing: Nakano Shigeharu and *Tenkō* Literature

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At the end of the essay "Chiisai kaisō" (Trivial Reflections, 1934), Nakano Shigeharu criticizes a phenomenon called "Shestovian angst" (*Shesutofuteki fuan*),[1] which had become popular among intellectuals following the introduction of Lev Shestov's *Dostoevsky and Nietzsche: The Philosophy of Tragedy* in 1934. Nakano writes, "First of all, today's participants in the discourse on 'angst' (*fuan*) are not suffering from insomnia. Nor are they dribbling [as Akutagawa Ryunosuke did]."[2] He is here referring to the words Akutagawa wrote in his posthumously published manuscript, "vague angst towards the future" (*bon'yari shita fuan*). The introduction of Shestov's *Dostoevsky and Nietzsche* was timely for its rejection of idealism, rationalism, and the existing system of values, resonating well with the period of *tenkō*, in which the ideals of the revolution crumbled away, fascism was on the rise, and an unnamable feeling of uncertainty prevailed.

Tosaka Jun characterized mid-1930s Japan as a time when thought was lacking and called it "the air pocket of thought."[3] He argued that Shestov's *Dostoevsky and Nietzsche* played the role of filling this "air pocket." According to Tosaka, *Dostoevsky and Nietzsche* was less vulgar than religion because of its nihilistic and anarchistic character, and therefore, it appealed to intellectuals more than religion, although the latter could also fill "the air pocket of thought." Both Tosaka and Nakano were wary of those who indulged in the discourse on angst. However, Tosaka, a Marxist philosopher who had not undergone *tenkō* and therefore had never faced "the air pocket of thought," criticized their rejection of rationalism by arguing that they hastily equated rationalism with a mechanistic manner of thinking. Hence, in Tosaka's view, these people were themselves exercising what they claimed to denounce, namely a mechanistic manner of thinking. On the other hand, Nakano criticized angst discourse participants' failure to really engage with angst (as he himself did) from the midst of the angst brought on by *tenkō*. Akutagawa's name in the quote at the beginning of this essay could well be replaced with Nakano's name.

For Nakano, "the air pocket of thought" was not something he could fill with another thought simply by participating in an existing discourse: it signified a crisis of a system of representation. Facing this crisis, Nakano not only called into question the political representational system (that is, the past Marxist movement) but also subjected language as a system of representation to serious scrutiny. In fact, critique of language enabled him to investigate the Marxist movement in ways different from those who, after their *tenkō*, treated the problem of *tenkō* merely as a problem of inappropriate identification. That is to say, these individuals went on to pursue an "appropriate" and "natural" identification with the identity of

[1] The term "Shestovian angst" was coined by Miki Kiyoshi in his essay "Shesutofuteki fuan" published in *Kaizō* in 1934. Miki Kiyoshi, "Shesutofuteki fuan ni tsuite," in *Miki Kiyoshi chosakusū*, vol. 13 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1950), 216-32.
[2] Nakano Shigeharu, "Chiisai kaisō," in *Nakano Shigeharu zenshū*, vol. 7 (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1959), 9.
[3] Tosaka Jun, "Shesutofuteki gensho ni tsuite," in *Tosaka Jun zenshū*, vol. 4 (Tokyo: Keisō shobō, 1966), 79.

the Japanese ethnos instead of that of the proletariat.[4] Thus they left the apparatus of representation founded on the logic of identity unquestioned. Through the reading of two of Nakano's so-called *tenkō* pieces, "Mura no ie" (The House in the Village, 1935) and "Shōsetsu no kakenu shōsetsuka" (The Novelist Who Cannot Write a Novel, 1936), I hope to illustrate the ethico-political implications of Nakano's critical engagement with language within the specific context of the 1930s.

In "The House in the Village," Nakano depicts a former writer of proletarian literature named Takahata Benji, who after his *tenkō* goes back to his hometown where he is confronted by his father, Magozō, a well respected peasant in the village. Magozō urges Benji to give up writing and become a peasant in order to save what he had written up to the point of his recantation. It is worth quoting Magozō's words at length:

> Now I haven't read anything myself, but I hear Wajima and some others wrote books to justify recanting. What's the purpose of that? And if that question has to be asked, why do they write at all? If you care about the honesty of what you wrote before, if you want it to live, stop writing today. There's nothing you can write now without killing what you wrote before. . . . Think it over. Throw away your writing and save yourself. . . . Try doing some hard labor yourself. If something you wanted to write was born out of that, I would respect it.[5]

Based as it is on deep wisdom he claimed to have gained from nearly seventy years of life experience, Magozō's reasoning for why he thinks it best and wise that Benji give up writing is very convincing. However, Benji detects a trap and expresses his determination to continue writing. The story does not articulate the nature of the trap Benji senses. Critic Yamashiro Mutsumi interprets this as a trap in which the author commits "*tenkō* at the level of writing." By this, he refers to the erasure of the fundamental characteristics of language—the very fact that language, due to its materiality and generalizing function, can never be transparent and fully adequate to singularities such as this "I." He warns, "The words of those who naively stress the re-*presentation* of singularity would result in '*tenkō*' at the level of writing and could eventually organize a harmful ideology despite their best intentions."[6] To quit writing once and then begin to write again from the standpoint of a peasant about peasants' lives is what Benji cannot do. To do so, as Yamashiro warns, risks making oneself an ideologue. This argument can be tested against the context of the literary scene in late 1930s Japan.

In the late 1930s new genres called "peasant literature" (*nōmin bungaku*) and "production literature" (*seisan bungaku*) appeared and were co-opted into the state program to propagate the idea of labor as a morally good deed; this was part of an effort to maximize national production

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[4] Prime examples of those who shifted from identifying with the international proletariat to identifying with the Japanese ethnos would be the Communist Party Leaders Sano Manabu and Nabeyama Sadachika, whose *tenkō* led to the phenomenon of mass *tenkō* in Japan. In their public statement of *tenkō* issued in the July issue of *Kaizō* in 1933, they criticized the Japan Communist Party's hitherto blind allegiance to the Soviet Comintern, and declared their new identification with the Japanese ethnos, the naturally-fit leader of Pan-Asianism that would liberate Asia from Western imperialism. Takahata Michitoshi, "Ikkoku shakai shugisha: Sano Manabu, Nabeyama Sadachika," in Shiso no kagaku kenkyu kai, eds., *Kyōdō kenkyū tenkō*, vol. 2 (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1978), 172-208.

[5] Nakano Shigeharu, *Three Works by Nakano Shigeharu*, Brett de Bary trans. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 69.

[6] Yamashiro Mutsumi, "Kakukoto to tenkō," *Gunzō*, vol. 49, no. 9 (1994), 186.

following the beginning of Japan's full-scale war with China in 1937. In these genres, hard labor is often highly valued, and the stories are mostly representations of writers' experiences as laborers or their actual on-site research. Interestingly, many of the writers who played a major role in these genres had once been engaged in leftist movements.[7] In "The House in the Village," Benji is determined to continue to be a *writer* without any other symbolic identification to qualify what kind of writer he would be. Although this story was written before these new categories of literature were created, it is as if Nakano had a premonition of the pitfalls awaiting those writers who recanted and lost purpose in their lives.

Like Benji, Nakano himself did not become a peasant writer after his *tenkō*. In "The House in the Village," Nakano does not represent peasants' lives in the village. In fact, this story represents the inability to represent an ordinary peasant as such. To put it more precisely, it represents the inability to represent those who do not engage in the act of representation. Critics whose works I have examined, including Yoshimoto Takaaki and Etō Jun, understand the relationship between Benji and Magozō in binary terms: an intellectual vs. an ordinary peasant. However, on closer inspection, such a binary scheme begins to deteriorate.[8]

I consider Magozō not as an ordinary peasant but as an embodiment of the ideology of anti-representation.[9] By urging Benji to quit writing, Magozō wants Benji to stop engaging in the act of representation both in the sense of writing and proxy, and instead be present to himself by working in the field, which does not require mediation; he would further fulfill his role as the oldest son, which unlike non-familial identities, is a role that does not require work for recognition. Magozō highly regards those who unwaveringly adhere to their ideals and whose actions do not run counter to their words. He even tells Benji that it would have been better for him to have died in prison than to have undergone *tenkō*. Magozō condemns Benji's *tenkō* and says, "I don't care what you did before, this was wrong. . . . No one should do a thing like that. If you think about it, you'll see I'm right. Think of the way you stood up, like a leader, telling people what to do."[10] He does not want Benji to create an irreparable gap between his words and actions anymore.

Magozō is far from what one would think an ordinary village person to be like; he is not just one among the many. He is a well-respected and trusted man in the village and plays an important role in the community. Unlike his father, who was a typical farmer and notoriously stubborn and known to have a temper, Magozō is a man of calm demeanor and able to resolve quarrels between village people simply by being present and making small talk with those who are arguing. If there were a fire, he would willingly walk a long distance to be of help to others, regardless of how far it was from his home. Thus, he embodies the ideal characteristics of what one would expect a morally good person to be.

In my view, one person depicted as an ordinary peasant in the story is Benji's mother Kuma. Unlike Magozō, who *consciously* identifies with an ideal image of an honest, hardworking, responsible peasant who speaks only from his own experience, Kuma is present to

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[7] Examples of such writers are Nakamoto Takako, who wrote *Hakui sagyō* (1938), and Shimaki Kensaku, who wrote *Seikatsu no tankyū* (1937).

[8] See Etō Jun, *Shōwa no bunjin* (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1989) and Yoshimoto Takaaki, "Tenkō ron," in *Yoshimoto Takaaki zenshū*, vol. 13 (Tokyo: Keisō shobō, 1969).

[9] It is noteworthy that in an interview with Hirano Ken, Nakano mentions that Magozō is a dangerous person. He is like the agrarianist Kobayashi Morito, who after *tenkō* became a strong advocate of Japan-ism (*Nihon shugi*). Hirano Ken, *Hirano Ken taidanshū: seiji to bungaku hen* (Tokyo: Miraisha, 1971), 121.

[10] Nakano, *Three Works by Nakano Shigeharu*, 68.

herself, not actualizing an ideal image that is outside herself. Following hearing of Benji's second arrest, she further receives the news of the deaths of her daughter and granddaughter and goes half-mad from the shock. Magozō, as a self-conscious person, envies Kuma for being able to go insane and lose herself. Kuma can no longer read a newspaper nor write a letter even as Magozō writes to Benji in prison informing him in detail of the village and family. In short, Kuma does not engage in representation. Kuma appears much less frequently in the story as compared to Magozō, and even when she appears, her speech is hardly represented. There is certainly a hesitation in representing Kuma, and I consider this hesitation to be proof of Nakano's avoidance of committing "*tenkō* at the level of writing."

Through the figure of Benji's mother, Nakano brought into play a dimension of singularity, but he could do so only negatively, that is, only by showing the inability to represent it. As Yamashiro argues, Nakano underwent *tenkō* politically but not at the level of writing. In my view, political *tenkō* was precisely what made it possible for him to avoid *tenkō* at the level of writing. A question arises here as to how one can go on writing without committing *tenkō* at the level of writing. Is there a way to break the impasse between the negative mode of engagement in representation and representation made possible by the erasure of singularity? Nakano's "The Novelist Who Cannot Write a Novel" gropes for a way to break this impasse through its critique of a reified notion of language.

In this story, the protagonist Takagi Takakichi is again a writer who has undergone *tenkō*. Takakichi struggles to no avail to write a novel under strict government surveillance. What makes it so difficult for him to write is not only the government censorship, but also his radical scrutiny of language. Let us pay attention to two scenes in which the word "understanding" is highlighted. On one occasion, Takakichi searches for a passage in an autobiography he had once underlined. The passage describes a situation in which social democrats or Bolsheviks could face prosecution if they used certain words that Mensheviks and cadets had used. Upon re-reading the passage, he thinks to himself that at the time he underlined it, he did not really understand what the passage meant. This time, he utters, "I . . now . . understand"[11] with a pause between each word as if to contemplate them. On another occasion, Takakichi comes across an essay while skimming through a popular magazine in the bathroom. The essay was written by a biologist in memory of his former Russian teacher. The author remembers how his teacher tried to teach him how to play chess and was then chided by his family that the Japanese student would not understand the game. The teacher tells them, "He can understand. He is a biologist."[12] In the text, these words are written in Japanese with Russian in parentheses. Takakichi reads the Russian words out loud with his chin shaking and breaks into tears. Sobbing and holding onto the toilet bowl, he says, this time in Japanese, "That is right. He can understand. I understand."[13] The word "understand" weighs heavily in Takakichi's mind. As for the first scene, we could say that Takakichi came to understand the underlined passage, because he himself had a similar experience in which his words were censored regardless of their content. However, such a reading does not account for the second scene in which what Takakichi understands remains unclear.

Perhaps the question "what does he understand?" misses the point, for the story focuses on illuminating the process of understanding words occasioned by *tenkō* rather than the content

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[11] Nakano Shigeharu, "Shōsetsu no kakenu shōsetsuka," in *Nakano Shigeharu zenshū*, vol. 2 (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1959), 161.
[12] Nakano, "Shōsetsu no kakenu shōsetsuka," 176.
[13] Nakano, "Shōsetsu no kakenu shōsetsuka,"176.

of understanding. *Tenkō* enabled Takakichi to understand the words that, before *tenkō*, he had only *recognized.* After *tenkō*, Takakichi has lost the Marxist discourse that guaranteed his words' meanings. Now he is forced to think alone. The story ends with the following line: "He began to think that he would try to remember all the stories he once heard and all the words he once memorized."[14] This shows Takakichi's determination to *understand* what previously he had simply recognized. To shed light on this point, I would like to draw on the distinction made by V. N. Volosinov in *Marxism and Philosophy of Language* between the recognition of the identity of a word and the understanding of the novelty of a word. "The task of understanding doesn't amount to recognizing the form used, but rather to understanding it in a particular, concrete context, to understand its meaning in a particular utterance, i.e., it amounts to understanding its novelty and not to recognizing its identity."[15] Volosinov further argues that only a sign, which is immutable, can be understood. What is recognized is a signal, which is fixed and self-identical.

The insertion of the Russian words "I understand" in the aforementioned scene is telling. How Takakichi *understands* Russian words throws into relief how he *understands* words instead of recognizing their identity. According to Volosinov, the process of understanding corresponds to the process of learning a foreign language. When we are still unfamiliar with a foreign language, we only recognize the identity of a word and its corresponding meaning. However, as we master it, we come to grasp how a given word *figures* in the specific context in which it is being used. He conceives of the abstract meaning of a word, such as the one we find in a dictionary, as pure "potential to mean." Signals only carry this potential to mean, and when such potential is employed in a concrete circumstance and for a concrete purpose, there emerges a real meaning; and at this point, it is no longer a signal but a sign. To treat language as a sign instead of a signal is to conceive of language as material. This, however, is not the same thing as simply treating language as a material substance. It means to treat language as material *activity*: how it figures *in use* in a certain concrete context.[16] We could say that prior to *tenkō*, Takakichi was merely using the words he recognized and was instantiating their abstract meanings.

Reflecting on how he joined the revolutionary movement, Takakichi thinks to himself that he did not join the movement out of a strong opposition to Japan's national polity (*kokutai*).

> After betraying the movement and coming out of prison, the national polity became a serious issue for him. . . . Compared to the discourse of nationalists and patriots at the time the constitution was the center of political debate, the vague feeling he had before he betrayed the movement was nothing.[17]

Before his *tenkō*, Takakichi did not really understand the concept of the national polity and what it meant to be against it. It did not even occur to him to question it while he was participating in

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[14] Nakano, "Shōsetsu no kakenu shōsetsuka," 179.

[15] Valentin N. Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, Ladislav Matejika and I. R. Titunik trans. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 68.

[16] Raymond Williams rightly argues that by separating language/consciousness and reality, we fail to take into consideration actual human use of language in reality. See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 21-44.

[17] Nakano, "Shōsetsu no kakenu shōsetsuka," 159. The debate over the constitution mentioned here refers to the political dispute over the constitutional role of the emperor, which took place in 1935. Minobe Tatsukichi's "tennō kikan setsu" (theory of the emperor as an organ of the state), which had been taken for granted since the Taisho period, became the subject of political debate.

the revolutionary movement. In other words, he did not have to think on his own insofar as he participated in the existing discourse on the national polity by the Party. Thus, the act of thinking was confused with a mere act of recognition, an articulation of what is already thinkable. Following the act of *tenkō*, Takakichi endeavors to understand words. Hence towards the end of the story, he shows his strong condemnation of those who have read and accepted Comintern '32 theses without any objections. For Takakichi, such a reading is not a real act of reading; it is in fact a resistance to reading, for they are only recognizing the familiar words (signals) rather than really trying to take in and understand what is written.

The story appears discordant and challenging to "understand" ("recognize" in Volosinov's sense). It is tempting to read this story as a work depicting the inability to write.[18] However, if that were the case, the story would only be repeating the aporia posited by "The House in the Village," that is, how to write without committing *tenkō* at the level of writing. In my view, "The Novelist Who Cannot Write a Novel" offers a materialist treatment of language as a way to avoid committing *tenkō* at the level of writing. Through the writing of this story, Nakano is doing what he claimed to do in the essay "'Bungakusha ni tsuite' ni tsuite" (Regarding 'On Literary Persons,' 1935): undertaking a radical critique of the past revolutionary movement through the production of literary works that constitute rigorous self-criticism.[19] The self-criticism made in this story is precisely a criticism of a reification of language.

The rejection of language as abstract signal, however, does not amount to valuation of a "personal" language of subjectivism in which the individual is the sole source of meaning. Such a move, however, took place during the so-called "literary renaissance" between 1933 and 1937, in which the sense of a liberation of literature from politics prevailed. Writers of proletarian literature who underwent *tenkō*, freed from "totalizing, theory-oriented" politics, went on to write works in the manner of *shishōsetsu*, as if literature should deal with immediate personal issues rather than its opposite, abstract politics. Such a view of literature—as that which deals with immediate matters—in opposition to politics—as that which deals with general society—is itself a strong abstraction, lacking any consideration for language as material social *activity*. The story critiques not only the dominant Marxist discourse of its heyday, but also its subsequent reactionary literature-ism (*bungaku shugi*).

The lack of serious scrutiny of language led to an uncritical affirmation of literature away from "totalizing, theory-oriented" politics, which in turn fed into the emergence of another politics, i.e., fascism. Nakano's radical engagement with language calls into question such reified, oppositionally structured thinking. His *tenkō* literature written from the midst of angst or a crisis of representation functioned as a timely critique that undermined a simple reversal of hierarchy between two identifiable signals, politics and literature, and questioned the apparatus of representation/ thinking that supported such an operation.

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[18] For instance, see Suzuki Sadami, "Shōsetsu no shōsetsu: sono Nihonteki hatsugen o megutte," in Komori Yōichi et al., eds., *Kōza shōwa bungakushi*, vol. 2 (Tokyo: Yūseidō, 1988), 39-48.

[19] Nakano Shigeharu, "'Bungakusha ni tsuite' ni tsuite," in *Nakano Shigeharu zenshū*, vol. 7 (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1959), 83-94.