"Writing the Limits of Sexuality: Tomioka Taeko's 'Straw Dogs' and Nakagami Kenji's 'The Immortal'"

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Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies 2 (2001): 338–352.



PAJLS 2: Acts of Writing. Rebecca Copeland, Editor-in-Chief; Elizabeth Oyler, Editor; Marvin Marcus, Editor

WRITING THE LIMITS OF SEXUALITY: TOMIOKA TAEKO'S "STRAW DOGS" AND NAKAGAMI KENJI'S "THE IMMORTAL"

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We know that sexuality is shrouded in all kinds of myths. One layer of mythologization is found in association with the value of the sensual and erotic, which produces a variety of philosophical theories on ecstasy and eroticism. For George Bataille, eroticism is a simulation of death, in which our solitary and discontinuous mode of being is violently transgressed by the sense of continuity with the other individual.¹ Ecstasy is a dangerously sacred experience, in which one senses a transcendental unity with one's partner and with life itself at the risk of losing one's own individuated identity. In contrast, Emmanuel Levinas stresses an elusive power of the erotic, portrayed by the vision of an endless and aimless caress between partners.² Instead of highlighting a teleological vision of ecstatic togetherness, an erotic intimacy is here founded on one's appreciative exposure to the heterogeneous discontinuity in one's partner: one enjoys the other's company not as someone with whom to be subjectively fused but as an attractive mystery endlessly deferring itself from one's comprehension, definition, and possession. Note that in spite of their clear differences, both Bataille and Levinas share the fundamental understanding of the nature of sexuality as an area in which one's sense of identity is radically shaken by one's interactions with another individual.

Tomioka Taeko's "Sûku" (芻狗, "Straw Dogs," 1980) and Nakagami Kenji's "Fushi" (不死, "The Immortal," 1980) unfold stories on the topic of sexuality that reexamine sexuality's mythological foundations.³ Tomioka experiments with an approach to sexuality from

³ Quotations from Tomioka's are from the English translation, "Straw Dogs," Unmapped Territories, ed. Yukiko Tanaka. The original text is "Sûku,"

¹ See his Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo.

² See Levinas's "Time and the Other."

the standpoint of an outsider who is unconstrained by the conventions of sexual semantics. Her proposal of a new mode of communication based on a positive appreciation of the differences between interactants shows an interest similar to the Levinasean notion of Eros. In contrast, Nakagami deconstructively rewrites the myth of sexuality by highlighting the abjected origin of male sexual desire. His search necessarily questions the validity of the binary foundation of the metaphysics of sexuality.

In Tomioka's story, a middle-aged narrator/protagonist continues one-night-stand adventures with young men. She insists that she is only interested in the moment when a stranger's penis slips inside her, and she refuses to see any of her partners more than once. She later defines her desire as a "hope to live as an animal" and stresses that her desire requires her to give up "physical *relationships* and words" (140, emphasis added). The word "animal" is indicative of the protagonist's desire to develop her area of sexuality as a sphere free from the penetration of the conventional semantics of sexuality, particularly as it is associated with the moral value of commitment and the metaphysical value of ecstatic pleasure ("physical relationships"), and ultimately with the epistemological value which assumes sexuality's final interpretability ("words").⁴

The protagonist seems to display a two-fold motivation for her project: one is an ironically educational and/or vengeful motivation to challenge men, who blindly exercise gendered politics. The other is to

⁴ Ueno Chizuko compares the notion of the animal highlighted by Nakagami's Mizu no onna and Tomioka's "Sûku." Ueno concludes that Tomioka's protagonist pursues freedom that eventually leads her to a sphere outcast from society, where interactants are all reduced to anonymous, fetishized, and self-alienated beings. See Onna to iu kairaku (女という快楽). The notion of animal as presented in Tomioka's major texts is analyzed in relationship, in particular, to characteristics of female narrativity by Mizuta Noriko in her Monogatari to hanmonogatari no fûkei (物語と反物語の風景).

in Namiutsu tochi/Sûku (波打つ土地・芻狗). Nakagami's text is quoted from the English translation, "The Immortal," in The Shôwa Anthology, vol. 2, ed. Van C. Gessel and Tomone Matsumoto. The original text is from Nakagami Kenji, "Fushi," in Kumanoshû (熊野集).

seek a new form of physical communication between a woman and man. The two motivations are inseparably interwoven. In terms of ironical challenge, she consciously teases her young partners and wants them to remember their meeting with a "certain vile feeling, an awful aftertaste" (122). For that purpose, she routinely asks her partners, right after having sex, what they would do if she got pregnant; she also frequently refers to her arthritis and her reading glasses in order to stress her age. However, she is often frustrated by her partners' insensitive responses to her irony. In one episode, a young blue-color worker has sex with her. He finishes quickly, puts his pants back on as if the act were no different than a "bowel movement" (122), and he starts to talk vulgarly about his sex life. He keeps talking about himself and for himself as if she were not there in front of him. She likes his uncomplicated approach to sexuality, but she knows that he doesn't notice any of her irony and frustration. In another episode, a young graduate student takes an overnight trip with her to a lake resort. The narrator fakes a tragic love story atmosphere by saying, "Doesn't this view of the lake make you want to try double suicide?" (136). The young man starts to insist that he has decided to marry her; he goes on to talk about plans for their future life together. She is frustrated because he never honestly faces his sexual desire; instead, he covers up his naked desire with the morally decorative value of commitment and sincerity. So frustrated by his reactions, the narrator strongly expresses her hope to "live as an animal" (140), the passage of which we have already discussed. With a sense of mission, she consistently wants to respond straightly to her physical desire.

Furthermore, her man hunting meets much open hostility from different men. In one episode, a young man is offended by her straight expression of the desire for sex. The man snaps at her, "How old are you really? Young women don't say things like that. Men have pride, if you really want to know" (142). In another episode, she asks a young father sitting next to her on an amusement park bench to go somewhere and "asobô" (lit, 'to play together'). The man gets angry and yells, "You're insane to pick up a man at a place like this." These men grow uneasy when they assume that she is trying to manipulate them. The protagonist's reflections over the gap between her invitation ("asobô") and his interpretation (" $otoko \ o \ sasou$ ") suggest their differences in understanding the matter. While her words indicate an improvised search for fun in response to each of their own desires, he sees in her words a need to control the man by leading him to a game she has planned out. In other words, her reflections indicate that her man hunting is not just a reversed version of a boy picking up a girl if men see it as a power trip. Her determination to be honest to her desire implies that she is always ready to be dictated by her own sexual arousal. If a male power trip is a matter of controlling his own desire and his partner's desire, she is least concerned about such an approach to the issue of control. A tone of urgency in the following passage keenly indicates that she lets her desire rule her: "I went toward the amusement park, looking for a man I wanted to have sex with. If I found one, I wanted to do it *on the spot*" (143, emphasis added).

The uncommonness of her project is further articulated when we see the protagonist's positive reaction to a man in another episode. She picks up a young student actor. On the way to a hotel, he looks gloomy. Sensing in him "humiliation and anger," she feels very aggressive toward him: "I felt like pouncing on his shame as if it were some helpless prey" (128). In bed, however, she is pleasantly surprised by his body's communicativeness: "His whole body seemed to reach every corner of mine. And yet I didn't think he was acting. There was an innate expressiveness to his body...I was moved by this" (131). And she adds: "Yoji spoke little and responded with his body to what I, a stranger, sought from him, and I understood intuitively what type of person he was. He approached me as an equal. His body was not affected by my age or my social status" (132). Her reactions here are indicative of what kind of values she looks for in her potential partners.

First, she appreciates shock value. By insisting on the first and only encounter with a stranger, she is always looking forward to tasting a refreshing, accidental, and scandalous taste encounter. It is the taste coming from the occurent aspect of an action—a taste of mystery that occurs and fulfills her with its unique performance. Second, she appreciates the equality actualized between a woman and man when their bodies communicate with each other straightly and richly. It is the equality exercised by what she calls "animals," who stop relying on the language's symbolic/interpretative power and let their body's communicative potential run freely. Third, the protagonist's aggressiveness towards her young partners does not copy the type of aggressiveness coming from the understanding of sexuality as a power struggle between the opposite sexes. Rather, this is an aggressiveness associated with her effort to experience sexuality as a domain free from the concern about control and power.

In order to further clarify the third point, let me discuss the story's ending scene. The protagonist is attracted to a young waiter who serves her beer at a place in the amusement park. She decides to wait for him until his shop is closed. Now it is over an hour past the shop's closing time and the young man has not come out. She notices that a number of men working at the park go inside the shop. She realizes that she is no longer interested in the young boy, but is now attracted to the building itself, which her mind imagines is starting to swell in the twilight darkness of the park. The dark building that swells by swallowing so many men forms a multi-layered symbol, which seems to represent a collective vision of male desire and at the same time a vision of her womb aroused by her constant desire for new men. She now finds herself in a circle of bright light from the lamp near her bench. Note that this picture of the protagonist as a seer forms an upside down portrayal of the convention of voyeurism, according to which a male seer unilaterally views his object of desire while placing himself where no one can see him. In contrast, the protagonist stares at her potential male partners' desire (as well as at her own desire) as something invisible, while she makes herself visibly available to them. Her mode of seeing ironically invalidates the modern voyeurism and its implicated politics of power while proposing a new vision of the act of seeing: she stresses her desire to see the invisible, and thereby unknowable, in her partners, in order to exchange acts of seeing with her partners in a bilateral manner. Hours pass and nobody comes out of the building, yet she still waits patiently. This final picture of the protagonist is impressive: it indicates her solitude, together with her unbending hope for a new communication with men in a manner different from the conventional, that is, a new vision of communication on the basis of respecting the unknowable mystery in each other's desires.⁵

⁵ I briefly discussed the characteristics of the type of desire highlighted in "Sûku." See my "Gender Differences in a Genealogy of Modern Love Stories." Let me add that since the protagonist's search is not for the ultimate

Nakagami's "Fushi (The Immortal)" unfolds a wandering *hijiri*'s erotic encounters with a mysterious young woman in the otherworldly depth of the Kumano mountains. When the *hijiri* sees the woman, he is first attracted to her "infant hands," which are unusually small for her grown-up body. He thinks she may be a creature from another world and wants to find out more about her. His belief is that if she is just an ordinary woman he can rape her, but if she is an incarnation of Kannon, he may save himself by touching her infant hands. This two-fold desire is typical of him. He is a *hijiri*, who self-trains himself in the Buddhist Way in the mountains of Kumano. He, however, knows that his spiritual life goal is always obscured by his sexual desire, whose haunting nature is recurrently expressed by the sound of "*jaarajaara*." So, he goes ahead and rapes the young woman.

When he is violating her for the second time, he hears noises of invisible creatures surrounding them. The woman tells him that it is a group of "the noble ones" and guides him deeper into the mountains where the noble ones reside. He hears the voice of a weeping woman inside the mansion, saying that the little princess has been killed and her group has fled to this mountain with the prince. The *hijiri* looks around him and sees a number of people crying with her. They are all shaped like humans but parts of their bodies are body parts of monkeys, boars, and dogs. The *hijiri* soon decides simply to leave the place, thinking that he must keep going. Note that nothing dramatic happens to the *hijiri* at the center of this otherworldly space. His erotic interactions with the woman always take place at the outskirts of this magical land.

The woman follows him to the area where they first met. He desires her again and they have sex by the water in the morning sun light. He asks her to stay with him. She shakes her head and steps into the water. He follows her and asks her to live with him in a village. She says no. He still asks her if she will live with him in the mountains. Without her answer to his last proposal, he comes inside her again. While hearing her moan in ecstasy, he feels a strong love and hatred

man but for the enjoyment of each first encounter with new men, her interest is peculiarly similar with that of Yonosuke in Ihara Saikaku's *Kôshoku ichidai* otoko. For the characteristics of Yonosuke's desire, see "Yonosuke to Tanjirô," *Edo bungaku* (江戸文学) vol. 10.

towards her at the same time. He is grabbed by a desire to kill her and puts his hands around her throat.

The description is ruptured by his recollection of a previous murder he committed. He stays at a place where an older woman lives alone in a village. Every night the woman cries out to him while making love to him,"Ah Holy Man, Save me. Teach me the Way and give me salvation..." (427). Her words shake him so unbearably that early one morning he strangles her to death while chanting the same words for salvation with her:

"Ah, holy man...reverend priest...Save me..." Her cries became louder, and with her moaning in my ears, my hand stretched out towards her throat. Save me... I was saying it with her as I put more strength into my hands. "Save me..." Even after I had released her limp body, her voice remained in my ears forever. (427-28)

The quoted passage explicitly shows the *hijiri*'s obscure violence, whose nature will be discussed later. The story then returns to the mountain scene and ends with the *hijiri* putting his clothes back on by the water in the mountain. He turns to ask the woman one more time if she will live with him in a village, but no one is there.

This is a gothic fantasy developed on a timeless framework of narration. As pointed out by some, this story builds itself through a deconstructive intertextual play with preceding gothic tales, most obviously with Izumi Kyôka's $Kôya hijiri.^6$ Let me examine the basic difference in the two stories. Kyôka's story is structured by the binary oppositions between the present and past and between daily reality and otherworldly fantasy. The overall narration is framed by the present interaction between the narrator and the old *hijiri*, and the *hijiri*'s encounter with the mysterious woman unfolds as a dream-like memory from his younger days. The meeting between the young *hijiri* and the

⁶ See Monnet. According to Monnet, "Fushi" intends to parodize the entire literary history associated with *hijiri*. As for Nakagami's complex intertextual symbolism, see Cornyetz, Part III in *Dangerous Women*, *Deadly Words*.

lady takes place at a magical realm of reality in the depth of an eerie mountain and is experienced as the ultimate, yet an elusively dream-like, experience for him. The woman represents the only central authority of her fantastic world and embodies the perfect charm of femininity consisting of a mixture of motherly gentleness and erotic sensuousness. The fact that she has an evil power that enables her to transform men into animals gives an additional transcendental quality to her power. When embraced and caressed by her in the water, the young, naked, hijiri becomes completely ecstatic to the point of losing consciousness. This sexually innocent and incomplete, yet sensuously ultimate and conclusive, union with the woman allows the hero imaginarily to appropriate the woman and all the mystery she represents. His successful escape from the woman and his return to student life, as well as his success as a Buddhist priest, further indicate the stable establishment of his binary world vision, in which the fantastic world centered by the mysterious woman forms an entity autonomous from his daily and rationalist reality: He now owns the image of the woman as an unforgettable and unthreateningly sweet memory.

In Nakagami's story, reality is not structured binarily, but by three different layers: a daily reality represented by the village, an otherworldly realm represented by the noble ones, and the borderline realm where the hijiri continuously wanders. Let us examine the two stories' different descriptions of the otherworldly realm. First, Kyôka's fantasyland is centered on and visually articulated by the mysterious woman, who is the only source of superior power, while Nakagami's center remains obscure-the noble ones are evasive, existing only as voices. Second, the mysterious young woman with whom Nakagami's hijiri has contact belongs to the magical world not as the central figure but as a peripheral messenger or mediator with the outer borderline world. His intimacy with the woman does not allow him connections with the center of the noble ones' world. Third, Kyôka's hijiri constitutes the only and ultimate union with the magical woman, while Nakagami's hijiri continues to violate the woman without being able to form any conclusive unity with her.

Let me now examine more closely the characteristics of Nakagami's *hijiri*. Unlike Kyôka's *hijiri*, who is socially respectable, Nakagami's *hijiri* is an outcasted anti-hero: he looks for life's truth yet is habitually a thief, rapist, and murderer. His contradiction is inherent to his borderline quality, which constantly obscures his life goal: "he always ended up chanting *jaarajaara jaarajaara*, like a lewd growling in the throat, instead of the phrases of the sacred sutras" (415-16). The sound of *jaarajaara*, which appears 12 times in the 19-page Japanese paperback text, emphasizes the *hijiri*'s fundamental lack of a positively articulated identity. Instead, he is haunted by a shaky yet persistent and essentially transgressive desire evoked by that obscure sound that echoes through him.

Sex with a woman keenly reveals his vulnerability. His murder of the village woman most clearly explains where his desire takes him. Note first that the woman is determined to stick with the Saviorworshipper role-play. His identity then starts to swing wildly. He finds himself a holy man equal of Kôbô Daishi one moment and then as someone inferior even to a wild dog the next. Also, the line of demarcation between his self and the woman becomes blurry. The totally helpless way the woman surrenders herself to him makes him feel like he is the personification of all evilness and that at the same time her urge for salvation is his own. Then he ambivalently asks for salvation for himself and for the woman at the same time: "I was pleading to myself for salvation and at the same time saying the same words in my heart to the woman. 'Ah! Teach me! ... Save me!... Teach me the path to paradise..." (427). His self is split between a total powerlessness and a merciless evilness, and the woman is split between a pathetic abject and a Kannon-like savior. In a dangerous meltdown of the barrier between himself and the woman, the hijiri ends up killing her. Note that right before he strangles her, he hears the cuckoo echo, "ako...ako..." The bird's echo is transcribed by kanji that mean "my child (吾子)," and the description shifts to the hijiri sucking this older woman's nipple as a baby might its mother's: "I rolled her nipples around in my fingers for a moment, and then, just as I had done long, long ago, I sucked it into my mouth" (427). The implication of the hijiri's murder seems to be now fairly obvious. He murders the woman so as to radically simulate his old self's original abjection of his own mother in a manner perfectly applicable of Kristeva's theory of abjection.⁷ His consistent desire, marked by the obscure sound of *jaarajaara*, reveals its true goal here. His borderline self, who resists integration within the binary order of the "symbolic," keeps walking forward without a positive goal to pursue and a definite location to settle in, and is constantly and traumatically gnawed at by an impossible desire to return to the state of mother-infant fusion. The description of his desire to kill the woman in the mountains indicates his obsession's fatally inescapable yet elusively unattainable nature. Note that whether he has killed the young woman in the mountain remains unanswered. The text's final words indicate the firmness of the *hijiri*'s borderline identity, where uncertainty is the only certainty and the barrier between fantasy and reality is removed: "The *hijiri* thought he had known that [the woman's disappearance] from the beginning, too" (428). He is reduced to nothing but a haunting desire to imaginarily return to the original moment of abjection.

"Fushi" fundamentally rewrites "Kôya *hijiri*" in the above context. For Kyôka, a reunion with the Mother is an imaginarily attainable and safely sweet dream, thanks to his binary framework of representation. For Nakagami, however, a fantasy always remains elusive and is mingled with a taste of violence. Let me refer to, in this regard, his critical view of the Japanese narrative tradition as a whole.⁸ He claims that a prototypical narrative hero has to be an abandoned child, meaning one who has been symbolically killed by his parents. This original trauma, or "*utsuho* (hollow, emptiness)," haunts him in such a way that he develops as someone inevitably violent and evil. He resurrects as a powerful hero, whose heroism glows tragically because of

⁸ See Part I in Nakagami Kenji to Kumano (中上健次と熊野).

⁷ See Kristeva, *Power of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. According to Kristeva, an infant needs to get out of his "semiotic" fusion with his mother in order to establish his "symbolic" order. In his transitional borderline, he finds his mother as an intensely ambivalent "abject," that mixes an uncanny vision he fearfully distances himself from but is endlessly fascinated with. Monnet critically questions in the above-quoted essay the nature of Nakagami's male rape fantasy developed on the basis of the abjection theory, a fantasy that preserves/justifies the gender asymmetry by allowing the male hero to survive while his female partners are killed repeatedly.

the sin he unconsciously commits against his parents in the process of his resurrection. (Oedipus, who murders his father and violates his mother, is a typical prototype for Nakagami's narrative theory.) For Nakagami, *Utsuho monogatari* is the exemplary prototype of the Japanese narrative tradition, highlighting the original "*utsuho*" in the hero. However, Nakagami criticizes the modern Japanese narrative convention for taking *The Tale of Genji* as the origin of Japanese narrative heroes. Nakagami challenges this modern convention by conscientiously creating heroes with an evil flavor. The *hijiri* in "Fushi" is one of these prototypical heroes based on Nakagami's theoretical framework.

The two authors discussed in this article commonly share the same general interest-that is, to question the nature of the discriminatory economy founded on the binarily organized, hierarchized systems of values and meaning. They pursue their projects to the limits of their respective semantic conventions to the point of finding themselves social outcasts (an animal, a wild dog, and so forth). The new visions they display indicate two interesting directions to explore in order to develop, challenge, and digress from the binarily founded readings of sexuality and of literature in general. Tomioka's and Nakagami's heroes want something clearly different in each story, however. Tomioka's hero wants a taste of freedom from the myths on sexuality as an outsider of the gendered semantics/politics, while Nakagami's hero wants to subvert the myth of sexuality by rewriting the myth from within. The differences correspond to each author's different Tomioka challenges the gender discrimination interests: bv experimentally neutralizing the existing gender asymmetry, while Nakagami looks for the way to overcome the discrimination against the burakumin in his uniquely complex way.

I would like to add additional comments on their differences. What seems to remain most real for Tomioka is the naked immediacy of body contact between individuals. Let me again quote the following passage:

His whole body seemed to reach every corner of mine. And yet I didn't think he was acting. There was an innate

expressiveness to his body. He wasn't experienced with women and he didn't try to conceal it, nor did he take his partner for granted. His body told all of this eloquently. I was moved by this. (131)

The protagonist's one-night-stand venture seems to show here its precious secret. It is, in essence, an opportunity for her to experience Zen-like enlightenment to feel reconnected with life's physical and daily foundation. What is discovered is refreshingly meaning-free, yet intimate for her body. In contrast, Nakagami's description of sexuality indicates the *hijiri*'s disconnectedness with his partner and with the purely physical aspect of sexual interaction. In the following passage, which appears in the sequence where the *hijiri* strangles the woman while he is inside her, he feels her vagina tighten and hears her writhe in pain. He then "takes his hand away from her throat" and remains still:

With the morning sun striking them, the stream, the rocks, and the woman's naked body were almost blinding. The brush beside the stream rustled in every gust of wind, and though the sound did not reach his ears, he thought he could hear *jaarajaara jaarajaara*. And though the woman by no means said any such thing, he imagined that he heard her tiny voice saying, "Please let me go...Spare my life." (426-27)

Certainty of the *hijiri*'s tactile sensations coming from the woman's tightened vagina is not highlighted here. Instead, it is mixed with, or rather replaced by, the realness of his visual, and more fundamentally audile, sensations (the blinding vision of his surroundings, the sound of *jaarajaara*, and a female voice calling for salvation). His audio-visual sensations, intangible, invisible, yet penetrating, overwhelm him to such a degree that detaches him from the physical/tangible reality. Furthermore, the narrator makes sure that the sounds the *hijiri* hears are subjectively real for him, though at the same time he knows they are in his imagination. In short, he lives as if he were a sleep-walker in the sense that he goes back and forth between reality and day-dream and that he senses both reality and day-dream not as something immediately realistic but hyper-realistic to him.

With the same borderline vision, the hijiri relates himself to the village and the noble people's land in the depth of the mountain. The two areas represent the binary opposition between real living people and ghosts and figuratively between the social majority and the outcasted, self-segregating group (burakumin). This opposition is neutralized symbolically in the way in which the young woman in the mountain is mixed with the older woman in the village in the hijiri's murderous mind: they are interchangeable, both highlighting their ghostly realness by being fundamentally reduced to disembodied visions and voices. The hijiri is an eternal walker through the present, always haunted by something that is not materially there. The murder he commits is a metaphorical format to indicate the contradictory way in which he connects with this ghostly something. By stressing the omnipresence of such a negative or unphysical sense of realness, "Fushi" secretly subverts the convention of discrimination against burakumin. In this way, binarisms between social majority and minority and between positive and negative values are neutralized. Note additionally that half of Kumanoshû consists of I-novel-style stories, in which Nakagami unfolds the actual disappearance of the roji (the main burakumin district) in the city of Shingû. Nakagami stresses that his roji survives as an inexhaustible text: "This roji that I repeatedly referred to in my novels always remains as a new book, which I can never completely finish reading."9 The book's entire structure, which collects a number of short stories and conscientiously mixes I-novel style and monogatari style, allows Nakagami to write about the visions of the roji as a type of Barthean "writerly" text.¹⁰ It is in association with this larger context that "Fushi" proposes, subtly yet surely, a vision to challenge the convention of discrimination against burakumin.

⁹ Nakagami, "Chôtori," 56.

¹⁰ Karatani Kôjin discusses the importance of this editorial structure of *Kumanoshû*. He claims that with this dual viewpoint, Nakagami starts to historicize the issue of the *roji* as something digressive both from the I-novel's localism/particularism and the monogatari's universalism. See *Sakaguchi Ango to Nakagami Kenji* (坂口安吾と中上健次).

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