

JAPANESE AUTOBIOGRAPHY – 19th Century

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Overview: Japanese Culture in the Nineteenth Century

Japan in the nineteenth century underwent an all-but unprecedented social, political, and cultural transformation. The centuries-old Tokugawa shogunal regime, predicated upon the privileged status of the samurai class and a policy of national seclusion, went into decline in the early nineteenth century. The shogunal leaders were unable to reform their outmoded regime, and they were equally incapable of fending off the incursion of Western powers— most notably, Commodore Perry and the American 'Black Ships' (*kurofune*). But they did succeed in promoting a strong sense of native identity and a credo of Japanese uniqueness based upon the Shinto faith and the Emperor as a living god— a *kami*.

Fifteen years following Perry's arrival on Japanese shores, the Tokugawa shogunate fell, in what was a relatively bloodless transition to Japan as a modern nation. The advent of the Meiji era (1868-1912) set in motion a process of modernization that eventuated in the establishment of Japan as a powerful empire that succeeded in rivaling the Western imperial powers. The shogunal center of Edo was 'reinvented' as the modern nation's new capital— Tokyo.

Japan's modernizers, though, were largely erstwhile samurai who sought to preserve and promote traditional values and a strong national identity at the same time that they embarked on a comprehensive program of nation-building, industrial development, urbanization, and Western-inspired political, educational, social, and cultural institutions. Their rallying-cry of 'Civilization and Enlightenment' (*bunmeikaika*), which trumpeted the virtues of science, technology, and modernity, was tempered by a state-sponsored embrace of duty and dedication to the Emperor and to the imperial state— *Nippon teikoku*. This seemingly incongruous embrace of tradition and modernity, epitomized in the motto of 'Japanese spirit, Western know-how' (*wakonyōsai*), marks the new age.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Japan had in place a sophisticated rail system, a powerful military, and a productive industrial economy. It had established a representative parliamentary system, political parties, and a modern Constitution. A modern educational system provided a standard Western-style curriculum to the nation's youth, and modern print and entertainment media were available to all Japanese. Japan gradually absorbed the material and intangible culture and institutions of the West. But the identity question— the contest between individualism and personal autonomy and the fact of an authoritarian regime intent upon maintaining order and discipline— remained unresolved. The death of the Meiji Emperor in 1912 marked the end of a truly unique chapter in world history.

The Place of Autobiography in Nineteenth-Century Japan

Overall, Japanese literature in the late-Tokugawa period was marked by the intersection of stultifying traditionalism and formalism and the gradual assimilation of new forces and influences— most significantly, a concern for the individual and an interest in new modes of self-expression. The shogunal regime remained unchallenged, as did its official embrace of samurai virtue and privilege. But the urban merchant class, the so-called *chōnin*, favored a more progressive and secular orientation. With the advent of the Meiji era, these forerunners of modern urban society assumed a dominant role.

Meiji literary activity quickly came to center on Tokyo and its literary community, the so-called *bundan*. Although writers were politically marginal and avoided direct critique of the imperial regime, they explore a tacit resistance through their abiding concern for individualism and freedom of expression. Yet the *bundan* was a largely male bastion, and literary women were in the minority.

The literary journalism that served to mediate between writers and the print media— be it the periodical press or book publishers— was marked by a rising demand for personal narratives by noteworthy writers and public figures. These were identified by a confusing array of genre terms, but they were united insofar as writers were expected to hold forth on their upbringing, their literary background, and their

thoughts regarding current issues and the world at large. A crucial criterion was the crafting of a convincingly genuine personal voice.

Modern autobiography—the comprehensive, extensive narrative overview of one's life and times—was introduced into Japan as part of the wide-ranging translation project of key Western works. Foremost here, in terms of their impact on young Meiji writers and intellectuals, were Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782) and the *Autobiography* of Benjamin Franklin (1793). These were widely read and admired, and often cited as inspiration for writers grappling with the challenge of crafting personal narrative. The pioneering autobiography of the great Meiji educator and ideologue Fukuzawa Yukichi was liberally adapted from the Franklin work.

Nonetheless, the Western model of comprehensive, coherently-plotted autobiography did not take hold during the Meiji period. Instead, writers generally opted for shorter, more episodic narratives. Of note in this regard is the key role of the print media and their broad solicitation of personal narratives regarding the lives of noteworthy individuals— literary and otherwise. (See: Essays)

Of note, too, is the significance of autobiographical fiction. Here, the role of the late-Meiji Naturalist (*shizenshugi-ha*) coterie was crucial. Its writers were committed to crafting fictional protagonists whose accounts would be 'read' as faithful projections of the author himself. In short, the autobiographical burden of Japanese fiction was well established by the end of the Meiji period.

Late-Tokugawa autobiography: The escapades of Katsu Kokichi

The increasingly secular orientation of late-Tokugawa Japan witnessed a break from the strongly Confucianist cast of earlier autobiography, as epitomized by Arai Hakuseki's *Told Round a Brushwood Fire*. A prime example is a work entitled *Musui's Story* (*Musuidokugen*, 1843), the personal account of a low-ranking samurai named Katsu Kokichi (1802-50). (See Tokugawa genres: Autobiography). Katsu's account seems to have more in common with Jippensha Kku's picaresque novel, *Shank's Mare* (*Hizakurige*), serialized between 1802-22. Katsu casts himself as the proverbial 'bad boy'— the very antithesis of the samurai ideal of self-restraint and steadfastness. He appears to revel in accounts of his youthful dissipation and debauchery. Yet his autobiographical escapades are recounted from the retrospective position of one who has dutifully reformed himself and renounced his profligate ways. Katsu has learned his lesson, so to speak, and managed to reestablish his good name. But what makes *Musui's Story* so compelling— and entertaining— is the vivid and unabashed exposé of one's youthful transgressions. And so one is inclined to question the seriousness of his moral exhortations and admonitions. Is Katsu's narrator serious about his role as a penitent soul, or is there an ironic 'dig' at the pomposity and pretense of it all?

Meiji Autobiography

Given the aims of Meiji modernization, one might think that writers would happily eschew didacticism and instead favor the voice of individualism and unencumbered self-expression. But the Meiji regime essentially repurposed the Tokugawa moral code and promoted it as part of a state-sponsored national identity. This 'neo-*bushido*' ethos, famously expounded by Nitobe Inazô in his widely-read *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* (1899; written in English), would intersect with a Western-inspired embrace of individualism and social progressivism. The pioneering work of Meiji autobiography, written at the turn of the twentieth century, would position Japan's traditional— and emperor-centered— moral code against this new spirit of independence and rational inquiry.

The Autobiography of Fukuzawa Yukichi

Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901), whose image graces Japan's 10,000 yen banknote, was a towering figure of the so-called 'Meiji enlightenment' (*bunmeikaika*). His role was akin to that of Franklin vis a vis the birth of our own nation, and it was Franklin's autobiography that helped mold Fukuzawa's autobiographical persona in *Fukuôjiden* (1899). Like Mori Ôgai, Fukuzawa was raised in a traditional samurai household. Both were challenged to reinvent themselves in accordance with the Meiji agenda of modernization, and

both went on to make outstanding contributions to the nation's development, in their respective ways. Unlike Ôgai, however, Fukuzawa left a compelling autobiographical record of his rise in the world.

Focusing on his youthful rebelliousness, Fukuzawa's narrator relates key incidents in the emergence of his spirit of independence, social justice, and rational inquiry. One such incident centers on his older brother, a stern, self-righteous lad who would regularly admonish him for any infractions of propriety—for instance, defiling the image of a samurai leader or, worse yet, a Shinto deity (*kami*). Skeptical about such seemingly mindless superstition, the young Yukichi decided to put it to the test:

I stole one of the sacred Shinto charms—a piece of paper bearing the names of the *kami*—and I deliberately trampled on it when nobody was looking. Lo and behold—nothing happened! No divine punishment was visited upon me. And so I decided to go one step further. I took another sacred charm to the privy and tossed it in the filth. It did cross my mind that I might have gone too far with such a brazen deed. But again, nothing whatsoever happened! Aha, I thought. I'd indeed made a great discovery. But I had to keep it to myself.

Based on *The Autobiography of Yukichi Fukuzawa*, pp 16-17

The young man went on to devise ever more sophisticated challenges to the status quo, and in so doing he refined his intellectual acuity and independent, rational temper. By and by he turned his critical eye to the egregious inequalities of the feudal system itself, and the hegemony of samurai power and privilege. Indeed, Fukuzawa would famously emerge as an ardent exponent of egalitarianism in the early years of the Meiji.

Like other erstwhile samurai, though, Fukuzawa Yukichi did not entirely abandon the elitist qualities he had acquired through his samurai upbringing. One notes a *noblesse oblige* quality to his public career, despite (or perhaps in tandem with) his Meiji-era reinvention as a modern intellectual and a culture critic.

UchimuraKanzô, *How I Became a Christian*

In much the same vein as Fukuzawa, but fully a generation younger, UchimuraKanzô ranks as a leading Meiji intellectual and social activist who harbored a distrust of authoritarian institutions and advocated an independent and questioning spirit—and spiritual life. Like Fukuzawa, he too wrote an autobiography detailing the process of his intellectual and spiritual coming of age—as a Christian. Uchimura's career as a Japanese Christian burdened with making sense of this 'foreign faith' and promoting it among his countrymen is indeed unique, and it inspired a number of autobiographical works that trace the course of his spiritual journey. The best known of these works—*How I Became a Christian* (1895)—was written in English, and it presents a strikingly new autobiographical persona—at once recognizably 'Japanese,' yet untethered from the expected traits of character.

A native of Edo, Uchimura was educated in a mission school in Hokkaido, in the far north, where he was baptized in 1877. He tried his hand at various ventures before deciding to continue his education in the U.S., where he spent four years (1884-88). Uchimura's autobiography focuses on these years, and the disillusionment he felt as he confronted an American Christendom that fell far short of his expectations. Inspired in part by the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine (ca 400), arguably the first work of Western autobiography, Uchimura's account explores the challenges of acquiring faith and maintaining it in the face of temptation, societal opposition, and self-doubt. Its having been written in English can be said to have opened up avenues of narrative soul-searching not easily accessible in his native language.

Together with his other autobiographical writings of the 1890s, Uchimura succeeded in crafting a comprehensive and deeply moving spiritual autobiography. He would go on to become an ardent proponent of pacifism, in the face of Japan's impending war with Russia, and the founder of *Mukyôkai*—a 'non-church' Christian movement that sought to minimize the excessively regimented quality of the established churches and to underscore the individual's responsibility to construct and maintain a faith-based life.

What follows is a late-Meiji autobiographical subject who was cut from a very different cloth.

Ishikawa Takuboku, *Romaji Diary*

Primarily known as a pioneering Meiji poet, Ishikawa Takuboku kept a sporadic record of his thoughts and moods over a three-month period (April to June) in 1909, from his Tokyo apartment. He employed a Roman alphabet transcription of his remarks, for reasons not entirely clear, and proceeded to hide the manuscript away. It was discussed in the 1950s, entirely by accident, and published posthumously, under the title *Rômajinikki* (A Diary written in the Roman alphabet).

Takuboku's work is neither diary nor autobiography, strictly speaking. Rather, it is a disjointed series of tormented and twisted observations, thoughts, and fantasies, which points to the influence of the then-dominant Naturalist movement, which espoused an unvarnished, unfiltered self-exposure, which would maximally reveal one's quirks, anxieties, and obsessions. And it also is consistent with the *bundan* preference for episodic, fragmentary glimpses of character—in this case, a character straddling the border of sanity and madness.

I am unhappy. I am a weakling, a weakling with a marvelous sword inferior to none. . . I want to live like a farmer, ignorant of everything. I envy people who go crazy. I'm too healthy in body and mind. . . I can't obtain any satisfaction from people, and yet it's impossible for me to go off by myself. . .

I am worn out. I am seeking peace of mind. Where can anyone find this thing called peace of mind? I want to be sick. . . Sickness is the only way we have to obtain peace of mind. . .

Why am I loved? Why can't I hate anyone? To be loved is an insufferable insult. I am tired. I am a weakling. God, do me a favor and damage my body. I won't mind the pain. Or make me sick. Just make me sick.

Based on Keene, *Modern Japanese Literature*, pp 218, 220-21

Natsume Sôseki and *shôhin* reminiscence

Sickness— physical, for the most part, but psychological as well— would figure prominently in the life and personal writings of Japan's most esteemed novelist, Natsume Sôseki. Sôseki turned to autobiographical sketches and reflections in between the serial publication of his widely-read novels in the *Asahi* newspaper, from 1907 until his death in 1916. Referred to as *shôhin*— literary miniatures— these hundreds of personal narratives can collectively be regarded as Sôseki's autobiography.

The author, writing from the solitary confines of his study, touches on a range of themes and concerns— his upbringing in early-Meiji Tokyo, and how the city had changed virtually beyond recognition; his childhood friends and schoolmates; his parents— a mother recalled fondly but only imperfectly, and a rather indifferent and remote father. Sôseki remarks at length about his ill health— a chronic stomach disorder would prove fatal at age forty-nine. Often hospitalized, he was prone to reflect upon his own mortality and to lament his inability to comprehend the world in which he lives.

Natsume Sôseki candidly remarks upon himself as an imperfect family man. There is the fraught relationship with his wife Kyôko, and his ambivalence as a father to a large brood of children. He expresses his strong distaste for being hounded by journalists and others seeking some favor. He writes of the family pets and his sorry neglect of their needs.

A curmudgeon by nature, Sôseki fully acknowledges his shortcomings— and his occasional moments of tranquility and repose. One such moment comes at the conclusion of his final *shôhin* collection, *Inside My Glass Doors* (*Garasudo no uchi*, 1915):

I'd brought my desk out onto the veranda on this Sunday afternoon in spring, and leaned up against the railing. I just sat there, lost in thought. . . I reflected upon these little episodes I'd written and how pointless they seemed. . . But I managed to look down upon myself and enjoy

laughing at my own folly. Cosseted by my self-mockery, all the while I am little more than a child asleep in his cradle. . .

Looking out upon the great expanse of humanity, I can only smile. And as I cast the same gaze upon myself, the author of these trifling accounts, it's a thought someone else had written them all. And I can only smile. . .

The house is still and hushed, as is my spirit. And so I open wide the glass doors, and bathed in the quiet light of spring, I bring this work to a close. And when it's done, I will lie down here on the veranda.

Based on Marcus, *Reflections*, pp 153-54

Conclusion

The nineteenth century witnessed a dramatic shift in the way that writers conceived of themselves as individuals and members of society. Late-Tokugawa writers generally steered away from a focus on self and self-exposure, instead conforming to established codes and practices. Poetry remained the dominant genre, and prose writing tended toward droll tales, romances, and popular fare.

The interest in *jiga*— modern selfhood— and its narrative representation became a concern of Meiji writers drawn to Western models of individualism and literary subjectivity. Romanticism proved influential, as did political liberalism and the Christian concern for confession and soul searching.

As noted above, the classics of Western autobiography were read and appreciated, but there was a preference for personal narratives that were episodic and fragmentary. Also, autobiographical fiction emerged as a prominent vehicle of self-expression, especially of the confessional variety. It is perhaps ironic that the fictional works of the Naturalist coterie came to be regarded as authentically autobiographical.

Finally, one notes that the backdrop for this literary quest for individuality and self-expression is the Japanese imperial state, whose authoritarian agenda was entirely at odds with that of the *bundan* community.

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Discussion Questions and Topics

What do you regard as the proper criteria of 'autobiographical writing'? How to determine the border of 'essay' and 'autobiography'? Of the various genres noted above, which are easiest for you to relate to and appreciate?

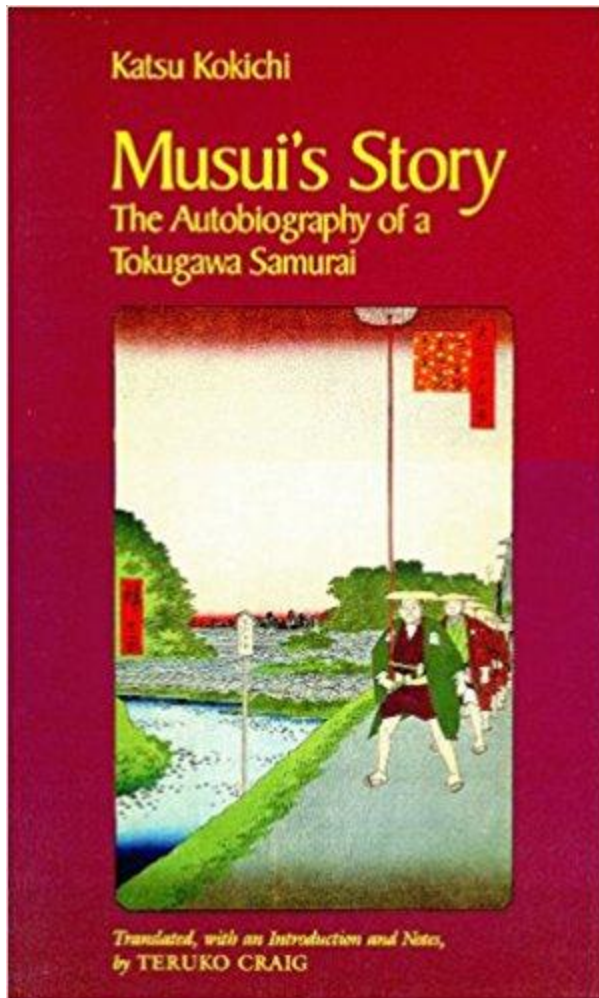
Ultimately, is it possible to judge the 'authenticity' of any form of personal narrative?

Compare Fukuzawa's autobiography with its 'source work,' the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin. How does Fukuzawa 'Japanify' the Franklin persona?

Compare Fukuzawa's work to Nitobe's *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* and Uchimura's *How I Became a Christian*. How might the fact of these latter two works having been written in English affect the 'self' being constructed?

How can fiction serve as an effective vehicle for autobiography? What examples come to mind?

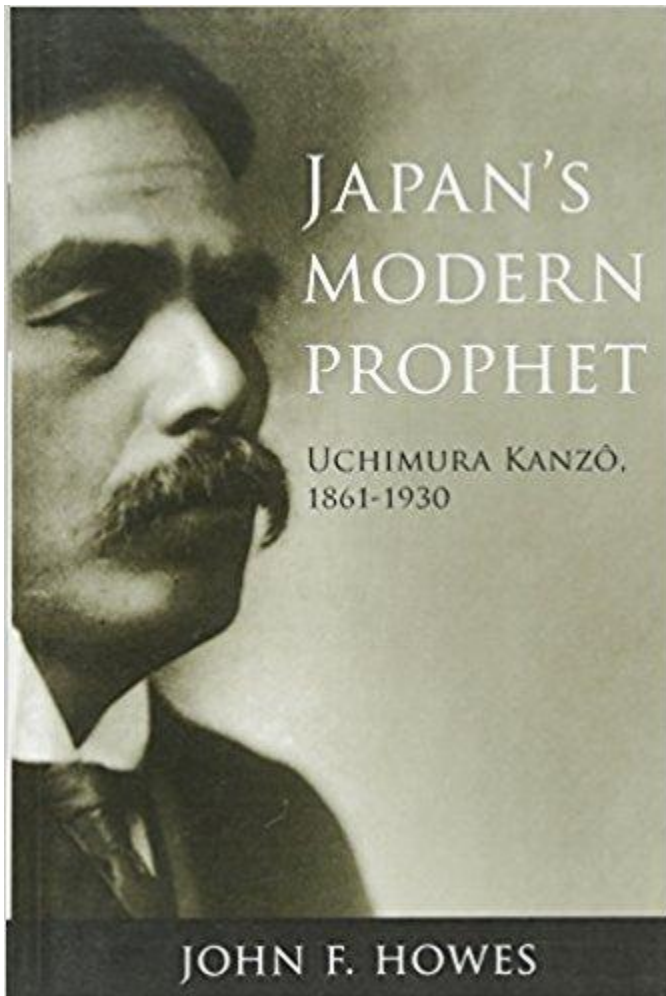
Images



English translation of KatsuKokichi's autobiography (Source: Amazon.com)



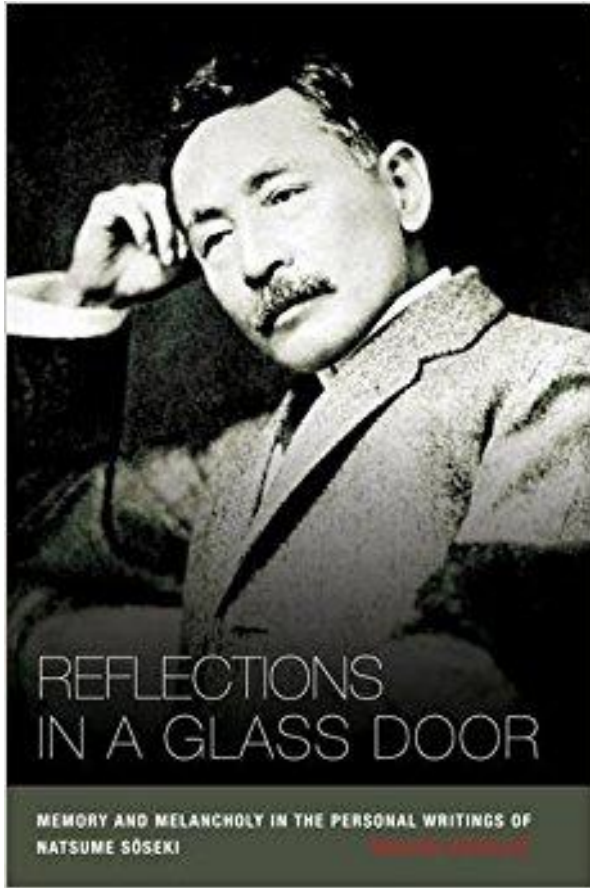
FukuzawaYukichi, as pictured on the Japanese 10,000 yen banknote
(Source: Wikimedia commons)



UchimuraKanzô, as pictured on the cover of John
Howes' biography. (Source: Amazon.com)



Ishikawa Takuboku's *Romaji Diary* and his 1912 *tanka* collection, In English translation (Source: Amazon.com)



Natsume Sôseki, as pictured on the cover of Marcus's study of the *shôhin* writings (Source: Amazon.com)