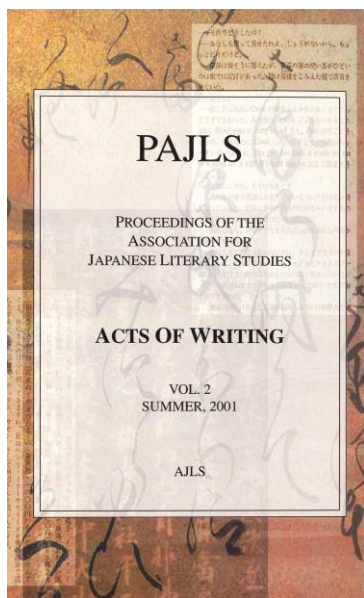


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Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies 2 (2001): 47–60.



PAJLS 2:

Acts of Writing.

Rebecca Copeland, Editor-in-Chief; Elizabeth Oyler, Editor;
Marvin Marcus, Editor

THE ANXIETY OF TRANSLATION: INTERLINGUAL SEDUCTION AND BETRAYAL IN FUTABATEI SHIMEI'S *UKIGUMO*

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Widely acknowledged as the fountainhead of the modern vernacular novel in Japan, Futabatei Shimei's (二葉亭四迷, 1864-1909) *Ukigumo* (浮雲, 1887-1889) occupies a special place in the annals of literary history. Generally speaking, there have been two basic approaches to reading *Ukigumo*—first, as a stylistic document, a kind of road-map for early *genbun itchi*; and second, as a narrative prototype for modern Japanese literary interiority. The first approach poses the question, “What is *genbun itchi*?” while the second approach poses the question, “What is *Ukigumo* really about?” In this paper, I would like to propose that what *Ukigumo* is really about is Futabatei Shimei's struggle with the literary project of *genbun itchi* itself. So to begin with, let us briefly consider Futabatei's relationship to *genbun itchi*.

If we take the term “*genbun itchi*” at face value (言文一致), meaning the “consolidation of spoken and written language,” it is easy to lose sight of its interlingual motivation. Needless to say, the *genbun itchi* movement was motivated by a desire to bring written Japanese into conformity not only with spoken Japanese, but even more importantly, with the vernacular written languages of the West. True to this logic, Futabatei's interest in the vernacular novel was sparked by a chance encounter with modern Russian fiction and literary theory. Indeed, he was so taken with Russian fiction that he began his writing career in 1886 with two abortive attempts to translate Turgenev and Gogol into vernacular Japanese. With the publication of *Aibiki* (あひゞき) in 1888, he debuted as Japan's first vernacular literary translator.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of Futabatei's work as a vernacular literary translator. Normally, we think of translation as a process of transference between two discrete and already established languages. But Futabatei chose to translate into a written language that did not yet exist, thereby creating something new. At a time when translated

literature essentially meant loose renditions of exotic Western stories into *kanbun-kuzushi* or *gabuntai*,¹ what drove Futabatei to venture into such uncharted and potentially hostile waters? His motivation could only have come from his understanding of literature itself.

In the 1886 theoretical essay “Shôsetsu sôron,” (小説総論) Futabatei defines the novel as a genre that borrows the appearance of reality for the sole purpose of revealing the Idea—truth or meaning—hidden within it. He elaborates this theory as follows:

...none of the phenomena of the real world of appearance are without a necessary Idea, yet the Idea is obscured by contingent form so that it cannot be understood clearly. Certainly, the phenomena described in the novel are also contingent, but to clearly draw out the essential Idea within these contingent forms by means of verbal locution and plot pattern is the purpose of the mimetic novel. This requires that the writing be alive. If the writing is not alive, then even if there is an Idea it will not be evident. It requires that the plot be suitable to the Idea. If it is not suitable, then the Idea will not be able to develop sufficiently.²

For Futabatei, the essence of the novel is the Idea that it reveals by the dual means of living language and calculated plot construction. In other words, the essence of the novel does not reside in narrative content alone, but also in its particular linguistic articulation.

According to this logic, the novel must be translated as an indivisible unit of form and meaning. Both *kanbun-kuzushi* and *gabuntai* were capable of rendering the basic plot or surface “meaning” of a novel, but neither could convey the form and rhythm of foreign vernacular writing as “living language.” Unlike his contemporaries, Futabatei followed such a

¹ *Kanbun-kuzushi* (漢文くずし) is a Japanese permutation of literary Chinese that employs Chinese diction, orthography, and grammatical conventions that were developed from the practice of reading Chinese texts in Japanese. *Gabuntai* (雅文体), literally “elegant written style,” is the classical Japanese literary style, which employs native Japanese diction and poetic conventions.

² *Futabatei Shimei zenshû* (hereafter FSZ), Vol. 4, 7-8. Originally published in *Chûô gakujutsu zasshi*, April 1886.

stringent standard for faithful translation that he even tried to reproduce the same number of words, commas, and periods as the original. It is this pious attitude toward the vernacular form of Russian novels that drove Futabatei to carve out new literary ground. With the possible exception of Tsubouchi Shōyō (坪内逍遙, 1859-1935), he was the first of the Meiji literati to treat the vernacular novel with the respect customarily reserved for the Chinese classics—the essential syllabus for elite education in pre-Meiji Japan. Put in terms that would apply to any culture at some point in its development of a modern literature, Futabatei was one of the first men in Japan to accord the vernacular novel the respect normally reserved for the language of truth.

Needless to say, this passionate belief in the ability of the vernacular novel to reveal the truth is what inspired Futabatei to write *Ukigumo*. Ironically, however, the narrative of *Ukigumo* actually dramatizes the deep disjunction between spoken and written language that the *genbun itchi* style was meant to resolve.

At a glimpse, the basic story of *Ukigumo* is a simple one. The protagonist, Utsumi Bunzō, is in love with his cousin, Sonoda Osei. Her mother, Omasa, has hinted that she would support their marriage. But when he loses his job, everyone seems to turn against him. Omasa becomes increasingly hostile towards Bunzō, and increasingly friendly towards Honda Noboru, his former colleague in the prestigious government bureaucracy. In turn, Osei also seems to shift her affections from Bunzō to Noboru. Things go from bad to worse, and by the end of the novel, Bunzō is not only jobless, but also completely alienated from his surroundings.

Significantly, all four of these characters are defined by their use of language. Bunzō is constantly hampered by his inability to manipulate spoken language: from the refusal (and actual inability) to curry favor with his boss that results in his loss of employment, to his inability to verbally defend himself from or mollify his aunt Omasa, his frequent reduction to stuttering and speechlessness in moments of highly charged emotion, and, most importantly, his inability to secure Osei's affections in the face of competition from the silver-tongued Noboru. By sharp contrast, the other main characters in *Ukigumo* all share an easy facility with spoken language. Osei herself is described as a natural-born mimic. Her mother Omasa spins out words "with a will that could turn even a heron into a crow," and

Noboru's rise up the bureaucratic ladder is fueled by "an inexhaustible wealth of eloquence"—a reference to his strategic use of flattery.³

The sharp division between Bunzô and these strategic talkers neatly coincides with class distinctions. Both Omasa and Noboru claim samurai roots, but the narrator casts suspicion on their lineage. As a successful money-lender, Omasa is particularly associated with the merchant class. By contrast, Bunzô's bona fide samurai lineage is described in some detail. His father was a former retainer for the Bakufu—a disadvantageous resumé in the wake of the Meiji Restoration. Stripped of his social standing and formal occupation, Bunzô's father finds himself at a complete loss in navigating the new world. And his dilemma is constituted in part by the distinction between spoken and written language: "his mouth weighted down by *sayô shikaraba* could not suddenly make the sound *hei*" (45). "*Sayô shikaraba*" is shorthand for the punctilious language of the samurai class. In tone, it stands somewhere between "such being the case, therefore," and "ergo sum." This Sinified phrase is emblematic of a spoken language that imitated learned writing, the basic foundation for a class that claimed moral and intellectual authority. Firmly anchored to the bedrock of written language, Bunzô's father cannot manipulate the spoken language of commercial negotiations. From the perspective of his class, "*hei*"—"yessir" or "yes'm"—is an obsequious merchant expression, a vulgar and deceptive performance of servility undertaken in the interest of personal profit. Yet in a world no longer defined by a stable hierarchy, the inability to treat spoken language as the malleable stuff of verbal performance rather than the strictly defined terms of self-representation renders what was once a prized social identity into a fatal economic albatross.

Pinning all of his hopes on his son, Bunzô's father places such a complete emphasis on education that Bunzô's subjection to the written word becomes his most significant patrimony. Bunzô's very name, which can be read as shorthand for *bungaku zanmai* (文学三昧 [immersion in literature]),

³ *Futabatei Shimei shû* (hereafter FSS), 94 and 90, respectively. Page numbers for the following quotations are given in parentheses. A note on the style: Futabatei used very little punctuation for the first two volumes of *Ukigumo*, which have been reprinted by Nihon Kindai Bungaku-kan. Due to the length and quantity of the quotations here, however, I have broken Futabatei's rule of translation and refrained from strictly following the orthography of the original text.

suggests as much.⁴ For Bunzô, reality is so thoroughly mediated by written language that even his loss of employment assumes the quality of an imaginary scarlet letter:

Startled from the middle of a dream by the wake-up call of the maid at his pillow, Bunzô lifted his flustered head and looked about to see that the morning sun was already shining diagonally across the *shôji*. "What, have I overslept?" The thought was instantly succeeded by two thickly looming characters that quickly choked his breast: 免職 [*menshoku*, dismissal]. (75)

So traumatizing is this two-character inscription that Bunzô can barely manage to force it out of his mouth in front of Omasa. He finally blurts out: "ム、めん職になりました。" While this statement could be translated into English as "I was di-dismissed," the Roman alphabet cannot approximate its particular orthographic configuration. The first sound, "mu," is written in *katakana* to emphasize its quality as a stuttering sound rather than a morpheme. Of infinitely greater significance, however, is the fact that when Bunzô does manage to blurt out the two-character compound "*menshoku*," it is rendered half in *hiragana*, as though to reflect the speaker's desperate desire to strip the word of the meaning visually fixed in its ideographic form. The subtle use of *katakana*, *hiragana* and *kanji* in this brief statement encapsulates one of the main sources of conflict in *Ukigumo*: the uneasy relationship between the indeterminate body of sounds that constitutes spoken language, and the corpus of meaning fixed by the written word.

The fundamental incompatibility between the malleable spoken parlance of social commerce and the inflexible, letter-bound language of ideas serves as the impetus for the entire narrative of *Ukigumo*, a novel distinguished by the fact that almost all of its key events are verbal exchanges. Time and time again, we see Bunzô inundated by the artful words of others; his alienation from their language initiates the internal soliloquy by which he attempts to comprehend the world around him. This almost plotless novel depicts an escalating power struggle between two

⁴ In this case, "*bungaku*" refers to learning, rather than "literature" in the modern sense. Specialists point out that the name Bunzô also derives from the year of the character's birth, Bunkyû 3 (1863).

different approaches to language—the seamless speech of Omasa and Noboru against the mental text Bunzô patches together from their words and the ethical code inscribed in his consciousness.

Osei is the enigmatic hybrid at the center of this bipolar struggle. Not only is she presumably of mixed class, as the daughter of Omasa and Bunzô's paternal uncle, but her penchant for mimicry assimilates the written diction of Chinese and English to her everyday speech. Indeed, the study of these languages constitutes the core of her secondary education. Significantly, Osei's facility with verbal mimicry is the very trait that arouses Bunzô's desire.

Since the beginning of the summer, when he was asked to teach Osei English, Bunzô began to open up a little, occasionally holding forth on the state of Japanese women, the pros and cons of the Western-style bun, and even the relative merits of social intercourse between men and women, whereupon, lo and behold, Osei—who until now had not given any thought to Bunzô as a man and had bragged in front of him to her heart's content—at some point became reticent in front of Bunzô, took on an air of composure, and seemed to become gentle and feminine. One day, Bunzô was surprised to see that Osei was not wearing her spectacles or scarf as usual, and when he asked about it, she said "But aren't you the one who said that they are actually harmful to people in good health?" Bunzô smiled in spite of himself, said "That's an excellent thing," and smiled again. (52-53)

Clearly, Bunzô gets a thrill from hearing Osei repeat his own words. This is the linguistic event that solidifies his latent attraction for Osei.

The degree to which Bunzô's idealization of Osei hinges upon her use of language becomes comically clear in the following passage. Bunzô and Osei are home alone together, and their conversation quickly turns to their relationship. When Osei innocently declares that Bunzô is her newfound confidant, he responds with a faltering attempt to confess his true feelings:

"...but I am utterly incapable of associating with you as a confidant."

"Now what is that supposed to mean? Just why can't you associate with me as a confidant?"

"Why? Because I don't understand you, and you also don't understand me, so associating as a confidant is, well..."

"Is that it? But I believe that I understand you very well. You are learned, your conduct is exemplary, you treat your parents with filial piety..."

"That's why I say that you don't understand me. You say that I treat my parents with filial piety, but I am not a good son. For me...there is something more...important than parents..." stammered Bunzô, hanging his head.

Osei stared at Bunzô with a puzzled look. "Something more important than parents...something...more important...than parents... Oh, there is also something more important to me than parents."

Bunzô raised his hung head, "What? You too have that?"

"Yes, I do."

"Wh-who is it?"

"It's not a person, it is Truth."

"Truth," repeated Bunzô with a tremble, biting his lips in a moment of silence, soon after which he suddenly let out with a stunned sigh, "Ah, you are a chaste one, a pure one... What is more important than parents is Truth... Ah, you are a pure one." (55-58)

Osei's demonstration of fluency in Bunzô's learned language generates the comedy of their exchange. Her grasp of Bunzô's idiom has been based on their English lessons and discussions of abstract social and ethical questions. When Bunzô suddenly bursts out that he is not a "good son" because he values something more than his parents, Osei recasts his faltering confession into the form of a test question, and then searches for a clever answer, as if to say, "Hm, what could be more important than parents or filial piety? Well, it must be the new Western ideal of 'Truth.'"

The word "truth" was a key component of many of the new systems of thought coming in from the West, such as Christianity, philosophy, and science. The set Japanese translation, *shinri* (真理), carries the weight of written language in a way that is closer to the Latin *veritas*. It is certainly not a term that one uses in casual conversation. Osei never elaborates on

what she means by "Truth," nor is her meaning apparent anywhere in the narrative of *Ukigumo*. In fact, the question of meaning has nothing to do with her use of the word here; it is simply a clever way to keep up her end of a conversation that apparently strikes her as highly intellectual. Her enunciation of an absolute value in modern Western thought reduces the term to the status of an exotic verbal prop.

This is the constitutive difference between Osei and Bunzô. Osei is not subject to the written word; rather, she manipulates that language to aggrandize her self-image. Her meaningless enunciation of written signs has the virtually alchemical effect of converting the heavy materiality of written signs into the weightless ephemerality of sound. While her language is quintessentially performative, however, Bunzô reads it in the referential mode. To our thoroughly literal-minded protagonist, the word "Truth" is strictly bound to the textual sources that give it meaning. Thus, when she spouts out this word in place of the beloved's name he was expecting to hear, he sees a direct reflection of the speaker's pristine self, instead of his own image inadvertently parodied in her performance.

So profound is Bunzô's subjection to writing that his entire thought process takes the form of textual analysis. In his mind, Osei's increasing "indifference" takes on the proportions of a physical object, upon which he attempts to perform a painstaking dissection.

Unable to understand, Bunzô grasped the double blades of imagination and discernment to dissect, from various angles, this worrisome indifference of Osei's, upon which it seemed that some thing was hidden within it, yes, there was definitely something hidden there. But, he could not make out its form. Hence he once again summoned his courage and concentrated his attention on this point alone, throwing all of his might into dissecting this first, but like the Broom Tree of song, just as it seemed to appear he could not grasp it, and Bunzô eventually lost patience. Then that mischievous creature delusion would come out heckling—it might be this, then again it might be that—making him grab at utter shams and groundless suspicions. Not entirely seeing through these shams and groundless suspicions, but not entirely unaware of their character either, Bunzô carelessly grabbed at whatever was thrust upon him, blowing on it, crumpling it, making it into a ball, and

then stretching it out again, straining himself to turn it into a fact, and as if the thing had just occurred before his very eyes, he writhed and flailed, suffering every kind of torment, and in a burst of anger he would take the sham and smash it into a million pieces, and before he could breathe a sigh of relief, set back down to the investigation, once again being handed a sham, once again turning it into fact, once again smashing it, smashing and grabbing, grabbing and smashing, with no end in sight, constantly stuck in the same place, without progressing forward or retreating backward. When he did take a step back to have a good look, it still seemed that something was there inside the indifference, just dimly perceptible. (118)

The delusions spawned by Bunzô's mental process function as an inadvertent parody of the Idealist metaphysics outlined in "Shôsetsu sôron," which presupposes the existence of an Idea in every Form, thus fostering an obsession with the meanings hidden deep inside the Forms of sensory phenomena. This apprehension of the world as a meaning-laden text is also the source of Bunzô's chronic indecision, for it stunts his ability to sense reality in the contingencies of Form.

Thus, even when Bunzô arrives at the sudden insight that Osei might be attracted to Noboru, he is led to the disturbing conclusion that his suspicion has come from out of nowhere.

Bunzô at last exhausted himself. By now, the energy to keep investigating was gone, and his courage failed him too. Then he closed his eyes, held his head, and collapsed to the floor right there, numbing his five senses and letting go the hold on his seven passions, wanting nothing more than to forget right and wrong, honor and shame, success and failure, Omasa, Osei, the fact of being himself, everything at all, striving to escape from this torment and anguish even for a single instant, and for a while he neither moved nor breathed, still as a dead man; then all of a sudden he sprung to his feet,

"What if it's Honda..." he started, but didn't dare to finish, making a startled look all around just as though he were in search of something.

Even so, where could this suspicion have come from? Whether it fell from the sky, or sprang up from the ground, or was simply a mirage of Bunzô's sense of persecution, it emerged suddenly and came without thought, in an indiscernible haze, so there was no way to know its origin, but in any case, what he could not figure out after all that flailing, writhing, and investigating, that single thing inside the said indifference, Bunzô now had the feeling he had effortlessly and for no apparent reason just happened to pinpoint, and the hair on his body stood on end.

Nevertheless, a feeling is still not a fact. Unless the feeling came from facts, one could not easily believe in it. Hence, upon recalling Osei's behavior until now and thoroughly considering and examining it, there seemed to be no such signs. Granted, Osei is still young and her spirits have yet to settle down, her principles have surely not taken deep root. But...in Bunzô's eyes, Osei is the bud of what one would call a woman lionheart, with an elevated understanding, great elegance, a straightforward manner, she is a young woman to be loved and respected, so even if she might be deceived or led astray by a false gentleman who ornamented himself with morality, or a pseudo-lionheart adorned in magnanimity, when it comes to the likes of Noboru, an obsequious, shallow jerk even worse than dogs and beasts, there is no way that she could be led astray even by mistake.

"In which case, maybe it's all right...but..." Something still catches, it is still not clearly settled. Flustered, Bunzô tried vigorously shaking his head, but even with that it did not seem about to dispel. This damned "but," able to crawl into the tiny pores of a lotus fiber or even the space between a mosquito's eyelashes, just this one, minuscule, damned little "but" is more hindering than a mote in the eye, more frightening than the appearance of a thunderhead on the horizon.

That's right, frightening. Not knowing what horror might be lurking on the other side of this "but," Bunzô is frightened. Before it turns into something, he wants to dispel it as quickly as possible. As much as he wants to dispel it, it will not dispel. Moreover, with the passing of time, branch clouds appear, the thunderhead spreads,

and it seems like a great storm is about to break out any minute now, the senses reel...(118-120)

The vicious cycle of doubt that paralyzes Bunzô traces an interminable shuttling back and forth between the conceptual primacy of Ideas and the palpable yet unreliable sensations caused by manifest Form. Unable to place his complete faith in one or the other, we find Bunzô once again trembling before the sign of writing—the tiny yet ominous contradiction “but” beyond which his imagination dares not venture.

Bunzô’s internal language takes on a life of its own as he begins the sharp descent into nervous prostration. His mind suddenly becomes a playground for foreign words that, like his suspicions, seem to emerge from out of nowhere.

Incessant thinking about the same thing eventually exhausts the human mind, weakening its powers of discernment. Thus while Bunzô was constantly worrying about Osei, at some point his concentration scattered and was unable to focus on a single thing, and at times he would have haphazard thoughts about fragments that were totally unrelated to each other. Once he was lying down with his head cupped in his hands staring at the ceiling, at first thinking this and that about Osei as usual, when he happened to notice the grain of the wood ceiling, and he suddenly had a strange thought. “Looking at it this way, it looks like marks left by flowing water.” Once this thought occurred to him, he completely forgot about Osei and, continuing to stare even harder at the ceiling, thought “Depending on one’s state of mind, it can even appear to have peaks and valleys. Hm, so that’s an *optical illusion*.” Suddenly recalling the magnificently bearded face of the foreign lecturer who taught Bunzô and the others physics, he simultaneously forgot about the grain of the ceiling. Next, he saw seven or eight students appear before his very eyes, all of whom were his classmates, some with pencils stuck behind their ears, some carrying books, and still others opening the books to read. Upon looking closer, it seemed that Bunzô himself was among them. Now the lecture on *electriciteit* had ended and an exam was to take place, and everyone was gathered around an *electrical*

machine; and just as it seemed that they were all arguing about something he could not make out, suddenly the *machine* and the students vanished without a trace like so much smoke, and the wood grain came back into sight. Saying “Hm, so that’s an *optical illusion*,” Bunzô smiled for no reason. “Speaking of *illusion*, the most interesting book I’ve ever read is Sully’s *Illusions*. I must have finished reading it in two days and a night. How does a person get so smart? He must have an intricately organized brain...” Though there would seem to be no relation between Sully’s brain and Osei, at this moment the thought of Osei suddenly pierced his chest, erupting like a gushing water fountain. (214-15)⁵

That in the midst of his obsession with Osei, Bunzô suddenly recalls the word “illusion” is surely not an entirely “haphazard” thought. As this stream of associations indicates, the word “illusion” exists in Bunzô’s mind as part of the Western lexicon of scientific *truth*, the subtext for the “dissection” procedure he applied to Osei’s “indifference.” If the deeply reverberating sound of “Truth” was Osei’s siren song, this sudden musing on “illusions” constitutes Bunzô’s unsung refrain.

In the linguistic battle pitched by Bunzô, Omasa, and Noboru, Osei personifies the bewitching appeal of a language that can alchemically compound even the most intractable differences under the single sign of “truth.” In this sense, she is both Futabatei’s dream and his nightmare. She spans the gap between writing and speech, between foreign languages and Japanese, with no apparent effort. This was precisely Futabatei’s goal as a vernacular writer. As both translator and novelist, he attempted to create a language that would span all of these gaps. Yet given his profound reverence for the Russian novel as a textually fixed language of Truth, he must have harbored deep-seated anxieties about the elusive medium of spoken Japanese. Indeed, he must have been haunted by the possibility that writing in the Japanese vernacular would have the same effect as Osei’s pronouncement of “Truth”—a hollow ring that reduces the truth of the modern novel to the status of mere talk.

⁵ Seiji Lippit’s work on Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, which analyzes the eruption of foreign words as a symptom of psychological breakdown, originally alerted me to a similar trend in *Ukigumo*.

In the figure of a polyglossic femme fatale, Futabatei's first novel powerfully evokes the unsettling proximity between truth and illusion that inhabits the space between languages—not only the ineffable difference-in-sameness of *veritas*, truth, and *shinri*, but also the confounding difference between writing and speech, truth and "Truth."

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