

JAPANESE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Marvin Marcus, Ph.D.

NIKKI (Diary)

Contents

Part I : Classical Age
Part II : Medieval Age
Part III : Early Modern Age
Part IV : 19th Century
Part V : 20th Century

Part I : CLASSICAL AGE

Overview: The Classical Age of Japanese Culture

Japan during the Heian period (ca 800-1200) has long been heralded as a Golden Age of classical civilization. Its wide range of literary, artistic, and artisanal products are indelibly associated with courtly style, elegance, aristocratic refinement, and exquisite aesthetic sensitivity. Overall, Heian arts and culture are suffused with what may be termed a feminine aura of emotional depth, nuance, and elegant understatement. This in part reflects the fact that a number of their treasured products are the work of aristocratic women who served in the imperial court.

Aside from literary pursuits, Heian courtiers indulged themselves in a variety of creative activities— music and dance, painting, calligraphy, textile design, and so forth. Much of this work reflects the influence of Chinese prototypes and models— part of the centuries-long process of absorbing the language, political institutions, and arts of China. A key inspiration emerged from the Chinese-based Buddhist sects that took root among the Japanese elites and became widely patronized. This led to the eventual mastery of Buddhist religious arts— sculpture, painting, ritual objects, sutra copying, and of course architecture.

In short, Heian culture, in its stunning variety, would become an enduring civilizational legacy, inspiring artists, writers, and craftsmen over the centuries. A fundamental aspect of Japanese national identity, to the present day, can be said to tap into Heian classical roots.

Heian Literature and the Role of *Nikki*

Heian literature both mirrored and celebrated the world of the court aristocracy. Courtly sensibility and bearing were highly valued, and these would be channeled chiefly through poetry and lyrical expression. Yet there was a broader interest in expressing one's personal voice, and producing narrative accounts of one's experiences, recollections, and musings became standard practice among the courtier class. Such accounts, though, would be subject to Heian codes of propriety and restraint, which placed certain constraints on what we might regard as 'freedom of self-expression.'

Diary literature (*nikkibungaku*) has long been a fixture of the Japanese canon. And as with other genres, the role of Chinese models and influences must be acknowledged.

Heian courtiers were avid diarists. In their role as court officials burdened with various administrative duties, the males were expected to keep a relatively factual record of daily events, written in the business-like *kanbun* genre of Chinese-style narrative. Court women, on the other hand, were free to express themselves in their 'native language' and with a more explicitly personal voice than was the case with their male counterparts. And they collectively succeeded in crafting a style that adhered to aristocratic conventions while achieving a high level of literary excellence.

Of the many examples of Heian diaries written with a clear literary purpose, three stand out— *The Tosa Diary* (Tosanikki, 930) by Ki no Tsurayuki; *The Gossamer Journal* (Kagerônikki, 974) by the mother of

Fujiwara no Michitsuna, and the *Diary of Lady Murasaki* (MurasakiShikibunikki, 1010).

The Tosa Diary

This is the work of one of the great Heian court poets, Ki no Tsurayuki— the chief compiler of Japan's first Imperial waka anthology, the *Kokinshū* (905). Interestingly, Tsurayuki's account of the return voyage to Kyoto from his governorship in the province of Tosa adopts the fictive voice of a woman who was part of the ship's company. Incorporating some sixty poems attributed to many of the passengers, which provide a lively verse counterpoint to the daily record of the two-month voyage, the diarist pays particular attention to one of the passengers— the mother of a child who had died in the provinces.

12th month, 27th day: During the bustle of departure. . . one member of the party had looked on in silence, thinking of a little girl, born in the capital, who had died suddenly in the province. It ought to have been a cause of joy to be setting out toward the city, but the parent was lost in grief for the absent child. The others were deeply sympathetic. A certain person wrote a poem and brought it out:

At long last, I think,
We head toward the capital
And yet this sadness,
Because of one among us
Who will not be going home [Based on McCullough, CJP 75-76]

Tsurayuki's fictive diary thus plays on the joy and anticipation of return to the capital, juxtaposed against the grieving parent and the solicitude of her fellow travelers. Yet it incorporates very mundane concerns as well— for instance, the scene that greeted the diarist upon returning home: "When we reached the house and entered the gate, the disrepair that greeted us was terrible. . . The sheer desolation of the scene evoked exclamations of grief and despair."

Overall, though, Tsurayuki's *Tosa Diary* is noteworthy for its many poems, which run the gamut from the halting work of children who were aboard the ship to highly polished verse, together with critical commentary. The density of poetic content and criticism suggests that Tsurayuki's underlying aim was to have his 'diary' serve as a handbook of poetic style and technique.

Moreover, the *Tosa Diary* is recognized as the pioneering work of an important subgenre of personal narrative— the travel diary (*kikōnikki*). Japanese poets often took to the road, and their travels would inevitably inspire poetic production along the way. In fact, it could be argued that the very purpose of travel, in some cases, was to inspire fresh new avenues of poetic production. Be that as it may, the poetically-dense travel diary has long been a fixture of the Japanese literary canon.

The Gossamer Journal

One of the most remarkable works of Heian prose is the *Gossamer Journal* (Kagerōnikki, 974), an account of a woman's loveless marriage to a high-ranking courtier, Fujiwara Kaneie. The diarist/ wife is known to us only as the mother of Michitsuna, in keeping with the practice of referring to court women by reference to a male relative. Praised as a great beauty, she was regarded as a poet of the first magnitude. Her 'journal,' which bears a closer resemblance to personal reminiscence, comprises episodes written over a span of twenty years (954-74). These episodes are interspersed with lively and often acerbic poetic jousting between the peevish wife and her philandering husband. Overall, the journal affords a moving account of domestic tedium, jealousy, melancholia, and righteous indignation that is stunningly contemporary in its feel.

[956] So the days went by. Kaneie's visits did not cease entirely, but it was impossible for me to feel at ease with him, and our relations grew more and more strained. There was even a time when he turned around and left, declaring himself vanquished by my sulkiness. . . And now that his affections had strayed, he removed his belongings from my house. [CJP 113-14]

[966] Although this apparently secure marriage had lasted eleven or twelve years, I had lived in constant misery, tormented day and night by the inferiority of my position. . . With no one to order repairs and look after things, my house and its environs had become more and more dilapidated, and it upset me that Kaneie should come and go blithely in such a place, without seeming to care whether its condition bothered me or not. [CJP 142-43]

Despite the evidence of male prerogative and the relatively confined circumstance of courtier wives, the *Gossamer* diarist, together with the poet Komachi, belie the pernicious stereotype of eternally meek, compliant Japanese womanhood. Indeed, through her frank and at times scathing remarks, she exacts a certain literary revenge on her boorish, uncouth husband. Yet the diarist's melancholic and brooding voice dominates the work as a whole and is recapitulated in the final entry for the year 968:

So time passes, but the advent of a new year brings no joy to one who is sunk in grief, her life far from what she would have desired. When I reflect on the perpetual uncertainty in which I exist, it seems to me that this has been the journal of a woman whose fortunes are as evanescent as the gossamer shimmer of a heat wave in the sky. [CJP 155]

Something akin to the *Gossamer* diarist's anxieties and insecurities would mark the diary of MurasakiShikibu.

Diary of Lady Murasaki

What we know of the otherwise anonymous author of *The Tale of Genji* is largely based on her diary, which she composed around the year 1010. Her personal accounts of life in the Heian court, with a focus on the comings and goings of her great patron Fujiwara no Michinaga, are immediately reminiscent of the writings of SeiShônagon. In fact, these two court ladies were literary rivals with evidently scant regard for one another. Murasaki remarks as follows:

SeiShônagon is dreadfully conceited and thinks herself so clever. . . Those who think of themselves as being superior to everyone else will inevitably suffer and come to a bad end.

But the diarist then proceeds to become moody and dispirited:

And so it is that I criticize others [such as Shônagon], yet here is one who has survived thus far without having achieved anything of note. I have nothing to look forward to in the future that might afford the slightest consolation. . . Everything conspires to make me unhappy. [Based on Shirane, TJL 449, 452]

Murasaki's melancholia recalls that of the *Gossamer* diarist. Both of them are unusually candid in their glum self-assessment. Yet for the author of *The Tale of Genji* to lament her failure to achieve anything of note strikes one as ironic in the extreme.

As the above examples attest, Heian diaries provide a running commentary upon events and experiences, emotions and musings. They combine frank self-expression, reflective commentary, poetic counterpoint, and fictional license. Bordering the domains of fiction (*monogatari*) and essay (*zuihitsu*), and a congenial vehicle for poetic expression, the classical diary is anything but a self-contained genre but rather points to the integrated quality of creative expression among the Japanese court aristocracy. Notwithstanding Murasaki's lament, the achievement of women writers across the literary spectrum is among the chief legacies of Heian culture.

Readings

Keene, Donald, *Seeds in the Heart: Japanese Literature From Earliest Times to the Late Sixteenth Century* (Columbia, 1999)

Keene, Donald, *The Pleasures of Japanese Literature* (Columbia, 1988)

Marcus, Marvin, *Japanese Literature: From Murasaki to Murakami* (Association For Asian Studies, 2015) Note: Material from this work has been incorporated into the essay.

McCullough, Helen Craig (ed.), *Classical Japanese Prose: An Anthology* (Stanford, 1990) [Abbreviated CJP]

Morris, Ivan, *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan* (Knopf, 1964)

Shirane, Haruo (ed.), *Traditional Japanese Literature: An Anthology, Beginnings to 1600* (Columbia, 2007) [Abbreviated TJL]

Varley, H. Paul, *Japanese Culture*, 4th edition (Hawai'i, 2000)

Discussion Questions and Topics

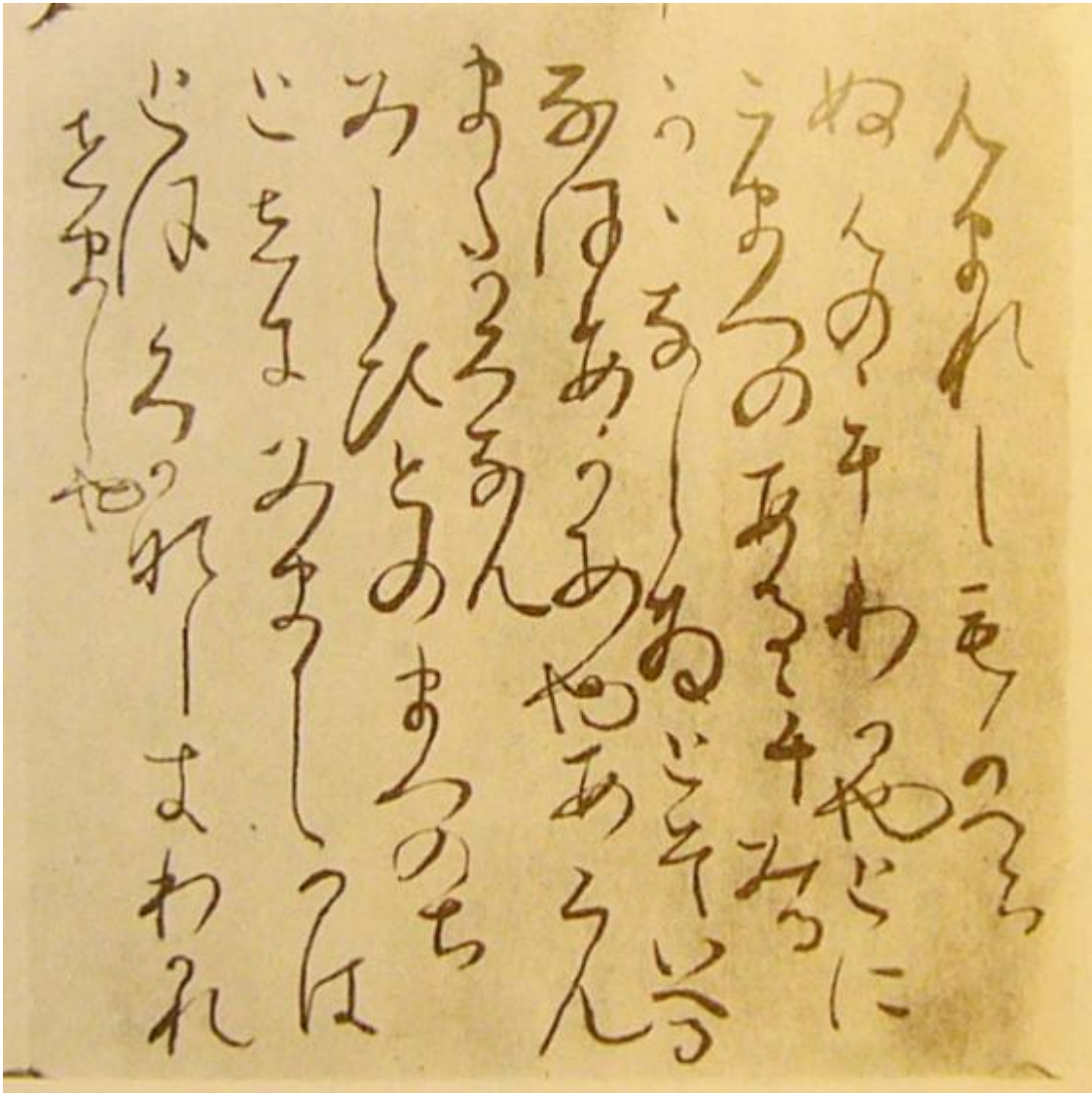
Compare the role of poetry and poetic expression in the three diary examples.

Does Tsurayuki's adoption of a female persona result in a convincing evocation of a woman's perspective, or is the persona transparently fictional? What might be gained from such a strategy?

Compare the perspective of a courtier wife living in her own household (*Gossamer* diarist) with that of a serving lady within the court (Murasaki).

What most appeals to you about these diaries? What strikes you as disappointing or difficult to grasp?

Images



Image

Detail from Fujiwara Teika's early 13th-century transcription of Tsurayuki's *Tosa Nikki*. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Part II : MEDIEVAL AGE

Overview: The Medieval Age of Japanese Culture (1200-1600)

The gradual decline of the Heian court in the twelfth century corresponded with the rise of the warrior (*bushi*) clans and the dawn of a centuries-long feudal history. Medieval Japan was governed by two parallel political centers— the imperial center in Kyoto and a new warrior administration, the shogunate. The period was marked by the growing power of provincial warrior chiefs (*daimyō*) and their domains (*han*), which numbered well over two hundred. The dominance of the samurai class inspired a warrior code— *bushidō*— that extolled the virtues of dedication, loyalty, and honor. Variants of this ideology would have important ramifications in Japan's subsequent history and culture.

The samurai elites emulated the cultural sophistication and artistic dedication of the Kyoto aristocracy. And their embrace of the meditative discipline inspired by Zen Buddhism would generate a distinctive artistry marked by austerity and solemnity, and a mood of evanescence and ephemerality (*mujō*). As with the Heian era, the cultural legacy of Japan's medieval period has long had a privileged place in the nation's collective memory and is well represented in its trove of literary and artistic treasures.

Medieval Literature and the Role of *Nikki*

The Heian literary legacy was much in evidence during the medieval period. Poetry and lyrical expression remained prominent, but the preëminence of courtly styles and conventions gave way to more austere and introspective modes of expression, reflecting the new social and political order. The dominance of the samurai class gave rise to the production of warrior tales and legends, with the epic *Tale of the Heike* (early 13th century) ultimately rivaling the *Tale of Genji* as a national classic.

While *waka*-centered court poetry remained the dominant literary mode, new forms— in particular, linked verse— reflected the temper of the times. A strongly Buddhist taste for meditative reflection and solemnity developed, and it would be brilliantly evoked in the uniquely lyrical and other-worldly Noh drama. Hence, Heian and medieval literature— spanning eight centuries of Japan's cultural history— constitute a unique 'yin-yang' complementarity that reflects the complex interplay of Japan's courtly and samurai-based elites.

As for medieval diary literature: In line with the classical Heian diaries, the major texts are the work of women in the imperial aristocracy. Reflecting the ambiguous borders of personal narrative genre categories, this work combines elements of diary and memoir, with the all-but-obligatory poetic content and lyrical sentiment.

Three works are particularly noteworthy. Two are by aristocratic women, Lady Nijō and the Nun Abutsu, who relate very different life experiences. The third is a poetically-dense travel diary by an anonymous male courtier.

The Confessions of Lady Nijō

Spanning forty-five years in the life of a woman of high rank, *The Confessions of Lady Nijō* (Towazugatari, ca 1310) recounts the unlikely vicissitudes and intimate affairs that ensued from her having been orphaned as a girl and hence deprived of parental support. What amounts to an intimate autobiography ends with the lady renouncing the world and taking Buddhist vows.

Written retrospectively, these 'confessions' hardly qualify as a diary in the conventional sense, but the author's diary-like attention to the details of everyday life provides a convincingly authentic glimpse into her emotional makeup. The affinity here with the personal reflections of the mid-Heian *Gossamer* diarist is noteworthy.

In particular, Lady Nijō speaks openly of her initiation into the world of amorous relations:

His Majesty's behavior that night was callous. I think my thin robes must have ripped rather badly, but he did as he pleased with me. I hated being alive, hated even the dawn moon. . .

Yet her initial revulsion quickly gives way to a more willing acquiescence:

What tutelage might have been responsible for the sudden attraction I felt as I looked at His Majesty standing there in a red-lined green-banded hunting robe, a lavender inner robe, and a pair of bound-patterned baggy trousers? I marvel at the complexity of a woman's heart. [CJP 297]

Although one is unable to fully appreciate the precise appeal of the lavishly-described courtly fashions, it bears noting that Lady Nijō likens her romantic entanglements to the accounts of Prince Genji and his lovers, recalling MurasakiShikibu's now three hundred year-old classic of courtly romance. In the course of things, she speaks candidly of her willing participation in her romantic affairs, one of which resulted in a pregnancy and the subsequent death of her infant son. Grief-stricken, Lady Nijō reflects upon the unremitting travails of human existence and imagines abandoning the world of attachment and desire by becoming a nun. This in effect would be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Of the world beyond the confines of the court we learn next to nothing.

The Journal of the Sixteenth-Night Moon

A roughly contemporaneous work, *The Journal of the Sixteenth-Night Moon* (Izayoi Nikki, 1279-80) by the nun Abutsu (1220-83), bears a closer resemblance to Ki no Tsurayuki's *Tosa Diary* of the early Heian period. Both are travel diaries (*kikōnikki*) in which poetry is predominant. Abutsu, who had been raised in the imperial court, belonged to one of its chief poetic lineages and was herself a noted *waka* poet. In fact, her journal was written on the occasion of a trip to Kamakura for the express purpose of petitioning the shogunal authorities regarding the disposition of her estate. The precise legal details are beside the point of the journal, whose underlying purpose is utterly clear— to exalt the 'Way of Poetry' in the face of its evident decline and to defend her own poetic faction against rival claims.

In short, the journey to Kamakura served as a 'poetic occasion' par excellence, yielding a trove of *waka* poetry and reverential praise for Japan as a divinely-inspired poetic realm:

It seemed to me that there might be those who regarded the art of poetry as lacking in seriousness, as mere frivolous amusement. But our wise men have told us that this art has helped to regulate society and to calm unrest in the Land of the Rising Sun from time immemorial. . . [Based on CJP 340]

Beginning her journal account by thus invoking the 8th-century *Kojiki* account of Japan's mythic origins, Abutsu goes on to defend the claims of the Mikohidari poetic lineage, to which she belongs. What ensues is a record of the journey itself, with each stop along the way occasioning the obligatory *waka* and a host of references to the classical poetic tradition— the *Kokinshū* anthology, the *Tales of Ise*, and medieval poets such as Saigyō and Teika. What is more, Abutsu happily notes the delivery of poetic parcels from the capital, which elicit a joyous response.

Abutsu's account contains no mention of the actual legal proceedings in Kamakura and its disposition. Rather, it concludes with a long, 150-line poem (*chōka*) that essentially presents her case in alternating five- and seven-syllable poetic lines. This remarkable poetic deposition reduces to the following four lines:

With no concern for myself
I trust the government. . .
If only it will reach a verdict
Without delay [CJP 374-375]

Although the evidence is unclear, Abutsu appears to have died in Kamakura while awaiting the shogunal verdict. Thankfully, her literary record survives.

A Journey to the East

A somewhat earlier account of a trip to Kamakura is the work of an anonymous courtier with obvious poetic credentials. *A Journey to the East* (Tôkankikô, ca 1242) predates Abutsu's work by almost forty years. But unlike her own explicit rationale for the trip, this anonymous diarist provides no reason for leaving the capital— other than his vague sense of anxiety and restlessness as he approaches his fiftieth year.

As though compelled to cite every possible poetic inspiration— both Japanese *and* Chinese— the diarist provides a dense poetic framework for his journey, making it clear that he is an accomplished court poet imbued with a lyrical spirit. But unlike Abutsu, whose reason for making the trip is made explicit, this gentleman leaves this to our imagination. Yet both diarists share the same destination and follow the same itinerary, which is rich with poetic and other literary associations.

Foreshadowing the celebrated travel diaries of Matsuo Bashô by well over four hundred years, *A Journey to the East* pays homage to the great poet Saigyô, who left a verse record of places visited by this more recent traveler. The diarist invokes the trope of 'the loneliness of travel,' a lyrical convention associated with one's departure from Kyoto. And he expresses the Buddhistic sentiment of *mujô*— the evanescence of all things.

Yet despite his 'political correctness' as a court poet, the diarist is rather more interested than Abutsu in observing and depicting actual scenes he encounters along the way. For instance, he notes that Mount Fuji's beauty is "even greater than in pictures." Curiously, perhaps, he is more moved by the spectacle of the adjacent marshlands, which appear to strike a responsive chord:

Sky and water merge, suffused with the reflected green of the mountains. Reed-cutters pole small boats here and there, and huge flocks of waterfowl utter raucous cries.

A view of the coast far to the south is described as follows:

The surface of the sea appeared as an immense expanse of clouded, hazy waves with no island to obstruct the view. . . . Wherever the eye ranges, the scene is lonely. Wavering columns of smoke rise from salt-burners' huts on the plain, and a shore wind moans in the pine trees. . . .
[CJP 440]

As travel diaries, *The Sixteenth Night Moon* and *Journey to the East* owe a debt to precursors such as Tsurayuki's early-Heian *Tosa Diary*. Yet one struggles to identify a sense of interiority, of palpable selfhood in these works. Rather, we must recognize the loftier purpose of poetic expression and dedication, compared to which the 'mere' portrayal of one's mundane personal concerns pales in comparison.

Readings

Brazell, Karen, *The Confessions of Lady Nijō* (Stanford, 1982)

Keene, Donald, *Seeds in the Heart: Japanese Literature From Earliest Times to the Late Sixteenth Century* (Columbia, 1999)

Keene, Donald, *The Pleasures of Japanese Literature* (Columbia, 1988)

Laffin, Christina, *Rewriting Medieval Japanese Women: Politics, Personality, and Literary Production in the Life of Nun Abutsu* (Hawaii, 2013)

Marcus, Marvin, *Japanese Literature: From Murasaki to Murakami* (Association For Asian Studies, 2015) Note: Material from this work has been incorporated into the essay.

McCullough, Helen Craig (ed.), *Classical Japanese Prose: An Anthology* (Stanford, 1990)

Shirane, Haruo (ed.), *Traditional Japanese Literature: An Anthology, Beginnings to 1600* (Columbia, 2007)

Varley, H. Paul, *Japanese Culture*, 4th edition (Hawai'i, 2000)

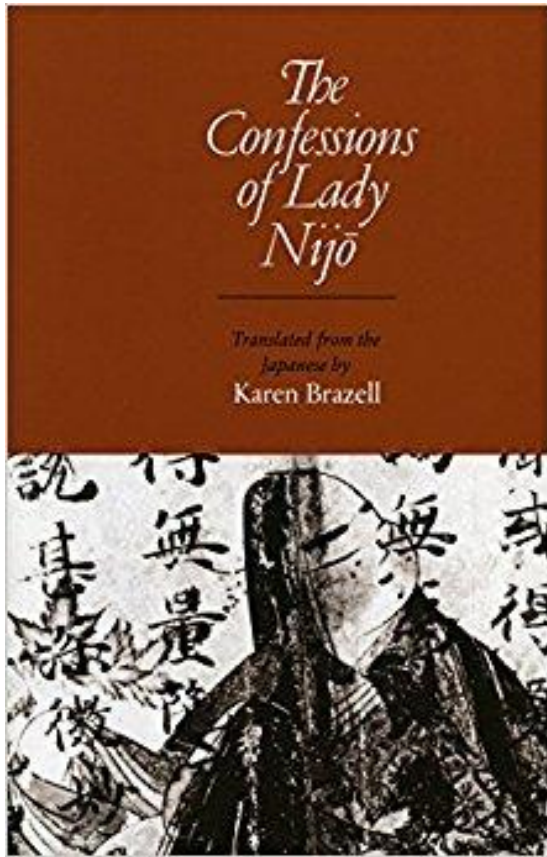
Discussion Questions and Topics

How do our medieval examples compare with the classical Heian diaries? What evidence is there of the samurai-based political and social order? What sort of society does this appear to be?

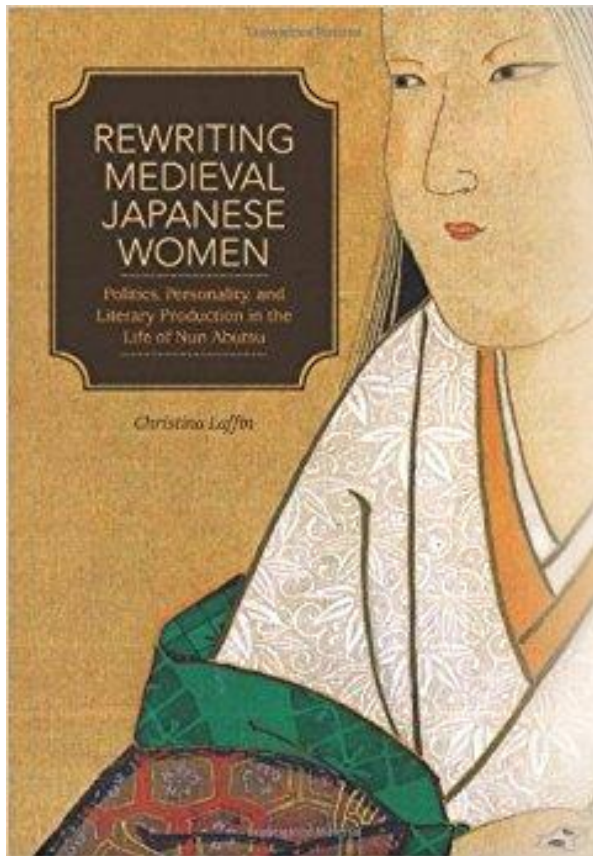
Is there anything distinctive about the day-to-day events recorded in the diaries? What of the poetry, which is so prominent in these works? Do they possess any real substance apart from the poetic content?

What do you regard as the most revealing glimpses of individuals and their private lives? What appears especially 'opaque' and esoteric?

Images



English translation by Karen Brazell of Lady Nijō's *Towazugatari*. Source: Amazon.com



Christina Laffin's study of the life and writings of Nun Abutsu. Source: University of Hawaii Press.

Part III : EARLY MODERN AGE

Overview: Japanese Culture in the Tokugawa Period (1600-1868)

Japan's medieval era was marked by complex feudal divisions and an increasingly weak central control, with neither Emperor nor Shogun capable of ruling the fractious nation. It was the sixteenth century that witnessed a gradual process of national reunification. A succession of three powerful warlords— Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu— managed to consolidate power and pave the way for the creation of a stable, productive, and culturally-vibrant nation— albeit one that was subject to strict authoritarian control. The sixteenth century also witnessed Japan's first encounter with the West, in the form of Christian missionaries and emissaries from Western nations in pursuit of colonial and commercial interests in addition to spreading the gospel.

The Tokugawa period can be traced to the victory of its clan chief Ieyasu over his rivals in 1600. This eventuated in his establishing a new Shogunal regime in the town of Edo— modern-day Tokyo. A brilliant political strategist, Ieyasu oversaw a comprehensive program of central authority, regulation, and social order. The samurai class sat atop a fixed, Confucian-style hierarchy, and a policy of 'national seclusion' (*sakoku*) led to the expulsion of Westerners and a cordoning-off of the country that lasted for centuries. An important exception was the Dutch trading mission in far-off Nagasaki— Japan's sole window onto the West until the late-nineteenth century.

Despite the repressive samurai rule and the nation's centuries-long isolation, Tokugawa Japan witnessed a burgeoning domestic economy centered in the rapidly-growing cities— most notably, Edo and Osaka— and the rise of a new class of merchants and townsmen, the so-called *chônin*. The material and secular interests of these affluent city dwellers led to the emergence of a remarkable culture of entertainment, whose locus was the urban pleasure quarters, with its geisha houses, theaters, and assorted fleshly delights. The centerpiece was the Yoshiwara in Edo, an entertainment mecca accessible to anyone with money to burn. It became the setting for all manner of literary and pictorial representation and stood in sharp contrast to the samurai elites and their code of self-restraint and austerity.

Tokugawa Culture and the Place of Autobiography

Autobiographical writings were an important component of the Heian literary world. One thinks here of canonical works by women of the Kyoto court such as the Mother of Michitsuna, Murasaki Shikibu, and Izumi Shikibu. With the medieval period, though, prevailing Buddhist values and tastes effectively silenced the strong, 'egocentric' personal voice. Autobiography— which is to say, the coherent, retrospective recounting of one's life in narrative form— had to await a new and more receptive social and cultural milieu.

As Japan's gateway to the modern world, the Tokugawa period was marked by a tension between authoritarian rule imposed by the samurai elite and a nascent concern for the individual and for the expression of one's selfhood— in terms of tangible achievements and contributions to literature and the arts. Put differently, the group mode that has typically been regarded as a defining quality of the 'Japanese national character' must somehow be reconciled with the voice of the individual seeking one's place in the world. In the West, this struggle is perhaps best represented by the romantic movement— Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his espousal of liberation from societal bonds and empowering individual expression— and by the political liberalism of John Stuart Mill. In Japan the picture has been rather more complex, in view of the persistence of authoritarian rule, hierarchical social order, and the ego-denial orientation of Confucianism and Buddhism.

Notwithstanding its extensive regulations and controls, the Tokugawa period witnessed an openness to the relatively unfettered literary expression of self. A number of writers— literary folk, political figures, and others— experimented with autobiography, which is to say the sustained, coherent narrative retrospection of the writer's life and circumstance. In earlier periods, personal narratives consisted chiefly of diary and essay writing; there was virtually no interest in autobiography *per se*. Tokugawa *bunjin*, too, indulged themselves in the full gamut of personal writing, not to mention poetry, and we need to recall that the various 'genres' subsumed under this broad heading are not discrete entities but rather overlap and interpenetrate. In short, the diarist, essayist, and autobiographer share a concern for plumbing one's inner self and giving it literary expression. At the same time, these texts reveal much of the authoritarian

political context and the strictures imposed by formal regulations and the widely-promulgated Confucianist social order.

Our survey of Tokugawa-period autobiography will focus on two notably contrasting works that span nearly a century and a half. Their respective approaches to self-expression and to comprehending one's place in the world will reveal as much about the Tokugawa social and cultural milieu as the individuals themselves.

Arai Hakuseki, *Told Round a Brushwood Fire*

The author of this oddly-named work (in the original, *Oritakushiba no ki*, 1717) is the noted Confucianist scholar, historian, and political reformer Arai Hakuseki (1657-1725). This work has been recognized as Japan's first 'genuine' autobiography— a coherent and comprehensive account of one's life and circumstances. The following excerpts are taken from the preface and the first of three 'books' that comprise the autobiography. In line with the author's deeply-held Confucian ethics, family figures— especially his father— figure prominently, as do details of his early schooling and devotion to study and achievement.

Now that I have the leisure to do so, I have set down past events just as they occurred to me. . . I have not hesitated to write in an informal style, nor of delicate matters. . . Insofar as I alone know the full story of my life, it would be inexcusable if I failed to set them down.

I hope that those who read this account, even unto the descendents of my sons and grandsons, will not swerve from the path of loyalty and filial piety. . . An old man of sixty, I took up my pen on the 17th day of November, 1716. (Based on pp 35-36)

Having thus established the Confucian subtext for his autobiographical project, Hakuseki goes on to provide telling details regarding his father:

My father's routine was always the same. It never varied. He rose at four in the morning, bathed in cold water, and dressed his own hair. When the nights were cold, my mother wanted him to use warm water, but he would not countenance putting the servants to this trouble. . .

Both of my parents were devout Buddhists. My father never neglected to make obeisance to Buddha each morning. On the anniversaries of his parents' death, he prepared rice and placed it on the altar, without troubling the servants. While it was still dark, he would sit up and await the dawn. As soon as it was light, he would go on duty. (Based on p 40)

Hakuseki makes a point of underscoring his father's scrupulously-observed daily routine, his unflinching sense of duty, and his abstemious, self-reliant nature. These emerge as exemplary traits of character that the son would emulate and in turn model for others. Hakuseki goes on to recount his educational background and the details of a political career that met with its fair share of reversals and disappointments. The autobiography is in a sense an apologia for the conduct of one's life. Here is how the author concludes his account of his formative years:

If, at the age of seventeen, when I first became interested in Confucianism, I'd had someone to instruct me, I should not have been as I am now. . . I'd always been **poor** and had to borrow books from others. Anything I needed copied out, I had to do with my own hand, with the result that I read very few books. . . I have made such progress as I have because I've always forced myself to endure that which was most difficult to endure, and because what ordinary people do once, I've done ten times. And what they do ten times, I've done a hundred. (Based on p 60)

Channeling the Confucian precepts that he so cherished, the eminent author adopts a notably humble and self-deprecatory voice as he underscores the virtues of unstinting effort and perseverance.

In sum, Arai Hakuseki's autobiography eschews intimate disclosure and self-exposure. Rather, the author presents a controlled, measured, and deeply principled account of a life oriented around duty, self-restraint, and dedicated service.

Musui's Story: The Autobiography of KatsuKokichi

Seemingly at the other end of the spectrum of autobiographical accounts by Tokugawa samurai is an 1843 work entitled *Musui's Story* (Musuidokugen) autobiography. Written by a low-ranking samurai named KatsuKokichi (1802-50), this work retells the hilarious and hair-raising exploits and misadventures of an individual who represents the very antithesis of the warrior code of honor, self-restraint, and diligence. Katsu deals unsparingly with his dissipation and vices as he regales the reader with his many escapades—brawling, thievery, and consorting with ne'er-do-wells of every stripe imaginable.

Katsu's account ends on a positive note, however, as the wayward youth eventually renounces his profligate ways and reestablishes his good name. In the epilogue to this unapologetic account of a 'failed samurai,' he holds forth on the value to be gained from the life of amoral reprobate:

Although I indulged in every manner of folly and nonsense in my lifetime, Heaven seems not to have punished me as yet. Here I am, forty-two, sound of health and without a scratch on my body. Some of my friends were beaten to death; other vanished without a trace or suffered some ill fate or another. . . Only recently have I come to my senses and begun to act more like a human being. When I think of my past, my hair stands on end.

He who would call himself a man would do well not to imitate my ways. . . In everything I was misguided, and I will never know how much anguish I caused my relatives, parents, wife, and children. . .

My past conduct truly fills me with horror. Let my children, their children, and their children's children read this record carefully and savor its meaning. So be it.

Written at Uguisudani, early winter, 1843. (*Musui's Story*, pp 156-57)

Strongly contrasting with the high-minded moral agenda of Hakuseki's autobiography, KatsuKokichi's work presents the comic—and more easily relatable—persona of the picaresque anti-hero. Here one may detect a foreshadowing of the more intimate disclosure associated with modern autobiographical writing. Yet both of authors, in their distinctly different ways, seek to validate and affirm themselves via narrative self-exposure. And in so doing they bear witness to the political, social, and moral contexts in which they lived and that marked this age of samurai power and privilege.

Conclusion

As with other literary genres, Tokugawa Period autobiography can be said to mark the intersection of countervailing forces and influences—traditional and orthodox practices and precepts versus an emergent sense of self and new modes of personal expression. Writers were able to channel this personal voice through sustained narrative; shorter, more episodic accounts; and poetry. Rather than fixed, mutually-exclusive categories, these are inevitably interrelated. It is up to the reader to assess the qualities of the 'self' thus expressed and the effectiveness of the narrative vehicle for its expression.

Readings

Ackroyd, Joyce. *Told Round a Brushwood Fire: The Autobiography of Arai Hakuseki* (Princeton, 1979)

KatsuKokichi (transl. Teruko Craig). *Musui's Story: The Autobiography of a Tokugawa Samurai* (University of Arizona Press, 1988)

McCullough, Helen (ed.). *Classical Japanese Prose: An Anthology* (Stanford, 1990)

Shirane, Haruo (ed.). *Early Modern Japanese Literature: An Anthology 1600-1900* (Columbia, 2002)

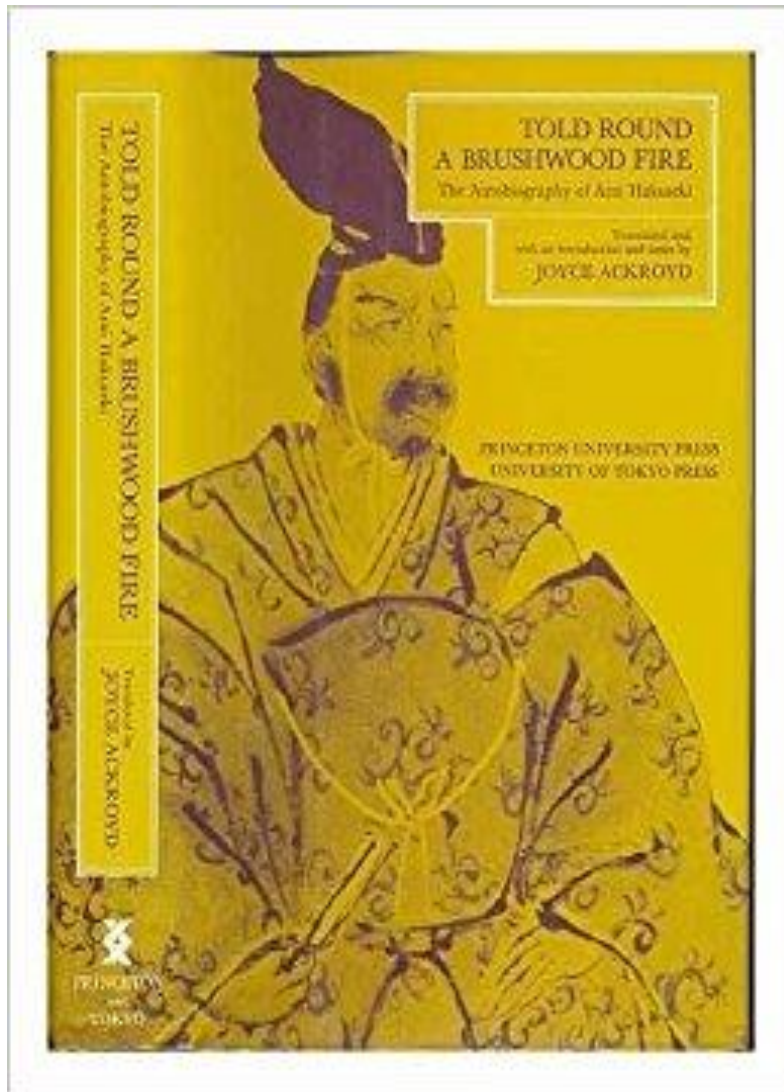
Discussion Questions and Topics

How to compare and contrast the personas that emerge in the Hakuseki and Kokichi autobiographies? What common ground can be found in these two seemingly antithetical works?

How to discern and understand the social and political contexts as presented in these two works? What aspects of Tokugawa 'life and times' are stressed here? What would you want to know more about?

Do the Hakuseki and Kokichi accounts call to mind autobiographies with which you're familiar? What connections can you make?

Images



Joyce Ackroyd translation of the Arai Hakuseki autobiography, with image of Hakuseki. (Amazon.com)

Katsu Kokichi

Musui's Story

The Autobiography of a
Tokugawa Samurai



Translated, with an Introduction and Notes,
by TERUKO CRAIG

Teruko Craig translation of the KatsuKokichi autobiography.
(Amazon.com)

Part IV : 19TH CENTURY

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 Inazō 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 *Fukuōjiden* (1899). Like Mori Ōgai, 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 Ōgai, 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.

Uchimura Kanzô, *How I Became a Christian*

In much the same vein as Fukuzawa, but fully a generation younger, Uchimura Kanzô 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.

Sources

- Fukuzawa Yukichi, *Autobiography* [Fukuôjiden, 1899; Eiichi Kiyooka, transl.] (Columbia, 1966)
- Howes, John, *Japan's Modern Prophet: UchimuraKanzô, 1861-1930* (University of British Columbia, 2006).
- KatsuKokichi, *Musui's Story: The Autobiography of a Tokugawa Samurai* [Teruko Craig, transl.] (Arizona, 1988)
- Keene, Donald, *Modern Japanese Diaries* (Holt, 1995)
- _____, *Modern Japanese Literature* (Grove, 1960)
- _____, *The First Modern Japanese: The Life of Ishikawa Takuboku* (Columbia, 2016)
- Marcus, Marvin, *Reflections in a Glass Door: Memory and Melancholy in the Personal Writings of NatsumeSôseki* (Hawaii, 2009)
- _____, 'The Impact of Western Autobiography on the Meiji Literary Scene,' in *Biography* 15:4 (Fall 1992), pp 371-89
- Rimer, J. Thomas and VanGessel (eds.), *Columbia Anthology of Modern Japanese Literature*, Vol1 (Columbia, 2005)

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?

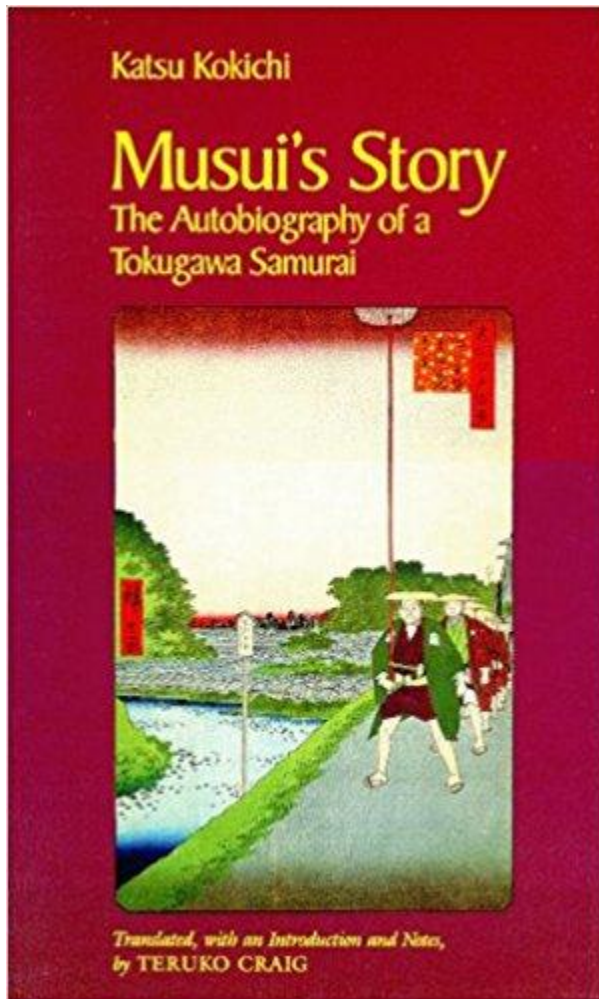
Ultimately, is it possible to judge the 'authenticity' of any form of personal narrative?

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?

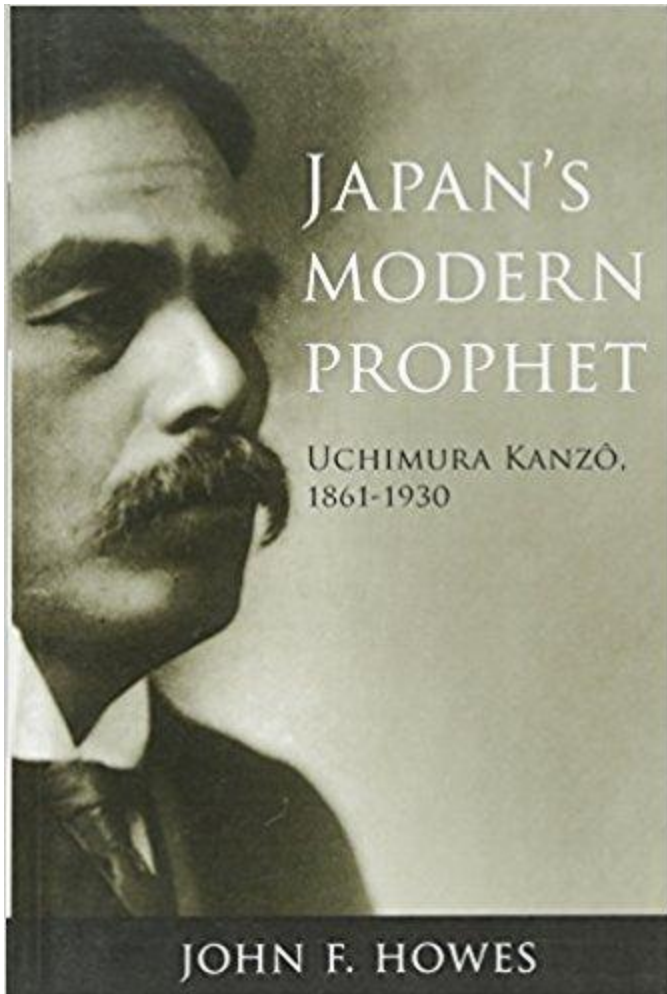
Images



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



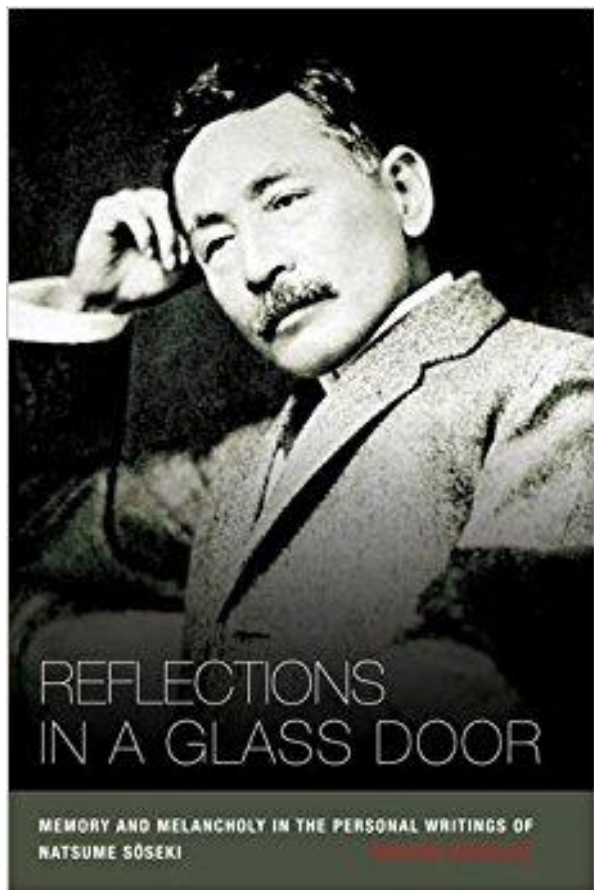
FukuzawaYukichi, as pictured on the Japanese 10,000 yen banknote
(Source: Wikimedia commons)



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)

Part V : 20TH CENTURY

Overview: Japanese Society and Culture in the Twentieth Century

Japan in the twentieth century experienced a degree of dramatic— and traumatic— change virtually unparalleled in world history. Ushering in the century as a newly-minted imperial power under the aegis of a 'divine' Emperor Meiji, Japan ending the century as an established post-imperial, post-industrial power. But the nation's modernization agenda, forged during the Meiji period (1868-1912) took a dramatic turn in mid-century, in the form of an imperial expansionism that ended in war and cataclysmic defeat. Yet this very defeat eventuated in an extraordinary postwar reconstruction and renaissance that was set in motion by the American victors, under the aegis of their Occupation regime (1945-52). In other words, twentieth-century Japanese history is conveniently reducible to a pre-war, imperialist component; a postwar, 'de-imperialized' component; and the intervening war, which began in China and ended with the nation's unconditional surrender in August 1945, in the wake of two atomic bombings. Prior to the militarist regime of the 1930s, however, Japanese society and culture were surprisingly open and vibrant. This was especially true during the Taishō period (1912-26), which was marked by unfettered creativity in the arts and a free and open society. 'Tokyo chic' was all the rage, as evidenced by the thriving popular media (including film and radio) and consumer marketplace. Notwithstanding the official rhetoric of imperial divinity and Japanese exceptionalism, Japan was a seemingly 'normal' nation, with a secure place in the global order.

The war put an end to all of this. And so it was that nearly a century following Japan's first encounter with the United States— and Commodore Perry's ultimatum to the Shogunal regime— Japan found itself subject to the Occupation authority of General Douglas MacArthur. Its cities had been destroyed, its economic and social infrastructure was in ruins, and its fate hung in the balance. In order to ensure the end of a virulent Japanese militarism, a new Constitution was put in place in 1947, which sought to establish an egalitarian and peaceful society— women were accorded equal rights, under a modern political and social order, and the nation renounced the use of military force. No longer a Shinto divinity, Emperor Hirohito was 'repurposed' as Japan's patriarchal figurehead and the imperial system was allowed to remain.

Japan's economic resurgence, as of the 1960s, is well known, as is its dominance on the world economic stage in the 1980s— the 'Japan as Number One' era. There was a corresponding resurgence on the cultural level, with an outpouring of literature, art, and film that has earned international recognition since the 1950s. And Japanese pop culture products have long been at the center of the global marketplace. Japan's exuberant national pride, though, has diminished in the interim, with a relatively stagnant economy as of the 1990s and looming problems that offer no easy solution— for instance, the demographic 'time-bomb' that forecasts steady population decline and raises the question of the nation's viability. Then there is Japan's role in East Asia— the fraught relationship with China, for instance, and the existential threat posed by a nuclear-armed North Korea.

What, then, of Japan in the twenty-first century? What of the perennial 'identity' question, and the schizophrenic identification of Japan as both perpetrator and victim of the Pacific War? Then there is the nuclear question— and the specter of Hiroshima and Nagasaki recently revisited in the wake of the 2001 Fukushima catastrophe. One thing is certain: We can look to Japan's writers, artists, and performers to grapple with these questions in their respective ways.

The Place of Autobiography in Twentieth-Century Japan

Western autobiography— ranging from the work of Saint Augustine to Benjamin Franklin, Rousseau, Thoreau, and others— was introduced to Japan late in the Meiji period. These works circulated within the *bundan* literary community, and considerable attention was paid to crafting personal narratives that expressed one's inner self and the quality of one's social relationships. Yet with few exceptions— the Fukuzawa Yukichi autobiography, most notably— there was little evident interest in the Western genre of comprehensive, exhaustive autobiography. Japanese writers favored shorter, more episodic accounts of one's life and times. Confessional narrative played a key role, largely owing to the Naturalist coterie (1906-10) and its credo of authentic personal expression. This in turn led to the so-called I-novel

(*shishōsetsu*) genre, whose claim to pure, unmediated expression free of artifice achieved currency in the Taishō period. The genre, which has generated much debate among literary scholars, remains a hallmark of modern Japanese literature, having essentially displacing 'standard' autobiography.

In short, the most productive vehicles for modern Japanese autobiographical literature have been in the form of episodic reminiscence and autobiographical fiction. The Japanese reader has come to understand that one's most authentic voice is channeled not through an actuarial recounting of the facts and data of one's life, but rather through subjective and suggestive narrative artistry. On the other hand, there has long been a demand for biographical accounts of prominent figures in the political, economic, and cultural spheres. In fact, a number of *bundan* authors who were reluctant to produce their own autobiography took on biographical projects at the behest of major publishing houses.

On the Stages of Twentieth-Century Japanese Autobiography

Pre-war accounts

Late-Meiji and Taishō writers favored accounts of one's childhood and youth, typically expressing nostalgic longing for a world on the cusp of being transformed by urban development, mechanization, and social dislocation. Noteworthy in this regard is Naka Kansuke's *The Silver Spoon* (Gin no saji, 1913). Naka, a protégé of Natsume Sōseki, produced a fascinating record of his upbringing, told in the voice of the experiencing child as opposed to the reminiscing adult. As the narrator relates in his introduction, these memories were triggered by a small silver spoon:

In the drawer of the bookcase in my study, which is full of all sorts of worthless objects, I've kept a tiny box since I was a child. Made of cork wood and adorned with a peony print on each corner, the box may have been an imported snuff box. Although not particularly attractive, the soft, smooth texture of its polished wood has made it one of my prized possessions.

The box is packed full with cowry shells, camellia seeds, and assorted objects that were the playthings of my infancy and childhood. Of these objects, the one most dear to me is a small, oddly-shaped silver spoon. From time to time I'd take the spoon out of the box, carefully wipe away the tarnish, and simply gaze at it, losing all sense of time. . .

Based on *The Silver Spoon*, pp 25-26

As for expansive, Western-style autobiography, it is interesting to note that this literary vehicle appealed to political radicals and leftists. For instance, figures such as Kawakami Hajime (1879-1946) and Ōsugi Sakae (1885-1923) produced major autobiographies that served to promote their political agenda. Ōsugi, incidentally, was influenced by the autobiography of the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin. Of note as well are the autobiographical accounts of radical Japanese women, some of whom were arrested—and executed—by the authorities. Mikiso Hane has compiled a landmark collection of their writings, which challenge the stereotype of compliant Japanese womanhood.

Postwar accounts of the war

The Pacific war, which resulted in the cataclysmic demise of Japan's empire, gave rise to a remarkable production of autobiographical accounts that looked back on one's experiences—both on the front lines and in the homeland—and critiqued the militarism and blind chauvinism that propelled the war effort. Such candor was of course impossible during wartime, on account of the repressive military regime. Autobiographical accounts of wartime experience were the work of both literary people and 'ordinary' citizens caught up in the conflict in different ways. Among the former, Ōoka Shōhei (1909-88) was sent to the Philippines in 1944, where he experienced the disintegration of the Japanese forces in the face of the American onslaught. Taken captive in January 1945, Ōoka subsequently wrote of his harrowing experiences in a celebrated war memoir. Consider the following episode, which recounts, with a certain philosophical detachment, one's failed suicide attempt in the face of a totally hopeless situation:

I do not intend to belabor the question of why I failed to kill myself. The psychology of a suicide is of minimal interest, and the psychology of the man who fails in his attempt is of less interest still. . . What actually determines the outcome is in most cases an entirely extraneous, accidental factor. My having survived owes itself to the fact that the hand grenade I carried, which would dispatch me to the hereafter, turned out to be a dud. . . I had to smile. The irony of fate that

refused to grant me a quick and easy death seemed somehow funny to me. (Based on *Taken Captive*, p 26)

A dramatically different perspective is presented by Sakai Saburô, whose autobiography recounts his exploits as Japan's most celebrated pilot and fighter ace— albeit on the losing side. Complementing the many written accounts of the war is an equally impressive body of oral narratives by a broad spectrum of Japanese. One important sub-category concerns the recollections of those who survived the atomic bombings. A collection of such accounts, compiled by Haruko and Theodore Cook and reminiscent of the celebrated oral histories of Studs Terkel (*The Good War*, for instance), provides what can be considered a composite portrayal of the Japanese wartime experience.

Postwar fictional autobiography

The Occupation period (1945-52) witnessed an outpouring of fictional autobiography that variously recounts, through personal testimony and literary artifice, both the postwar privation and dislocation, and the nation's gradual recovery and regeneration.

Several autobiographical novels by Dazai Osamu (1909-48)— *Setting Sun* (1947) and *No Longer Human* (1948)— speak to the spiritual vacuum of Japan's postwar circumstance and the loss of the old imperial order and its patriarchal center. Yasuoka Shôtârô (1920-2013), for his part, crafted a darkly comic vision of the postwar dystopia through a series of autobiographical tales centering on a pathetically dysfunctional family— in particular, the figure of his hapless, delusional father. A representative account is *A View by the Sea*, which tells of his mother's dying days in a mental institution and his awkward attempts to connect with an inept father.

The career of Mishima Yukio (1925-70), among modern Japan's most celebrated— and enigmatic— literary figures, was launched by an unprecedented autobiographical exposé of the author's sexual awakening. Entitled *Confessions of a Mask* (1949), the novel reveals the protagonist's complex and conflicted interiority through a series of homoerotic encounters recalled with dramatic intensity. What follows is the first of these memories:

My earliest memory— I was around four at the time— has haunted me with a strangely vivid image. . . It is of a young man who was approaching us, with ruddy cheeks and shining eyes and wearing a dirty roll of cloth around his head as a sweatband. . . He was a night-soil man, a ladler of excrement, dressed as a common laborer with close-fitting cotton trousers. I found myself choked by desire, thinking that I wanted to *be* him. . . An inexpressible adoration for those trousers was born in me, for reasons I could not understand. (Based on *Confessions of a Mask*, pp 7-9)

A very different perspective on one's childhood and youth is provided by Kita Morio (1927-2011) in his beautifully evocative autobiographical novel, *Ghosts* (Yûrei, 1954). The son of one of Japan's preëminent modern poets, Saitô Mokichi, Kita captures the exquisite sensitivity of his younger self through his masterful use of lyrical prose. *Ghosts*— an homage to those departed souls whom he recalls— begins with the following reflection upon what makes us human:

Why this desire to relate what we recall of the past? Because, just as any race has its mythology, so an individual bears within him his own private myths— myths that gradually fade, finally disappearing into the depths of time. And yet things leave their traces, and are a constant preoccupation of the deeper reaches of the mind, lasting until that time when all our actions cease.

And suddenly one day this normally unconscious activity may open up for us and become an awakening of sorts— much like a silkworm, as it slowly consumes a mulberry leaf for no reason it can comprehend, becomes aware of the faint sound of its own mastication. So it raises its head, unsure, fearful almost as it gazes around its small world, experiencing itself as something— whatever that something might be. (Based on *Ghosts*, pp 1-2)

In bears noting that several writers did opt for the more comprehensive, Western-style autobiographic account of their upbringing. Tanizaki Jun'ichirô's *Childhood Years* and Yoshikawa Eiji's *Fragments of a Past* present fascinating and engaging accounts of their respective families and boyhood friends, while serving as valuable documentary sources on life and times in late-Meiji Tokyo and Yokohama.

Family chronicles

An important category of twentieth-century Japanese autobiographical writing is the family chronicle, which broadens the scope beyond the individual subject to encompass one's family and social sphere. Important examples include *Chronicle of My Mother* (1982) by Inoue Yasushi, a renowned author of historical fiction. This deeply moving work recounts his mother's mental decline and eventual death as experienced by her children and grandchildren over a period of ten years. Kita Morio, whose childhood memoir is noted above, published the multi-volume *House of Nire* (1984), which relates the rise and gradual decline of three generations of a family-run psychiatric clinic. Ôe Kenzaburô departs from his elite literary persona in *A Healing Family* (1996), which tells of parental devotion to their brain-damaged son, Hikari, and a father's promotion of Hikari's remarkable career in musical composition. And finally, Inoue Hisashi can be credited with producing a composite family autobiography in the form of numerous personal essays and reminiscences that recount, in a voice at once comical and poignant, the pratfalls and antics of his youth and the challenges of being a father to his three daughters.

Women writers and their autobiographical collages

A number of women writers turned to personal narratives centering on family, acquaintances, and career. For some, the accumulated volume of such narratives amounts to a sequential, composite autobiography. For example, Kôda Aya (1906-90) embarked on her distinguished literary career on the strength of a series of remembrances of her father, the celebrated author Kôda Rohan (1867-1947). Aya's personal writings offer a trenchant and sensitive account of a father-daughter relationship that witnessed the vicissitudes of Japan's imperial and wartime history.

For her part, Uno Chiyo (1897-1996) wrote widely of herself as a liberated modern woman— a so-called *moga*— and of her many romantic encounters and escapades. Mukôda Kuniko (1929-81), representing the next generation of Japanese women, wrote numerous personal accounts of herself as a daughter, professional writer, and keen observer of the social scene. The penchant for publishing collections of literary personalia marks as well the work of Mure Yôko (1954-), representing the next generation of Japanese women writers. Mure's savvy, occasionally sassy narrator delights in her pithy, stylish observations and personal revelations.

A recent autobiography entitled *Will Not Forget Both Laughter and Tears* (2013) is the work of Mitani Tomoko (1945-), an 'ordinary housewife' who took it upon herself to write about her world in appealingly down-to-earth language.

Other voices

An important category of autobiographical literature is the recent work of expatriate Japanese who reflect on their bifurcated identity in Japanese and/ or their adopted language. For instance, Kyoko Mori (1957-) has written numerous works of autobiographical fiction in English— most notably, *Polite Lies: On Being a Woman Caught Between Cultures* (1997)— that recount her dual heritage and the circumstances of her rejection of her Japanese 'self' in favor of the freedom she gained in the American Midwest.

A far larger category— two complementary categories, actually— consists, on one hand, of the personal writings by foreigners— *gaijin*— reflecting on their experiences living and travelling in Japan. On the other hand, there are numerous accounts by Japanese reflecting on their 'expat' experience, be it in the U.S., Brazil, Germany, China, or elsewhere. Such writing can be traced back to the late Tokugawa era, when foreigners were allowed into the country, and when Japanese were once again able to leave their homeland and experience the larger world. Of particular interest is a fascinating anthology, edited by George and Carlson, of expat reminiscence by a range of Western writers.

Conclusion

Twentieth-century Japanese autobiography offers a kaleidoscope of forms and voices, ranging from the 'standard' comprehensive account of one's life to the assorted personal episodes and reflections that collectively yield a composite profile. The proportion of 'standard' autobiography appears to have increased since the postwar era, but the predilection for the personal essay and for autobiographical fiction remains strong. The border separating the 'genuine' and 'factual' from the fictive and fanciful remains obscure at best.

Autobiographical expression in the age of electronic and social media— in Japan and elsewhere— has been radically transformed, and narrative itself has given way to (or been augmented by) images and graphic display. One can imagine autobiography presented as a pastiche of tweets and blog postings, a graphic narrative mixing image and text, or simply a sequence of images and graphic display. The possibilities are limitless, and the status of exclusively literary self-representation is anything but clear.

Sources

Cook, Haruko and Theodore Cook (eds.), *Japan at War: An Oral History* (New Press, 1992)
George, Donald and Amy Carlson (eds.), *Travelers' Tales Japan: True Stories* (Travelers' Tales, 1999)
Hane, Mikiso, *Reflections on the Way to the Gallows: Rebel Women in Prewar Japan* (Pantheon, 1988)
Kita Morio, *Ghosts* (Kodansha International, 1991)
Loftus, Ronald, *Telling Lives: Women's Self-Writing in Modern Japan* (Hawaii, 2004)
Naka Kansuke, *The Silver Spoon*; transl. Etsuko Terasaki (Chicago Review Press, 1976)
Oe Kenzaburo, *A Healing Family* (Kodansha International, 1996)
Ôoka Shôhei, *Taken Captive: A Japanese POW's Story*; transl. Wayne Lammers (Wiley, 1996)
Ôsugi Sakae, *Jijoden: The Autobiography of Ôsugi Sakae*; transl. Byron Marshall (California, 1992)
Sakai Saburô, *Samurai! The Autobiography of Japan's Fighter Ace* (Bantam, 1978)
Shibusawa Eiichi, *The Autobiography of Shibusawa Eiji: From Peasant to Entrepreneur*; transl. Teruko Craig (University of Tokyo Press, 1994)
Tanizaki Jun'ichirô, *Childhood Years: A Memoir* (Kodansha International, 1988)
Yasuoka Shôtarô, *A View by the Sea and Other Stories* (Columbia, 1984)
Yoshikawa Eiji, *Fragments of a Past: A Memoir* (Kodansha International, 1993)

Questions and Issues

How would you explain the difference between biography and autobiography? What are the benefits and drawbacks of each? Do these genres appeal to you equally?

What are the pros and cons of the 'standard,' full-length autobiography versus the episodic, 'fragmentary' approach to personal narrative favored by many Japanese writers?

Childhood and youth reminiscence is a hallmark of Japanese autobiography— and arguably of autobiographical writing more generally. What do you find moving about such reminiscence? How would you approach writing an account of your own upbringing?

What 'life lessons' can you glean from the autobiographical passages presented above? Is there anything distinctively Japanese about the quality of self-reflection expressed here, or does it reflect universal concerns and understandings?

Images

THE SILVER SPOON

KANSUKE NAKA

MEMOIR OF A BOYHOOD IN JAPAN

銀の匙



TRANSLATED FROM THE JAPANESE BY HIROAKI SATO

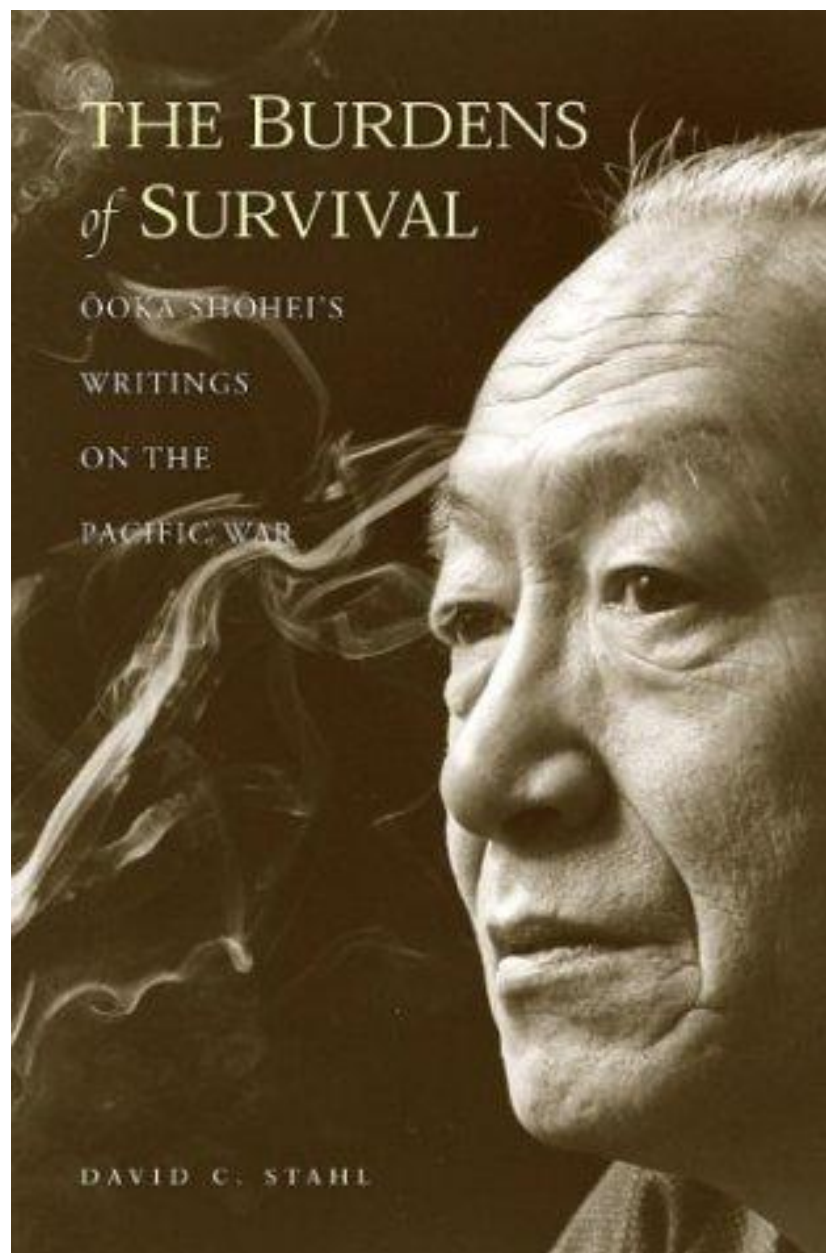
(Source: Goodreads)

THE
AUTOBIOGRAPHY
OF
**ŌSUGI
SAKAE**



TRANSLATED WITH AN
INTRODUCTION BY
BYRON K. MARSHALL

Source: Goodreads)



Scholarly study of Ōoka Shōhei's writings on the Pacific War (Source: Abe Books)



Yasuoka Shôtarô (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

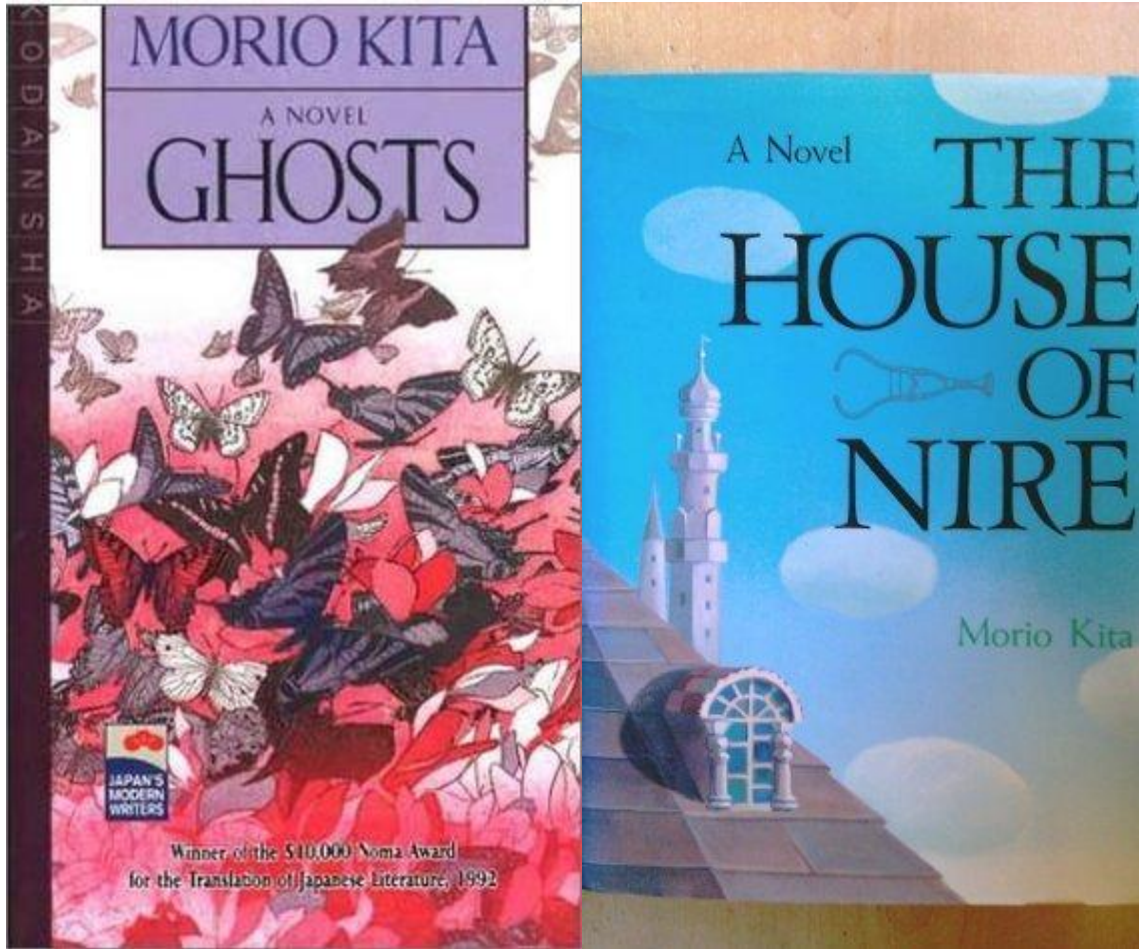


Perfect purity is possible if you turn
your life into a line of poetry written
with a splash of blood.

— *Yukio Mishima* —

AZ QUOTES

Mishima Yukio: the photo and the aphorism (Source: AZ Quotes)

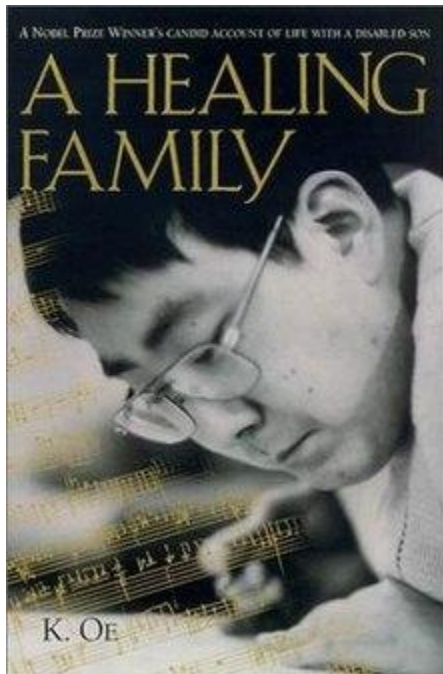


Kita Morio, *Ghosts*(Goodreads)

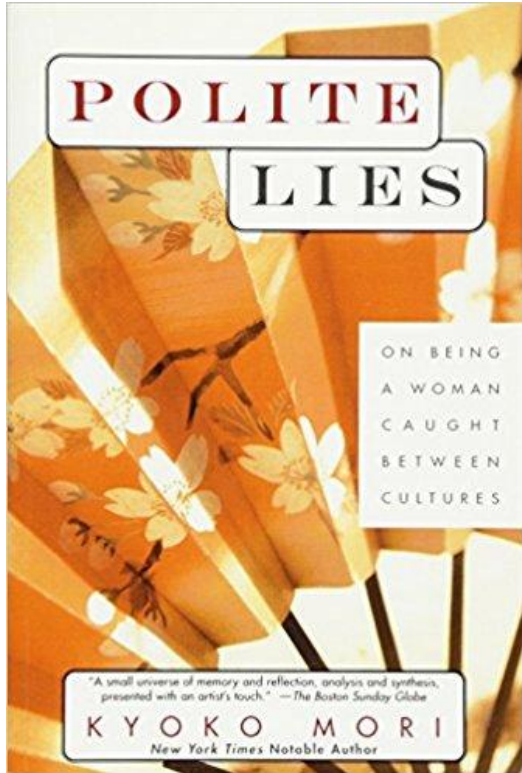
Kita Morio, *The House of Nire*(Abe Books)



Inoue Yasushi (Source: nowheretostay.blogspot)



Ôe Hikari (Wikipedia) Ôe Kenzaburô, author of *A Healing Family* (Japan Times)



Kyoko Mori's memoir (Amazon)

Kyoko Mori's photograph (Harvard Review)