“And There, Before Me, Japan: Mizumura Minae and the Orthodox Novel”

Ann Sherif

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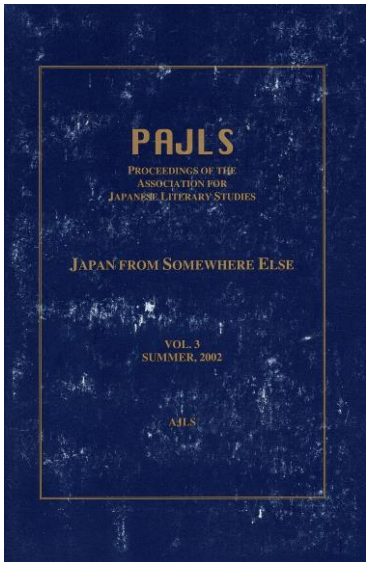

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AND THERE, BEFORE ME, JAPAN: MIZUMURA MINAE AND THE ORTHODOX NOVEL

Ann Sherif
Oberlin College

September 11 has powerfully impressed on us the vital place of genre and symbol in our culture life and social imagination. The terrorists perversely succeeded in playing on the viewers' knowledge of the genre of disaster story/movie in order to instill fear and confusion in us all. It was just like a movie, but it was not a movie. With that in mind, I shall now turn to the topic of my paper: the questions of genre and audience expectations, but on a modest and ordinary scale. Normally conventions of genre and art have been used as a tool to orient readers and consumers on the uses of the work of art.

Frederic Jameson has written about genre: "What literary criticism seems unable to do without completely [that is, rigorous descriptions of genre] . . . literary production has in modern times ceaselessly and systematically undermined…. The emancipation of the 'realistic novel' from its generic restrictions . . . modernism . . . postmodern aesthetic of the text . . . all seem rigorously to exclude traditional notions of the literary kinds, or of systems of the fine arts, as much by their practice as by their theory . . . Nor is it difficult to see why this has been so. Genres are essentially literary *institutions*, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact."[1]

Let us consider this interaction between literary criticism and literary production, especially in relation to genre. Modern Japanese literary history suggests that the negotiation between these two types of writing (critical and literary) has been an ongoing concern. One writer recently commented about her dilemma when faced with this intimate connection between readers' expectations about genre and a writer's creative activity:

> At present, a variety of prose genres coexist, and all assert themselves as equally legitimate. In that sense, there is no template that defines a single "orthodox novel" (honkaku shōsetsu). I myself was aiming at producing a novel that could trace its heritage specifically to nineteenth-century Western fiction. In

[1] Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 286.

> short, my work was not an exercise aimed at realizing some abstract generic conventions that dictate what a "honkaku shōsetsu" should be. In my novel, for instance, there would be no omniscient narrator as supposedly is dictated by the generic conventions of the "honkaku shōsetsu," nor any transcendent theme. Plus, my writing differed from the idea of the "honkaku shōsetsu" in a fundamental way. Whatever else can be said about "honkaku shōsetsu," fictionality is one of its defining characteristics. In contrast, the novel I am undertaking is based on "a story that actually happened" . . . . So the reason I continuously felt as if what was most important about the story was slipping away from me, sliding right out from between my fingers, was not unrelated to my effort to . . . write about something unrelated to my own life—in other words, to make something different from a "shishōsetsu" (personal novel).[2]

This passage, written by Mizumura Minae, comes not from a memoir, not from a piece of literary criticism, but from her serialized novel title *Honkaku shōsetsu* (Orthodox Novel, January 2001—January 2002). Mizumura creates interest in her novel in a variety of ways. Author of several novels and a student of comparative literature, Mizumura playfully and skillfully employs a variety of narrative strategies familiar from a range of genres. She structures *Honkaku shōsetsu* by telling two separate, yet related, stories. The first, narrated in the first person, concerns the life and creative challenges of a writer, a woman named Minae. She is also perhaps too aware the possible pitfalls and rewards of generic conventions (whether in the form of adherence to, resistance, or parody of). Minae's story is framed partly as a conflict between culturally specific narrative genres (*shishōsetsu* vs. orthodox novel) and partly as the coming-of-age story of a novelist who gains in self-understanding through her work. Her maturity is spurred not only by literature however. The novelist also changes in reaction to learning about a certain man's life, a life so compelling that she can define it only in reference to what is most familiar to her: literary genre. This particular life story, the narrator tells the reader repeatedly, is "just like a novel."

The second story is the one told *to* the narrator of the initial installment, Minae—in other words, the story that forms the core of the novel that Minae is writing: the tale of the life of a real man, one Azuma Tarō, the man whose life is "just like a novel." In this paper, I will discuss how Mizumura Minae,

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[2] *Honkaku Shōsetsu*, serialized in *Gekkan Shinchō*, January, 2001, p. 234.

in her most recent novel, explores the ways that narrative genre (a public category), intersects with private, individual concepts of personal and cultural identity, as well as artistic practice. Mizumura's occasionally serious and provocative approach to the relationship between "literary production" and literary criticism also has an intimate connection to the writer who works between different cultures, against culture: in this case, Japan and the U.S. in the postwar era. Thus, *Honkaku Shōsetsu* is not a self-referential literary exercise in the manipulation of literary conventions and narrative strategies, but a complex consideration of what it means to "hold two different histories inside you at once—how do you put them together?" (to paraphrase a question posed by writer Hanif Kureishi).

To readers of Mizumura's earlier novel *Shishōsetsu from left to right* (serialized, 1992-1994; 1995), the author's interest in genre and life between/among Japanese and American culture comes as no surprise. That novel's title refers to the Japanese heavily autobiographical personal novel genre called the *shishōsetsu* ("I novel"). The text of Mizumura's earlier novel is itself "bilingual"—a liberal mixture of Japanese and English. The reader, furthermore, starts the book and each page from the left, rather from the right (the normal orientation of a Japanese book published in Japan). In keeping with the convention of the *shishōsetsu*, *Shishōsetsu from left to right* is liberally sprinkled with "characters/people" and events that have obvious basis in Mizumura's life, including a figure/hero named Minae, and her sister named Nanae, who grew up partly in Japan, partly on Long Island, who go to college in the U.S., and who long to return to Japan. By calling the text a *shishōsetsu*, the author invites the reader to follow the conventions of that genre—that is, to identify the author with the narrator and to privilege the seemingly sincere recounting of that life over fictionality.[3] Thus we encounter a very literal invocation of Jameson's notion of genre as a means of signifying the "uses" of a cultural product. Or by highlighting

[3] Especially useful is Tomi Suzuki's succinct definition of the shishōsetsu as "a mode of reading that assumes that the I-novel is a single-voiced, 'direct' expression of the author's 'self' and that its written language is 'transparent'" and furthermore not a genre, but a "literary and ideological paradigm by which a vast majority of literary works were judged and described." Suzuki, *Narrating the Self* (Stanford University Press, 1996, p. 6). Fowler, notes the conventions of shishōsetsu of the extraordinary "narrator—hero—reader identification" and the reduction of the "narrating situation to its situation of writing." The starting point in the genre, furthermore, is not the "construction of a hypothetical situation but the observation of an actual one." The shishōsetsu, furthermore, "needs no overall plot signifier to enable its discourse." It also "rejects the transcendent grammar of fabrication," and embraces the "myth of sincerity." Fowler, Edward. *The Rhetoric of Confession* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), xi ,9, 16, 20, 294-295.

genre in her title, Mizumura may provoke the reader to consider her work a parody of that genre.

The title of Mizumura's *Honkaku Shōsetsu* (meaning "orthodox/ real/serious novel") similarly foregrounds genre. The text itself, however, bears a much more complex and intriguing relationship to the concept of genre, artistic production, and life in Japan/U.S. than does Mizumura's earlier work. Despite the title, which places the text in contrast to the conventions of the *shishōsetsu*, this literary text contains many characters and events that the reader can easily identify as autobiographically inspired—or even as coming straight from the author's life and the "real world": (again!) a main character is a novelist named Minae, who lives in Japan but sometimes comes to the States to teach at Stanford and University of Michigan, who grew up in Japan and Long Island, has a sister named Nanae, and other "real world" characters, events, and places too numerous to list here. Although set in the age of Japan's highest high-speed economic growth, the text considers extensively the often forgotten poverty and insecurity of the early postwar and the inherent asymmetricality of Japan's relation with the U.S.. Specifically, Mizumura illuminates the intersection of the personal with the broad sweep of history. Rather than the straightforward first-person narrative of *Shishōsetsu from Left to Right*, the work at hand has a complex approach to narrative voice, to time, to the stories told and the manner and order in which they are told.

The first installment of *Honkaku Shōsetsu* (January, 2001) exhibits structural complexity: it starts with a preface, in which the storyteller urgently explains her wish to receive an outward sign that she was meant to be a novelist:

> Anyone can be a novelist . . . but I had a specific desire. I wanted a voice from heaven to whisper in my ears, to announce that I had been born onto this earth to be a novelist. This is the will of heaven, the providence of heaven. That was what I desired.
>
> And so it came to be that a miracle happened to me one year ago. I was living in northern California at the time--in Palo Alto to be exact--and was in the midst of writing my third novel. More accurately, I was trying to be in the midst of writing my novel, while in fact I was puttering at writing, without conviction [writing a novel calle*d A Japanese Novel Written Horizontally*]. And then, an astonishing story, a story that was just like a novel, was unexpectedly sent to me from heaven. The story came to me, and only to me.

> The story concerned a man I knew—or rather that my family knew—when we lived in New York, long, long ago (*mukashi, mukashi*). He was no ordinary man, but a man whose life has practically attained the status of legend among Japanese living in New York. He had come to the U.S. without a penny to his name, and then became fabulously rich and successful, an embodiment of the American Dream. The part most people did not know was that, in Japan, this man had lead an entirely different kind of life. His life there was just like a novel, one that clearly bore the mark of the impoverished years of the early postwar. Ordinarily, his story might have disappeared without a trace. Instead, a certain young man happened to hear the tale in Japan, and then hand carried it, like a precious gift, across the Pacific Ocean. He brought it all the way to Palo Alto. And he delivered it to *me*.[4]

This beginning—which suggests the whole of the novel in digest form—is followed by a section somewhat whimsically titled "A Long, Long Story Before the Real Novel Starts*"* (*"Honkaku shōsetsu no hajimaru mae no nagai nagai hanashi*") in which Minae recounts in the first person her childhood in Long Island after her family moved there from Japan—and specifically her acquaintance with a Japanese man named Azuma Tarō, who starts out poor and rises to spectacular fame and fortune. A third section bears the title "In New York Again." Here, Minae tells about her trip to New York as a young adult, where she learns of Azuma Tarō's mysterious disappearance. Last, the final section of installment #1 is called "This Time, in California," in which Minae explains how she came to possess of the story of Azuma Tarō's life before he came to the U.S. and her discovery of the reason for his sudden disappearance. When Katō, the young man who brings the story, presents himself at Minae's office, the narrator describes the appearance in these terms: "And there, before me, Japan." Subsequent installments of *Honkaku Shōsetsu* separate from Minae's perspective, and instead narrate the story of Azuma Tarō's life in Japan and his encounter with the young man who took Azuma's story to Minae in Palo Alto.

Part of the fascination of this novel lies in Mizumura's playing with the conventions and even the cliches of the "orthodox novel" in order to tell her stories. Katō, the young man who suddenly visits Minae in Palo Alto, arrives on her doorstep on a blustery rainy day, and his story and reason for coming unfold slowly, deliberately, suspensefully one dark and stormy

night. The narrator invokes the supernatural and spiritual realms when Minae rejects the classification of novelist as an *occupation* and longs instead for a heavenly signal that her novel writing is a state of grace. People mysteriously and suddenly appear and disappear—in particular, the larger-than life Azuma Tarō. She describes his early life in Japan, furthermore, as mythical, archetypal, "just like a novel."

In a move that forces the reader to grapple with the boundary between fictionality and non-fiction, Minae insists to the naratee that Azuma Tarō is a real person whose fame is such in the N.Y. Japanese community that she did not even bother to change his name: "I could not bring myself to use another name when writing about him because all my memories linked to him are connected to that name, starting from the night I first heard my father say his name" (235). Real name or not, this particular one—Azuma Tarō (Tarō of the East)—has great symbolic potential, as symbolic names often do in "real novels."

At the point when Minae confesses to the reader that Azuma Tarō's life story bewitched her because it was "just like a novel," she also provides an important qualification: that his story draws her in because it is a great love story, just like a favorite novel she read as a child. After moving to Long Island as a girl, Minae had immersed herself mostly in Japanese novels as a means of escaping her discomfort with her American surroundings and the English language. But the novel that Azuma Tarō's story reminds her of "was not a Japanese novel, but of a novel . . . set on the wild moors of Yorkshire, by a British woman writer named EB." But, she confesses, "the more I wrote, the further my novel departed from the original that was in my head. But I could see nothing wrong with that. Even though I started from a desire to emulate a particular novel, art arises out of transformation, from shifts in time, in space, in language, in people. Of course a novel set in the last half of the twentieth century, in Japan, built densely with small houses, would turn out differently from one set in late eighteenth- and early ninteenth-century Yorkshire, with its desolate, severe moors, grown dense with heath."[5] The reader familiar with *Wuthering Heights* will, at this point, also begin to see the parallels in structure and complex narrative perspective between Mizumura's and Bronte's novels.

Minae can play with genre, with rhetoric, with cliché, to entertain herself and us. But, as the meditation on art above reveals, the novel also wants us to think about what it means to "hold two histories." In the course

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[4] *Honkaku Shōsetsu*, pp. 151-152.

[5] *Honkaku Shōsetsu,* p. 233.

of narrating, she comes to understand that the "I" of the "I novel" can never have a truly original or private journey: "When I was a child, my parents brought me to the States. For years, I considered our move from Japan to New York only as my individual fate, unrelated to the broader sweep of history. Of course, the reality was quite the contrary. My family's journey had everything to do with history—we rode to New York on the wheels of history, on the huge wave that was Japan's high economic growth…" (190)

In addition, encounter with a forgotten genre, an archetype helps Minae to do what she has not been able to do in the memoiristic *shishōsetsu* form: that is, to engage with her own childhood, and specifically the days of the early decades of the postwar, just as Japan's economic prosperity was starting to take off:

> …I felt as though Katō's visit had illuminated my soul, like a blessing from heaven, and that the voice of heaven had echoed in my ears, proclaiming that I had been placed on this earth to be a novelist. I knew that a miracle has happened.
>
> The "story just like a novel" that I was given that night offered the promise, at last, of bestowing form on time-- specifically on the *time* long locked inside my Pandora's box. The Japan where Azuma Tarō had grown up was the Japan of my childhood—a place that I could now identify as coinciding with the distant Japan to which I had returned in my heart, time and time again, after my family brought me to the States. I imagined Azuma Tarō's childhood: it too had the sound of the tofu seller's horn as he rode past, ripping through the chilled morning air. It too had a grandmother in her apron, crouched outside the kitchen as she fanned life into the coals of the clay cooking stove; and the white smoke rising from the cooking stove into the twilight sky. And we were playing out front, oblivious to the late hour, when suddenly a yellow street light above head switches on. As the sky gathered darkness, an old wooden telephone pole cast a long, lonesome shadow on the black asphalt street. In the distance beyond the fields stood two identical pale green round gas storage tanks, symbols of Japan's modernity. The Azuma Tarō I had known in New York suddenly faded away, and I became a little girl, my hair in a china bowl cut. I stood gazing at him as he ran by, his neck grimy with dust. At last, I would be able to do something with the

time that I had been trying to unravel in m*y Shishōsetsu Written Horizontally*.[6]

In conclusion, Mizumura's novel tells several wonderful and entertaining stories, but it is also a fascinating meditation on imagined points of intersection between the public and private, the broadly historical and the individual, Japan and the U.S., and modes of writing and reading from different cultures.

[6] *Honkaku Shōsetsu*, p. 231.