



## Article

# Letter Troubles: Rereading *Futon* in Conversation with Japan's Epistolary Discourse

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**Abstract:** Scholarship on letters in modern Japanese literature typically describes their discursive transformation from objects of practical import to texts of literary significance in the late Meiji 30s and 40s, a transformation contemporaneous to and engendered by the sudden explosion of interest in autobiographical literary texts. Such an approach, however, unintentionally denigrates the complexity of late-Meiji era fiction's negotiation with the epistolary discourse that flourished in this era. Seeking a broader engagement with this hitherto underexamined discourse, I take Tayama Katai's (1872–1930) famous I-novel, *The Quilt* (1907), as a test case, arguing that the letters embedded there engage with the contemporary conversation on letters on four levels: content, linguistic style, subjectivity, and hermeneutics. I argue that, far from reaffirming the overlap between letters and literature, Katai's text evinces a consistently oppositional stance toward contemporary epistolary dogma, problematizing, interrogating, and subverting it at every turn. I conclude by proposing that this defiant stance toward typical conceptualizations of the letter is common to other I-novels of the period, suggesting that the I-novel was only born through a conspicuous disavowal of the letter form.

**Keywords:** Japanese literature; letters; Tayama Katai; *Futon*; I-novel; linguistic style; subjectivity; discourse

## 1. Introduction

Within the field of modern Japanese literature, the relationship between letters and fiction has been given comparatively little consideration. Hirata Yumi and Seki Reiko, for example, have examined the intersection of letter writing, linguistic style, and the emergence of women's fiction in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, while Yamaguchi Tadayoshi and Kuroda Shuntaro have elsewhere documented the birth of a Japanese epistolary fiction in the early 20th century and marked the convergence of letters and literature in the late Meiji period (1868–1912) more generally<sup>1</sup>. Broadly speaking, these scholars have attempted to document the letter's transformation into a properly "literary" object. In this essay, however, I pose a different kind of question: how might we see modern Japanese literature itself as produced in conversation with what I term Japan's epistolary discourse?

By any measure, early 20th century Japan witnessed an explosion of interest in letters as objects of both practical and literary significance. A rapid increase in magazine and newspaper articles on the form was supplemented by journals expressly dedicated to letters and postcards, including *Letters* (*Tegami Zasshi* 手紙雑誌, 1904–1910) and *Postcard Literature* (*Hagaki Bungaku* ハガキ文学, 1904–1910). And, though frequently overlooked in scholarship on modern Japanese literature, this discourse exerted a considerable influence on fiction in the late Meiji and early Taisho (1912–1926) periods. Nowhere is this influence more evident than in the work of Tayama Katai (1872–1930) and his canonical I-novel, *The Quilt* (*Futon* 蒲団, 1907).<sup>2</sup>

Writing and publishing in the Meiji 40s—the indisputable heyday of the letter as an object of practical and literary interest—Katai was not only acutely aware of the flourishing conversation about letters in contemporary print media, but he was in fact directly



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involved in its production and proliferation. As chief editor of *World of Writing* (*Bunshō sekai* 文章世界, 1906–1920), a submission magazine whose stated aim was improving youth writing, Katai included sections on the best submitted letters and postcards, some of which Katai himself was responsible for selecting. Even more tellingly, Katai solicited articles from leading members of the *bundan* (文壇) on the topic of diaries and letters for an early issue, publishing responses from such contemporary luminaries as Kōda Rohan (1867–1947), Kunikida Doppo (1871–1908), and Izuma Kyōka (1873–1939), among others. Given editorial activities that so expressly contributed to Japan’s epistolary discourse, Katai’s deployment of letters within *Futon* would thus seem ripe for consideration in context. Yet, while scholars have not failed to recognize the significance of *Futon*’s epistles, even the most historically situated and theoretically sophisticated of these approaches has so far neglected to historicize Yoshiko’s letters within the contemporary discourse on the form.<sup>3</sup>

This essay contends that *Futon* probes contemporary understandings of the form on four separate levels: content, linguistic style, subject formation, and hermeneutic approach. Through a close reading of Yoshiko’s letters, I argue that these ostensibly disparate concerns coalesce around a consistent stance toward the predominant narratives of the letter. *Futon*, that is, consistently problematizes, interrogates, and subverts the reigning dogma on epistles: Yoshiko’s letters dissemble in an age that lionizes truth, sincerity, and straightforward description; they deploy multiple linguistic styles when the vernacular’s (*genbun’itchi* 言文一致)<sup>4</sup> ascension was all but assured; they refute the direct connection between the writing on the page and the subject with pen in hand; and they highlight the slow work of interpretation in an age where rapid and direct communication was considered paramount. Situating *Futon* in conversation with the contemporary epistolary discourse not only opens on to novel readings of Katai’s story, however, for by recognizing and positing the letter as a medium as-yet in flux, Yoshiko’s epistles critique the codified ideas of the letter’s function and thereby reimagine the letter’s possibilities. Subsequently, and as I will argue in the conclusion below, it is not only *Futon* but perhaps the I-novel proper that comes into being precisely through this rejection of epistolary precedent.

A brief word on method: in coining the term “Japan’s epistolary discourse”, I here adopt Michel Foucault’s theorization of the concept of discourse, which “refers to a way or practice of speaking (in a broad sense) situated in social, historical, and institutional (and thus political and economic) conditions, the emphasis being on the social practices and institutions that, both as an instrument and an effect of power, shape and condition the production and reception of verbal and other statements” (Suzuki 1996, p. 12). Foucault’s scholarship has been deployed in many ways, but for our purposes here, he reminds us that what an object *is* is highly contingent on social, historical, and institutional contexts, and it thereby demands explication with respect to its unique conditions of emergence. With this logic in mind, my operating assumption is that the letter is the product of a range of different forces, forces socially, historically, technologically, and literarily inflected. In Meiji-era Japan, the widely perceived need for rapid and direct communication to facilitate social and economic development, the consolidation and expansion of Japan’s national postal system, the privileging of factuality and narratives based on personal experience, the explosion of interest in the vernacular style) and literary sketching (*shaseibun* 写生文)<sup>5</sup>, the rise of Naturalism,<sup>6</sup> confessional tales, and what would later be termed the I-novel (*shishōsetsu* 私小説)<sup>7</sup>, among other developments, necessarily shaped contemporary conceptions of the letter form. Importantly, these various forces were supplemented by a newfound interest in and robust conversation about letters, evinced by an uptick in the publication of letter manuals and style guides, the continued popularity of submission columns in newspapers and literary magazines, the scandal-making publication of personal letters by recently deceased authors, and most significantly, the proliferation of articles explicitly concerned with the composition, function, and linguistic style of letters that appeared in newspapers, literary magazines, and academic journals.<sup>8</sup> It is this conversation that, to my mind, demands greater explication.

## 2. Crafting Sincerity

*Futon* tells the story of Takenaka Tokio, a middle-aged writer of little renown whose quiet life is turned on its head by a new love interest. When the story begins, Tokio's zest for life has all but dissipated: he is married to a wife decidedly out of step with modern fashion and mores, he is burdened with three young children, and he is reduced to editing geography books to make ends meet. Everything changes, however, upon his receiving a series of letters from a young, fashionable, female fan in the countryside by the name of Yokoyama Yoshiko, who Tokio quickly agrees to mentor as his live-in student. Tokio soon falls in love with her, but his passion is dimmed when he discovers that Yoshiko has taken a lover of her own, Tanaka Hideo, a student at the prestigious Doshisha University. After agreeing to assuage Yoshiko's parents' concerns by vouching for the couple's "sacred, serious" love, Tokio learns they secretly rendezvoused in Kyoto, a revelation that sets Tokio on a quest to determine whether the pair sullied their "pure love" through base, carnal relations. After initially denying the existence of a physical relationship, Yoshiko eventually admits to her sins, and she is consequently spirited home to the countryside to live out her days in obsolescence. In the famous final scene, Tokio can be found sobbing into Yoshiko's forgotten futon as the wind howls outside.

Broadly construed, the plot of *Futon* turns on the question of Yoshiko's sincerity. Having fallen in love with his young female student, Tokio spends much of the novel attempting to ascertain whether Yoshiko has fallen prey to carnal desire and physically consummated the relationship with Hideo. Her letters become his primary object of investigation as he searches for proof of her innocence or records of her sins, but Katai's decision to situate letters as the site of questions surrounding Yoshiko's sincerity is by no means arbitrary. For, while the epistolary discourse developed in the Meiji 30s and 40s considered the letter from a multitude of angles, including linguistic and calligraphical style, choice of materials, the necessity of greetings, and discussions about their content and arrangement, undoubtedly the most salient and frequently reiterated element of this discourse concerned the letter's status as a document of sincerity. Nearly every article on the form attests to this fact in some way, typically by arguing that letters should express one's sincerity (*shisei* 至誠) or "reveal the writer's true feelings" (*shinjō wo toro suru* 真情を吐露する).<sup>9</sup> Analyzing every iteration of this narrative is a practical impossibility, but one way of gesturing toward its power, proliferation, and diverse manifestation is by examining its refraction and dissemination by *bundan* writers.

For one of the early issues of *Bunshō sekai*, Katai solicited articles from leading *bundan* members on the topic of "Diaries and Letters" (*Nikki to tegami to* 日記と手紙と).<sup>10</sup> In their submissions on letters, such luminaries as Kōda Rohan, Emi Suiin (1869–1934), Yoda Gakkai (1834–1909), Izumi Kyōka, and Kunikida Doppo generally eschewed practical writing advice in favor of describing the relationship between letters, sincerity, and interiority. Time and again, these writers stress that paramount in letter writing is not linguistic style or felicity of phrasing, but the ability to bare one's soul on the page. Kyōka's article, "It's Best to Speak your Mind" (*Shinjō toro ni kagiru* 真情吐露に限る), elaborates:

何も自分で発明した言葉ではないが、「至誠は人を動かす」で、凡そ文章に尊しとするとところは誠心、誠意、自己の真情を吐露することである。殊に手紙の文にあっては、たとえ言葉は整はずとも、文章は拙劣であろうとも、もと実用を主とするものであるから、其人の真情さえ籠って居たらば差支えないと信ずる。

The quote is not my own, but I've heard it said that "Sincerity moves people." The suggestion is that generally, what renders writing noble is sincerity, is expressing one's true feelings. Particularly when it comes to letters, since they're mainly for practical use, it doesn't matter if the words are jumbled or if the phrasing is clumsy so long as they come from the heart. (Izumi 1906, p. 16)

Kyōka adopts a pragmatic mindset, arguing that because letters are primarily a communicative medium, it matters little whether the writing itself is skillful so long as one writes

from the heart. The importance of sincerity in Kyōka's formulation is indicated and emphasized by his iteration on the term, as he cycles through the synonyms 至誠 (*shisei*), 誠心 (*seishin*), 誠意 (*seii*), and 真情 (*shinjō*). In a separate article, Itō Gingetsu extends this formulation by yoking sincerity and letters to the physical body. Claiming to have little interest in the mechanics of diary entries and letter writing, Itō nevertheless prefers letters that avoid stock greetings and speak from the heart:

[...] これから手紙を書く人は、どうかキマリ文句をヌキにして、自分の胸から湧き出た真摯の言をつらねて呉れ給へ、古木のやうな手紙でなく、血と呼吸との通ふ手紙を貰ひたい、死んだ手紙の百尋よりは、生きた手紙の一寸が有難い [...]

If you're going to write a letter, please, toss out those hackneyed set phrases, and enumerate instead those sincere expressions that gush forth from your heart. I want letters teeming with the breath and blood of life, not stale like dead wood. I'd take a single, living letter over a hundred lifeless ones any day. (Itō 1906, p. 15)

Itō differentiates those letters brimming with trite greetings and clichéd niceties on the one hand from those letters whose straightforward style denotes a sincerity and earnestness on the other, with a clear preference for the latter. Elsewhere, Yoda Gakkai brings together the two threads of body and soul, further developing the link between letters, sincerity, and interiority. Relating his impressions upon encountering a reproduction of Kyokutei Bakin's (1767–1848) personal letters in the *Hōchi Shimbun*, Yoda notes:

元来手紙は思ふ事を洩れなく述べるのが肝要であるが、それが中々に出来ぬ。思ふ様にならぬから従って真情が現れない。しかるに馬琴の手紙を見ると、実に何から何まで行き届いて、現在其人を見る様な気がする。手紙ならば彼書きたいのだ。

In writing letters, it is of vital importance to express one's thoughts freely and without omission, but I can't seem to do so. I can't write as I think, and it follows that my true thoughts and emotions (*shinjō*) fail to materialize on the page. And yet, when I look upon Bakin's letters, it is though I am gazing upon the man himself. If I'm writing a letter, that's how I want to write. (Yoda 1906, pp. 13–14)

What distinguishes well-written letters for Yoda is thus not phrasing or rhetoric but the ability to write as one thinks, to portray one's thoughts and feelings in full (*morenaku*), and to put one's heart and soul (*shinjō*) on the page. Bakin's letters so powerfully fit this bill, Yoda claims, that the man himself appears before his very eyes, giving corporeal form to the two threads of body and soul outlined in Kyōka and Itō's writing.

As the brief selection of commentaries above begins to suggest, the discourse on letters was surfeit with articles linking the content of letters to their writer's "sincerity" or "true feelings". Emerging in a late Meiji literary environment that lionized frank expression, this formula's proliferation is hardly surprising.<sup>11</sup> Less expected, perhaps, was its continued resonance with subsequent generations of writers and scholars, a fact evinced in part by its continual reappearance in scholarship on *Futon*. Frequently pegged as the progenitor of the I-novel form, criticism on *Futon* would, for many years, gravitate to questions of its truth and authenticity, with Katai's own letters marshalled forth as evidence of both fact and fiction.<sup>12</sup> Frequently, however, the examination of letters in and around *Futon* hinges upon, or otherwise unconsciously deploys, this narrative of sincerity. Writing as early as 1915, Nagayo (née Okada) Michiyo (1885–1968)—none other than the model for the character of Yoshiko—both personally excoriates Katai and scandalously suggests that he had, in fact, fallen in love with her, yet the bulk of her argument is aimed at the insincerity of his personal letters. If he was sincerely apologetic for the outcry surrounding the so-called "Model Problem", as he so claims, then he would have more thoroughly considered the consequences of his gross caricatures of both her and her husband prior to *Futon*'s publication (Nagayo 1915, p. 79).

In the postwar period, as accusations flew that *Futon*'s solipsism had perverted the proper development of modern Japanese literature,<sup>13</sup> Hirano Ken would draw on the 1939



publication of a handful of Katai's letters in *Central Debate* (*Chūō kōron* 中央公論) to defend *Futon* (Letters 1939). According to Hirano, the letters, penned to Nagayo and her parents between Meiji 34 and Meiji 41, reveal a consistent, professorial demeanor that belies the widespread belief in *Futon*'s factuality. As a result, he suggests that the I-novel form did not begin with *Futon* but with later misreadings that took the events of the text as fact (Hirano 1964, pp. 80–112). Directly contradicting Hirano's claims, Iwanaga Yutaka has argued that because the events of *Futon* are always already filtered through Katai's subjectivity, the story's "truth" is not necessarily commensurate with verifiable and objective fact.<sup>14</sup> His logic, which views the text as internally coherent if not objectively verifiable, consequently demanded a reconsideration of the letters published in *Chūō kōron*, and Iwanaga theorized that Katai's epistles were a cleverly constructed ruse, a necessary means to exist in a society that would never willingly sanction Tokio's—and thus Katai's—lasciviousness (Iwanaga 1957). Of the two, it was Hirano's argument that would be canonized in postwar criticism, but of note here is how the narratives produced and disseminated by Japan's epistolary discourse continued to resonate 50 years on. At issue in both Hirano and Iwanaga's arguments, in other words, is not only or simply *Futon*'s status as fact or fiction but also the seemingly inescapable question of the letter's sincerity. If Hirano's article follows tradition by yoking the letter to conceptions of sincerity, truth, and so on, Iwanaga conversely breaks rank, suggesting that Katai's letters are an elaborate, if necessary, disguise to paper over a deep-seated degeneracy.

To a certain extent, even contemporary scholarship on *Futon* that has sought to overcome the fact–fiction debate considers the letter in terms of sincerity and truth. Shifting his focus from Katai's personal letters to those embedded within the text of *Futon*, Kiyoshi Fujimori argues that Yoshiko manipulates the letter to seduce Tokio, and in so doing obtains a modicum of agency in a patriarchal culture that typically foreclosed any such possibility. His argument hinges on Yoshiko's deployment of the vernacular *genbun'itchi* in her letters which, in contradistinction to the epistolary *sōrōbun*, ostensibly belongs to the realm of interiority and thus truth, sincerity, and authenticity. In Fujimori's rendering, Yoshiko's letters ring sincere—even when they are not—precisely because they were written in the vernacular (Fujimori 1993). This strict cleavage of linguistic styles is worthy of greater analysis below, but of note here is how the discourse of sincerity has continued to travel with the letters of *Futon*. Once delimited as a trait intrinsic to the letter form, however, sincerity has now been transferred to a product of linguistic style.

While ideas of "sincerity" and "authenticity" have been the structuring principles of both Meiji-era letter composition and criticism on *Futon*'s letters, the plot of *Futon*—and in particular the story arc traversed by Yoshiko's letters—specifically interrogates such criteria. Two readings of Yoshiko's letters seem possible here. On the one hand, we might follow scholastic precedent and interpret Yoshiko's epistles as enacting and embodying a conspicuous transgression of the sincerity principle. As noted above, *Futon*'s plot turns on the very question of whether Yoshiko's letters meet the sincerity standard, insofar as they are refracted through the question of whether she has committed the unforgivable sin of a physical relationship with Hideo. Penned following her secret liaison with Hideo in Saga, the first two of her letters embedded within the narrative explicitly and implicitly aver her innocence, and they reiterate her desire to live in accordance with the New Woman (*atarashii onna* 新しい女) ideals taught to her by Tokio.<sup>15</sup> Her third letter, however, reveals her betrayals. As her father and Tokio confer over her future, Yoshiko pens a letter to Tokio from her upstairs bedroom confessing what he knew but could not bear to admit: that she had sexual relations with Hideo in Saga, that she was not a New Woman at all but just another fallen schoolgirl (*daraku jogakusei* 堕落女学生) and so forth.<sup>16</sup> While this third letter exposes the previous two as artfully crafted documents of duplicity, what would have rendered this letter shocking to Meiji-era readers is not only or simply Yoshiko's admitting to her relationship with Hideo, nor even the revelation that her former letters were dishonest. Rather, the true scandal of this third letter is its rejection of contemporary epistolary dogma. At the same time in which the reader learns of Yoshiko's lies, that is, she

also witnesses the violation of the letter's most sacred principle: sincerity. Or, put in terms of the larger argument here, Yoshiko's critique of Japan's epistolary discourse underpins the very plot of *Futon*, with Yoshiko's pointed rejection of its principles serving as nothing less than the climax of the story.

On the other hand, we might also interpret the arc of Yoshiko's letters as elucidating a more nuanced account of what it means to be "sincere" than standard, naïve definitions of the term typically manage<sup>17</sup>. In such a reading, the near-ubiquitous refrain of "express one's true feelings" found in Japan's epistolary discourse paradoxically conceals the difficulty of actually doing so, for it suggests both that such feelings are immediately apparent and that they are easily expressed. Yoda's description of Bakin's letters already contravenes this narrative by revealing the potential difficulties one may encounter when writing letters, but Yoshiko's epistles significantly broaden the scope of his critique. Her letters reveal, in other words, that sincerity is not only or simply a state of being that easily lends itself to reproduction on the page, but it is rather and also a project of self-introspective becoming, a struggle or striving that may contain no small measure of insincerities or falsehoods. From this vantage point, Yoshiko's first two letters appear less as devious or ill-intentioned articles of deception, and more as honest or "sincere" attempts to embody the New Woman principles passed down by Tokio, attempts that necessitate and engender a certain amount of deception, both self- and other-directed. Or, differently put, these letters are less a direct expression of a preexisting sincerity than a tool for "sincere" self-reflection, the results of which are realized in Yoshiko's third, confessional letter that admits her lies to both herself and Tokio. Whether duplicitous femme fatale or artful and introspective thinker, however, Yoshiko's letters poignantly interrogate the myth of sincerity that circulated in the late Meiji era.

### 3. Letters and Linguistic Style

Thus attuned to Katai's reconsideration of the letter's capabilities on the level of plot, other modalities of epistolary interrogation now come into view. On a visual register, *Futon*'s engagement with Japan's epistolary discourse is most conspicuously highlighted by the transition in linguistic style in Yoshiko's letters from the vernacular *genbun'itchi* to the formal, epistolary style (*sōrōbun* 候文). Of the four of Yoshiko's letters embedded within the text, the first three, composed in Tokyo, are written in the vernacular, while the fourth, penned upon Yoshiko's return to her family home in Bicchu, is famously written in *sōrōbun*. This shift does not go unremarked upon by the narrative: opening Yoshiko's final letter, Tokio laments,

いつもの人懐かしい言文一致ではなく、礼儀正しい候文で [...]

Rather than the *genbun'itchi* he had grown so fond of, it was penned using the courteous *sōrōbun* [...]. (Tayama 1993, p. 605)

From the "fond" vernacular to the "courteous" epistolary style: much has been made of this transition for what it reveals about the relationship between language, gender, and power. Indra Levy, for example, has argued that in contrast to the final letter's deployment of *sōrōbun*, which "entrusts the relationship between strangers to a set of established conventions", Yoshiko's letters in the vernacular abandon such conventions "in favor of a style of communication that could imitate face-to-face contact" (Levy 2006, p. 187). In such a reading, the vernacular embodies Tokio's image of the frank, outgoing *atarashii onna*, an image developed in translation as Tokio ingested 19th century European literature. Even more radically, Fujimori argues that in contradistinction to *sōrōbun*, *genbun'itchi* produced and sustained the illusion of Yoshiko's interiority (Fujimori 1993, p. 27). Yet, while there is little doubt that *genbun'itchi* possessed the cachet of the new and foreign in the eyes of Meiji writers, contemporary articles typically demurred on the question of whether it was the only—or even the best—linguistic style for directly transmitting one's thoughts (or expressing one's interiority).<sup>18</sup> Certainly, articles espousing *genbun'itchi*'s frankness did exist. The forerunner of Japanese children's literature, Iwaya Sazanami (1870–1933), argues:

[...] 勿論言文一致は此方の心や情を明かに通ずる利益あることはいう迄もなかろう、独逸にいた頃殊に感じた、左様然らばと寒暖の御挨拶を儀式的に列べられた手紙は最一つ有り難くないね、言文一致で思う儘にいうてくれると遠くにいる人と直接に遭う気がして何様に嬉しいか知れぬ、手紙は言文一致に限る、その人の真情が表われておもしろい、[...]

Of course, it goes without saying that *genbun'itchi* has the benefit of transmitting one's feelings or emotions clearly. When I was living in Germany, it was even more apparent to me how unwanted those letters chock full of formal, seasonal greetings really were. You can't imagine how happy I was to receive letters written in *genbun'itchi*; when they wrote just as they thought, even my friends in distant lands felt close by. When it comes to letters, *genbun'itchi* is the best, for it has the power to make the writer's true feelings come alive on the page. (Iwaya 1904, p. 17)

In a slightly transposed version of the *bundan's* proclamations above, for Iwaya it is not the mechanism of form but that of linguistic style—specifically the vernacular—that possesses and transmits the “true feelings” and “emotions” of the writer. While this is the narrative most familiar to modern scholars, other writers in fact averred that *sōrōbun* possessed an equal capacity for clear expression. Examining the historical use *sōrōbun*, Takeda Ōtō (1871–1935) suggests that the character *sōrō* itself facilitated communication among members of different social class categories prior to the advent of *genbun'itchi*:

近來は専ら言文一致という文体が行われて書簡文もまた此体にかかれるようになったが、全体書簡文に此候という文字を使用し始めたのは、これも古えの言文一致を文章体にした一つの句切れに用いたのもであって、この文体に倣えば、いかなる僻遠の地の人でも、些の渋滞なく思うままを弁ずることが出来る[...]

These days the writing style of *genbun'itchi* is in vogue, and even letters have come to be written using this style. However, all letters began to use the *sōrō* character as a sentence-ending period in what we might call premodern *genbun'itchi* in written form. No matter how much of a country bumpkin you might be, if you imitated this style, you would have no problem communicating as you think [...]. (Takeda 1906, p. 118)

Researching the character *sōrō*, Takeda argues that even before the development of *genbun'itchi* the character *sōrō* provided even the most uneducated of individuals the capacity for free expression. Takeda's argument refutes the simplistic link between *genbun'itchi* and interiority (*omou mama wo benzuru koto*), effectively accusing those who would draw this association of a failure to properly historicize.

While such articles advocating for letter writer's use of *genbun'itchi* or *sōrōbun* were occasionally published, far more common were those that equivocated or even dismissed the linguistic style of letters as of tertiary concern. In one representative example, newspaper reporter and government official Miyakawa Tetsujirō (1868–1916) follows convention by arguing that letters should express their writers' true feelings, but he believes that the letter's ability to do so is engendered by the writer's skill, not the letter's linguistic style:

それから手紙の文体は、言文一致の手紙も、近來盛んに行われるようであるが、それは近親の間柄や、或は刎頸の交友などには適切でもあろうが、文品の点からいうと、候文の方が遥かに優っている。併し言文一致にも真情の流露余蘊なく、なかなか優美に書き為したのもあるけれど、それは寧ろ筆者の技巧に属することで、形式に於いて本来賤しいように思う。

As for the linguistic style of letters, it seems that it has become popular to write letters in *genbun'itchi* these days. This style is likely appropriate for immediate relatives or close friends, but insofar as the felicity of the prose is concerned, *sōrōbun* is a far superior style. While there are well composed letters written in *genbun'itchi* that fully express the true feelings of their writers, this is a product of the writer's skill, for the style of *genbun'itchi* itself is really quite vulgar. (Miyagawa 1909, p. 15)

Although the vernacular is typically glossed with a veneer of novelty by Meiji writers and intellectuals, Miyagawa adopts the position of the luddite, arguing that *sōrōbun* is more elegant than the new kid on the block. In doing so, however, he avers that the ability to put one's true feelings into words is unrelated to the specific linguistic style deployed; rather, this ability is a function of the writer's deftness of prose. Insofar as frank expression is concerned then, Miyagawa's stance renders all linguistic styles equal in the domain of the letter.

Even Katai himself argues that linguistic style is of little consequence when it comes to letters. Writing in his *Methods for Writing Flowery Prose* (Bibun sahō 美文作法), he argues that while flowery prose (flowery prose 美文) may be of some use as a tool of persuasion, a letter's linguistic style ultimately matters less than getting the message across:

書簡文は全く実用文に属する。美文と謂うことに余り関係が無いと言っても差支ない。即ち書簡文は文章などは何うでも用が弁じさえすれば好い、解りさえすれば好いということになる。一步を進めて、書簡文は余り多く美文の特色を帯びて来ると、其目的を失うことがある。

The language of letters belongs to the realm of the practical, and one could reasonably say that it has little relation to *bibun*. In other words, so long as you get your message across, the language of the letter doesn't matter. To go one step farther, if a letter takes on too many characteristics of *bibun*, it risks losing the plot. (Tayama 1995, p. 6)

As Katai continues, he does concede that *bibun* may be useful if it helps one achieve his or her goal in letter writing. Ultimately, however, linguistic style is subordinated to purpose: so long as one gets what one wants, Katai argues, the language of the letter matters not.

Having properly historicized the Meiji-era conversation on letters and linguistic style, it becomes possible to stake two separate claims. On the one hand, because contemporary writers recognized the ability of all linguistic styles to express one's "true feelings", the argument suturing *genbun'itchi* to the production of interiority would appear to demand further elaboration. In his *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*, Karatani Kōjin famously linked the discovery of interiority to the production of *genbun'itchi*, but significantly, he never conceptualizes *genbun'itchi* as only or simply a linguistic style. *Genbun'itchi* is instead figured as a semiotic constellation, a fundamental world view that, having been instantiated in the third decade of Meiji, sustained the illusion of "an inner self existing in and of itself" (Karatani 1993, p. 61). Once fully enmeshed within this semiotic constellation, in other words, not only *genbun'itchi* but *all* linguistic styles would have been retroactively posited as capable of representing this interiority. Read in this light, it becomes difficult to countenance arguments that rigidly separate *genbun'itchi* and *sōrōbun* solely based on the production of interiority.

On the other hand, if all linguistic styles are recognized as capable of producing interiority, what are we to make of *Futon*'s insistence on highlighting the language of Yoshiko's letters? Although modern scholarship has treated the unique characteristics of *genbun'itchi* and *sōrōbun* as rigidly codified by the time of *Futon*'s publication, recourse to Japan's epistolary discourse reveals that what and how these two linguistic styles signified was still very much in flux in the late Meiji era, and as such, it becomes difficult to argue that Katai manipulated the divergent characteristics of these two styles to craft his tale. In fact, the reverse appears true: *Futon* did not exploit *genbun'itchi* and *sōrōbun*'s ready-made distinctions but instead actively *forged* them, constructing the very tenor of these two linguistic styles through their deployment in fiction. In this light, Tokio's description of the "fond" vernacular and the "polite" epistolary style appears less a declaration of fact than a shot across the bow, an apparent avowal of the power of *genbun'itchi* that would paradoxically contravene even Katai's own published stance, not to mention the plot of the story, in which Yoshiko's use of *genbun'itchi* to duplicitous ends reveals that the vernacular is no guarantee of truth or sincerity. So powerful was Katai's crafting of the tenor of these two styles, in other words, that it has become difficult for modern scholars to imagine a discourse that considered them otherwise.



#### 4. The Subject of the Letter

James Fujii has convincingly argued that for much of the 20th century, scholars conceptualized modern Japanese realism as an extended rumination on the individuated subject. Typically constructed with recourse to Western, romantic ideas, this subject was an a priori, transcendental self, one posited as “the originary source of meaning” in the text (Fujii 1993, pp. 1, 24). Practically, this meant that the author of a work was seen as its source of “truth, meaning, and worthiness”, a view which encouraged an examination of the author’s personal life to uncover the text’s “true” meaning (Fujii 1993, p. 22). Given, as Fujii notes, that the construction of this modern self was of particular importance to Meiji writers and intellectuals, it comes as no surprise that theories of the letter, born concurrent to this “search for the self”, similarly adopted the transcendental subject as the origin and locus of the epistle’s signification. In many ways, the above quotes by members of the *bundan* already gesture toward such a subject. Their proclamations that letters embody sincerity and express their author’s true feelings presume a fully bounded self from which these feelings emerge, a subject who exists prior to his representation in language, simply awaiting his full expression there. Yoda’s description of reading Bakin’s letter stakes just such a claim. If, on the one hand, Bakin is the central locus of meaning in the text—that is, his presence is precisely what renders the letter comprehensible to its readers—on the other hand, and as the use of the verb *miru* “to see” delineates, Yoda’s description of Bakin’s apparition suggests not that Bakin is produced by the text of the letter, but rather that he is simply *revealed through it*.<sup>19</sup> Or, to put it differently, the writer “Bakin” is understood as preceding his expression in language.

This idea is refracted in other ways by other writers. In his article, “My Letters are Chimerical” (*Jibun no tegami ha nuketeki* 自分の手紙は鶴的) Emi Suin posits that letters are a direct expression of the mind by suggesting that they are interchangeable with speech:

で、自分は手紙を文章として書かうというふ考へはない、唯だ思っていることを、しゃべる代わりに知らせる考へである。従って、自分の手紙は始めが候文で、終いが言文一致、おまけに、所々に文章的の処も混じろうという、極くノ鶴的のものである。故にもしこれを文章として見るひには、殆ど価値はないかも知れぬが、自己の感情を充分に現わすことは出来ると思う。

I don’t think of writing letters as writing (*bunshō*) per se, but I rather think of them as expressing my thoughts in written instead of spoken form. It only follows that my letters are rather chimerical: they sometimes begin in *sōrōbun*, end in *genbun’itchi*, and even mix in some literary language (*bunshōteki na tokoro*) at times. That being the case, my letters don’t have any value as writing, but they are able to competently express my emotions. (Emi 1906, p. 12)<sup>20</sup>

As is well known, the *genbun’itchi* movement that sought to unify spoken and written Japanese was predicated on “the belief in the immediacy and directness of the voice or in the idea that speech more directly reflects one’s thoughts than the written language” (Suzuki 1996, p. 178). Striking in Emi’s formulation, however, is how the importance of linguistic style for directly communicating one’s thoughts is superseded by the form of the letter itself. By arguing that he views letters as a stand-in for speech, and by further suggesting that any linguistic style—or their admixture—is equally appropriate for letters, Emi does more than challenge the view of *genbun’itchi* as the most direct or transparent linguistic style. He imbues the letter form *itself* with the capacity to directly transmit one’s thoughts. Importantly, this reversal of the typical formula that *genbun’itchi* is equated with frankness or clarity does nothing to challenge the notion of a transcendental subject behind the pen, and in fact only further substantiates it.

The notion of the subject outlined here has been radically reworked by modern critical theory. Reversing the formula that posits the subject as the unquestioned origin and locus of meaning who precedes his or her expression in language, scholars now typically agree that the subject is instead produced precisely in and through his or her linguistic expression. The subject, in short, is a function of discourse (Butler 1997, pp. 1–30; Foucault 1979).

Among *Futon*'s characters, it is Yoshiko who most overtly embodies this textualist subject, for not only are her thoughts and actions filtered through the lens of the narrator/Tokio's increasingly harried mental state, but even in those moments when she bypasses Tokio's subjective refiguring by crafting herself in letter form, writing emerges as the only tool for constructing that self. Furthermore, if the romantic subject assumes an unchanging essence from which meaning issues forth, we have already seen how the text of Yoshiko's letters—and in particular her interrogation of the myth of sincerity—reveals an essential instability resting at their heart, portraying and enacting sincerity as a difficult and uncertain process of becoming.

The significance of Yoshiko's challenge to Meiji-era conceptions of subjectivity is not limited to a reiteration of well-traversed threads of contemporary critical theory, but indeed extends to conceptions of the field of Japanese literature more broadly. Before these consequences can come into view, however, we must here examine the question of how Yoshiko constructs her subjectivity—and how letters function in this construction—in greater depth. Scholars in recent decades have drawn on modern theories of the subject to attempt an answer, considering Yoshiko vis-à-vis contemporary discourses on women's hysteria, the *atarashii onna*, confessional literature, and the *daraku jousei monogatari*, among others. More recently, scholars have also recognized the central role letters play in engendering Yoshiko's subjectivity.<sup>21</sup> Yet, while these arguments represent important and incisive observations, they have also and unfortunately denigrated the importance of Yoshiko's final letter to Tokio in Yoshiko's crafting of the self. As the typical narrative of Yoshiko's letters goes, the first three enact the rise and fall of Yoshiko from the status of *atarashii onna* to *daraku jogakusei*. If her first two letters deploy the language of the New Woman, exemplifying her decisiveness and willingness to reflect on her actions, the third begins with that famous frank assertion of her fall from Eden: "I am a fallen schoolgirl." Her fourth letter is typically portrayed as the natural conclusion to this narrative arc: written from the countryside and penned in the stilted epistolary style, it represents nothing less than her physical and linguistic expulsion from modernity itself.

While Yoshiko's final letter has thus not gone unnoticed by scholars, overlooked so far is how Yoshiko uses it to reposition herself once again in relation to the discourse of *modern Japanese literature*. After informing Tokio of her return home, apologizing for the trouble she caused, and explaining her lack of a goodbye on the platform at Shinbashi, she proceeds to describe her current environment with reference to a haiku:

山北辺より雪降り候うて、湛井よりの山道十五里、悲しきことのみ思い出で、  
かの一茶が『これがまアつひの住家か雪五尺』の名句痛切に身にしみ申候、

Snow has fallen from the mountains to the north, and along the some 60 mountainous kilometers from Tatai, I had nothing but sad memories to sustain me. I cannot help but think of Issa's poem, "Is this my old home/to be my final dwelling/in snow five feet high". (Tayama 1993, pp. 605–6)

Stuck deep in the mountains of Bicchu, Yoshiko is reminded of a haiku by Kobayashi Issa (1763–1828), one of the four great masters of the form. Penned at age 50, Issa's poem describes his decision to live out the remainder of his life in his hometown of Shinanomachi in present day Nagano prefecture. The poem cleverly metaphorizes Yoshiko's current situation. At the time of its composition, Issa has just completed the trek back to the countryside, and penned against the backdrop of an uncertain family situation, we can hear more than a little resignation in his sigh as he gazes upon the snow blanketing the landscape around him. Yoshiko too is surely forlorn at her own return to the countryside (though given the background to Issa's poem, we might also wonder whether her return to the countryside was not a calculated move by Yoshiko to escape Tokio). Nevertheless, of note about the inclusion of Issa's haiku is not the particulars of Yoshiko's metaphorization enacted through it, but rather how we might read it as altering the typical narrative of Yoshiko's subjectivization. Certainly, Issa's poem can be interpreted in line with Yoshiko's fall from grace and eventual distancing from modernity, for both the poem's content and Yoshiko's specific inclusion of a haiku in an age that lionized other literary forms are indicative of this

separation. At the same time, however, this inclusion of Issa's poem might gesture toward not simply or only the narrative of Yoshiko's fall and expulsion from modernity, but also and simultaneously to her continuous attempts to know herself in relation to the discourse most readily at hand: that of Japanese literature.

Yoshiko's disavowal of the contemporary narrative of the subject in letters thus takes on greater significance here, enacting a rewriting of the typical depiction of her arc as a character. Now, in other words, we might read her as not simply penning her own disgrace, but as attempting to know herself—to subjectify herself—through different genres within the tradition of Japanese literature. Her mimicry of the language of the *atarashii onna* aligns her with modern literature, embodied in the foreign works of Hauptmann and Turgenev and reproduced in Japanese literature through adaptation and translation. Her stunning deployment of the term *daraku jogakusei* aligns her with more diverse forms of literature, for while the *daraku jōsei monogatari* series that ran for 35 installments in the *Mainichi Shinbun* might best be described as thinly veiled screeds for women's moral edification—it was, after all, penned by a self-described “longtime educator of women” (*joshi kyōiku ni tsukite tanen no keiken wo yū suru bōshi* 女子教育につきて多年の経験を有する某氏) (Watanabe 1992, p. 13)—we might also read this series as a reference to more “popular” strains of news and literature that would find greater inclusion in modernist texts.<sup>22</sup> And finally, her quoting of Issa's haiku reframes her identity in and through a more traditional and storied form of literary expression whose modern form was undergoing rapid transformation.

At their base, Yoshiko's repeated attempts to define herself through various literary forms and genres always already bely the myth of a positivistic, transcendental self, but the significance of her restless searching extends to the field of Japanese literature more broadly. On the one hand, we might read her continued invocation of low-brow and pre-modern forms of literature as a continuation of what Karatani has referred to as Natsume Sōseki's (1867–1916) genre—his purposeful invocation of those forms of literary expression that were rapidly being expelled from the canon of “modern Japanese literature” (Karatani 2001).<sup>23</sup> Accordingly, Yoshiko might here be read against the grain, construed as heroically combatting the totalizing forces of modernity through her unpopular choices of linguistic style and literary reference. On the other hand, we might also argue more broadly that letters are here invested with the duty of *containing* those very elements that would threaten the sanctity of modern Japanese literature. If, in other words, Sōseki positively embraced the diversity of literary style and prose available to “premodern” writers to critique the indiscriminate embrace of modernity, Katai's *Futon*, though also deploying such various styles and references, confines them to Yoshiko's letters and mires her character in degeneracy. This juxtaposition—the “fall” of Yoshiko and her conscious referencing of multiple genres of literature that cut against the grain of modern realism—would thus also seem to gesture toward the “impurity” of these alternatives to realist fiction. As such, letters begin to take on far greater significance to the canon of Japanese literature than is typically acknowledged, tasked with possessing those elements that modern literature itself would seek to excise—a view I will expand upon in the conclusion.

## 5. The Clarity of Hermeneutics

The final way that *Futon* interrogates Japan's epistolary discourse is by critiquing what we might term its clarity imperative. As we have seen, Meiji era writers generally expected the personal letter to sincerely transmit its author's true feelings. Such demands, however, needed to abide by the additional stipulation that letters should be as clear and concise as possible. Because the letter tended to be theorized as a method of communication—rather than say, an object of literary significance—discourse not only valued the letter's capacity to transmit information rapidly and clearly, but it indeed saw this function as its *raison d'être*.<sup>24</sup> Writers who sought to establish the letter as a modern form of communication, then, typically faulted unnecessary length and circumlocution:

人より案内をうけたる場合に、口の上なら「有難うございます参上いたします」にてよきに、手紙かく場合となれば、それでは、餘り花がなさすぎるとて前

文を添え、後文を添え、先方の言をくりかえし、長々と少なくとも十行くらいかかねばならぬと思ひて、とかく文が冗漫になり、手紙かくことが面倒になるものなるが、簡勁にしたきものに候。

When receiving an invitation face to face, one can simply reply, “Thank you, I will see you then.” When it comes to writing a letter, though, you have to gussy things up a little bit, so you add some greetings to beginning of the letter, you wish them goodbye at the end, you repeat their request back to them, and before you know it you’ve already written ten lines. Such letters are so tedious, and such a pain to write. I want to make letters concise. (Ōmachi 1906, p. 9)

In the process of shilling his new, “modern” letter writing manual, Ōmachi Keigestu (1869–1925) declares that what hamstringing contemporary epistles is their verbosity. The cure, he suggests, is more concision, but he was hardly the only one to hold this view. As Tokutomi Sohō (1863–1957) succinctly states:

簡潔と明確と正確とは、実に用事の手紙に於ける三要素也。

Brevity, clarity, and accuracy: these are the three components of business letters. (Tokutomi 1905, p. 2)

The logic underpinning these calls for concision is variegated. Some writers point to practical concerns, arguing that modern people are too busy and receive too many letters to sort through extended greetings and other niceties. Other writers, such as Ōmachi, simply decry lengthy letters as “a pain to write.” More often than not, however, that letters should be clear is stated as though it were a widely recognized fact. In a series examining the historical transformation of the letter, we find this argument:

書簡文の要は簡潔にして其意志を徹底疎通せしむるにあるは、謂う迄も無きことなり。

It goes without saying that the crux of epistolary style is to concisely transmit one’s intentions without obstruction. (Kan 1906, p. 118)

Tracking the transformation of the form by examining letters from the Heian era forward, the article argues that so obvious and widely understood is the modern letter’s purpose—to completely and concisely transmit one’s point—that it goes without saying.

In a move that registers and magnifies such anxieties of communication, *Futon* conspicuously spotlights the felicities of interpretation engendered by the letter form. By consistently calling attention to Tokio’s process and experience of reading Yoshiko’s letters, Katai’s story reveals the impossibility of fully mitigating the thorny problem of interpretation. *Futon* enacts this interpretive anxiety in two interrelated ways. On the one hand, Tokio at times embodies the literary detective, scanning Yoshiko’s letters for hidden clues that might reveal her lies to Tokio, and thus her carnal sins. Such scenes instrumentalize the act of reading, positing it as a strict search for the hidden kernel of significance resting at the heart of the text. Tokio, we might say, reads letters as communicative objects of concision and clarity; that his searches are stymied at every turn suggests the limits of this approach. On the other hand, certain scenes in *Futon* also describe, enact, and thereby call attention to the hermeneutic process of letter reading. In such scenes, Tokio embodies the literary critic in his attempts to make sense of Yoshiko’s letters. Striking here, however, is not that these letters resist immediate and perfect comprehension (though they do), but that they highlight interpretation as a laborious and unpredictable process. Over the speed of comprehension associated with modern letters, *Futon* seems to suggest that reading and interpreting quite simply take time.

For much of *Futon*, the central question driving the plot is whether Yoshiko and Hideo had committed the sin of a physical relationship. While Yoshiko consistently denies the existence of any such relationship, Tokio’s obsession with the question leads him to furtively examine letters between the pair. Like a detective in search of clues, he rummages through her desk and drawers, sifting through a handful of their endless exhortations of love:



空想から空想、その空想はいつか長い手紙となって京都に行った。京都からも殆ど隔日のように厚い厚い封書が届いた。書いても書いても尽くされぬ二人の情——余りその文通の頻繁なのに時雄は芳子の不在を窺って、監督という口実の下にその良心を抑えて、こっそり机の抽出やら文箱やらをさがした。捜し出した二三通の男の手紙を走り読みに読んだ。恋人のするような甘ったるい言葉は到る処に満ちていた。けれど時雄はそれ以上にある秘密を捜し出そうと苦心した。接吻の痕、性慾の痕が何処かに顕われておりはせぬか。神聖なる恋以上に二人の間は進歩しておりはせぬか、けれど手紙にも解らぬのは恋のまことの消息であった。

From reverie to reverie, such fancies eventually became lengthy letters that made their way to Kyoto. And from Kyoto, thick envelopes arrived nearly every other day. No matter how much they wrote, the lovers could not exhaust their feelings for one another. So frequent were their exchanges that Tokio grew suspicious. Under the pretext of supervision, Tokio, swallowing his conscience, waited until Yoshiko was absent and rummaged through her desk drawers and letter box. He flipped through two or three of the letters he found there.

Their letters were positively brimming with the saccharine tidings of lovers, but Tokio struggled to uncover any further secrets hidden there. Was there nowhere the trace of a kiss, the hint of sexual desire? Had the pair not progressed beyond sacred love? But left unsaid in the letters were love's true tidings. (Tayama 1993, pp. 560–61)

Saito Satoru has noted the resemblance between *Futon* and detective fiction—in particular Tokio's embodiment of the detective figure here—and others still have recognized *Futon's* emphasis on the hermeneutic process of letter reading (Saito 2012, pp. 139–55). Yet, this passage also offers a potential riposte to contemporary claims for epistolary concision and clarity—and thus rapid comprehension. Presumed to be a medium of instantaneous transmission in contemporary discourse, Yoshiko and Hideo's letters are fittingly sped read by Tokio as he attempts to glean the facts of their relationship. What becomes apparent, however, is that their letters resist such a hermeneutic method, and he instead finds himself sorting through their lengthy saccharine tidings as he struggles to uncover the secret that refuses to reveal itself. Rather than media for rapid communication, then, letters here become extended treatises for extolling romantic sentiment that thereby resist the interpretive methods designated for “modern” letters.

This resistance is borne out on an expanded scale in other scenes as Tokio tries his hand at interpreting Yoshiko's letters to him. In the paragraphs following the first embedded letter from Yoshiko, for example, the text tracks Tokio's attempts to settle on its significance:

この一通の手紙を読んでいる中、さまざまな感情が時雄の胸を火のように燃えて通った。その田中という二十一の青年が現にこの東京に来ている。芳子が迎えに行った。何をしたか解らん。この間言ったこともまるで虚言かも知れぬ。この夏期の休暇に須磨で落合った時から出来ていて、京都での行為もその望を満す為め、今度も恋しさに堪え兼ねて女の後を追って上京したのかも知れん。手を握ったろう。胸と胸とが相触れたろう。

Reading through the letter, a mix of emotions tore through his breast like a flame. Tanaka, that boy of just 21 years, had actually arrived in Tokyo. Yoshiko had gone to see him. There was no telling what they had done. Yoshiko's earlier explanations may have been nothing but lies. Maybe they had fallen in love in Suma during the summer break. Maybe the rendezvous in Kyoto was to fulfill their desire for one another that had developed during their summer break in Suma, and perhaps, unable to bear the distance any longer, Hideo had followed her to Tokyo. They must have held hands. They probably even embraced. (Tayama 1993, p. 542)

Tokio reveals himself to be a rather sophisticated reader. Analyzing Yoshiko's letter, he not only clocks his own emotional response to the text, but he further proceeds to both summarize the facts available to him and to raise questions about their significance. And, just a few lines later, he even engages in (a somewhat amateurish) philology, asking:

私共は熱情もあるが理性がある！私共とは何だ！何故私とは書かぬ、何故複数を用いた？

We are passionate about each other, but we are also thinking logically. We! What does she mean *we*? Why didn't she write I? Why did she have to use the plural? (Tayama 1993, p. 542)

In combination, both the lines here and the paragraph above belie the mantra of easy communication, positing letters as documents whose significance is rarely readily apparent. Tokio's working through of their potential implications enacts this ambiguity in real time, as he attempts to ascertain what lies beneath the surface of the text. Yoshiko's second letter to Tokio also provokes a similar moment of reflection:

時雄は今、芳子の手紙に対して考えた。

二人の状態は最早一刻も猶予すべからざるものとなっている。時雄の監督を離れて二人一緒に暮したいという大胆な言葉、その言葉の中には警戒すべき分子の多いのを思った。いや、既に一步を進めているかも知れぬと思った。又一面にはこれほどそのために尽力しているのに、その好意を無にして、こういう決心をするとは義理知らず、情知らず、勝手にするが好いとまで激した。

Now, Tokio considered Yoshiko's letter.

Their situation could not be put off for even a moment. The couple wanted to live together away from Tokio's watchful eye; buried in such a bold proclamation was much to be worried of. In fact, their relationship might have already progressed even further. Once again, having given his all for the couple, Tokio found his goodwill had come to naught. Their decision smacked of ingratitude. It was cold hearted. "Do whatever you want!" he thought, flying into a rage. (Tayama 1993, p. 579)

Here, the necessity of interpretation rises to the level of textual utterance, as *Futon* notes that Tokio must quite literally "think about Yoshiko's letter." Again, his hermeneutic process is enacted in full, as he scavenges for clues of how far the pair's relationship has progressed. Again, we witness Tokio's attempt at amateur philology, as her letter contained "bold words", that engender anxiety in Tokio.

Yoshiko's third letter ostensibly validates Tokio's paranoid readings, as she confesses that her relationship with Hideo was never as pure as advertised. It is a shocking revelation whose significance immediately upends the meaning of Yoshiko's previous epistles, but even here the significance is not described as readily apparent. After Tokio reads this letter, which acts as the apparent "key" to unlock the "true" meaning of Yoshiko and Hideo's relationship, the text pointedly highlights interpretation as a deliberate process once again:

時雄は今更に地の底にこの身を沈めらるるかと思った。手紙を持って立上った。その激した心には、芳子がこの懺悔を敢てした理由——総てを打明けて縋ろうとした態度を解釈する余裕が無かった。二階の階梯をけたたましく踏鳴らして上って、芳子の打伏している机の傍に厳然として坐った。

Tokio felt as if the floor would swallow him up. Letter in hand, he stood up. His heart aflutter, he began to wonder what would drive Yoshiko to confess—there wasn't time to make sense of the attitude that had driven her to finally admit everything and to implore Tokio for his help. He clamored up the stairs, gravely placing himself beside Yoshiko, whose head was face down on the desk. (Tayama 1993, p. 579)

Confronted with the bare truth, Tokio is stunned. And yet, while the thrust of the letter seems clear—that Yoshiko engaged in a physical relationship with Hideo, that her previ-

ous two letters were full of lies, etc.—Tokio nevertheless notes in passing the existence of interpretive work still to be done. Galloping up to her second-floor room, the thought crosses his mind that he does not have the time to make sense of the attitude that engendered Yoshiko's confession. Or, to put it in terms recognizable here, the text once again posits interpretation, and particularly the interpretation of letters, as a slow process. The gravity or importance of this continued reference to the slow process of hermeneutics is attested to by its contrast to Tokio's attitude early in the story, in which he believes the significance of Yoshiko's letters to be readily apparent:

この機会がこの一年の間に尠くとも二度近寄ったと時雄は自分だけで思った。一度は芳子が厚い封書を寄せて、自分の不束なこと、先生の高恩に報ゆることが出来ぬから自分は故郷に帰って農夫の妻になって田舎に埋れて了おうということを涙交りに書いた時、一度は或る夜芳子が一人で留守番をしているところへゆくりなく時雄が行って訪問した時、この二度だ。初めの時は時雄はその手紙の意味を明かに了解した。

Tokio himself believed that just such a chance had occurred at least twice during the past year. Once was when Yoshiko sent Tokio a lengthy letter tearfully decrying her inexperience, stating that there was no way she could ever repay Tokio for all he had done, and that she may as well return home, marry a farmer, and live out her days in the countryside. The other time was when he unexpectedly paid a visit to Yoshiko when she was home alone one day. The meaning of the letter was obvious to him. (Tayama 1993, p. 534)

Describing two moments in which he believed his relationship with Yoshiko verged on moving beyond the master–disciple structure, Tokio receives a letter that he interprets as her attempt to enact that relationship. The irony of the final statement, “Tokio understood the meaning of the letter clearly”, lies with the fact that, by the end of the novel, it is clear Yoshiko never had any intentions of becoming Tokio's lover.

Analyzing *Futon's* depiction of hermeneutics on a larger scale, we might view the novel as depicting and enacting a transition in Tokio's understanding of interpretation. If Yoshiko's early letters seemed to require no interpretation at all—if, in other words, they were immediately and clearly understood—as the novel progresses, her letters require more time and mental investment to render comprehensible. Indeed, the very climax of the story, the moment of greatest narrative tension in which we finally observe Yoshiko's letter-induced fall from grace, paradoxically highlights the necessity of slower reading, or more methodical interpretation. Considered in conversation with a discourse that values clarity, precision, and speed of reading, Tokio's hermeneutics of slow reading come to seem less like a fortunate coincidence and more of a purposeful subversion of existing conceptions of what and how a letter should signify in the late Meiji period.

## 6. Conclusions: Crafting the I-Novel

At the outset of this essay, I argued that scholarship on modern Japanese letters has typically sought to describe their transformation into objects of literary concern, an argument typified by Yamaguchi and Kuroda's work. Upon outlining some of the central tenets of Japan's epistolary discourse, and by furthermore showing how Yoshiko's letters interrogate and reject them, an amendment to and expansion of this argument now seems possible. In service of a more detailed examination of Japan's epistolary discourse, this essay has largely avoided discussing *Futon's* reputation as the progenitor of the I-novel, but as readers will undoubtedly have recognized, many elements of Japan's epistolary discourse meaningfully overlap with aspects of what Tomi Suzuki has termed I-novel discourse. It is, indeed, precisely this overlap to which Kuroda refers when characterizing literary letters as emerging within a literary “environment” that was heavily dominated by Naturalist writing and other, closely associated movements<sup>25</sup>. The problem with Yamaguchi and Kuroda's arguments, however, is that in the case of *Futon* and other Naturalist novels (many of which would later be termed I-novels), letters did not need to be rendered literary objects. Rather, they needed to be *differentiated from* Naturalist fiction.

Read in this light, *Futon* can be seen as not only rejecting contemporary epistolary dogma but as additionally imbuing the letter with precisely those characteristics that Naturalist novels themselves needed to excise. First, the appeals to “express one’s true feelings” and to be “sincere” in one’s letters echo and exemplify what Edward Fowler has called the I-novel’s “myth of sincerity”, in which “the totally accessible author relates his experiences through the totally transparent text”, (Fowler 1998, p. 38), and what Irmela Hijiya-Kirschner has termed the I-novel’s “factuality”, a rule in which “the work reproduces the reality experienced by the author” (Hijiya-Kirschner 1996, p. 178). Yoshiko’s first two letters are thus not only insincere to the extent that they are full of lies, but they also render Yoshiko “inaccessible” as an author, such that it becomes entirely impossible to determine whether her letters are truthful or deceptive. Second, Yoshiko’s conspicuous deployment of multiple linguistic styles runs counter to the homogenizing forces of *genbun’itchi*. Although *genbun’itchi* ideology was premised on the idea that “speech more directly reflects one’s thoughts than the written language” (Suzuki 1996, p. 178), Yoshiko’s clever wielding of *sōrōbun* subtly critiques this ideology by calling attention to the power of the written epistolary style. Third, Yoshiko’s letters undermine the subject that would be naturalized in I-novel discourse. As Suzuki notes, by the 1920s, “the Japanese Naturalist texts and other modern *shōsetsu* regarded as autobiographical began to be received and read as a direct transcription of the author’s lived experience and of his ‘self’, which was considered to exist *a priori* and independently of language, itself now regarded as a transparent vehicle for expressing the self” (Suzuki 1996, p. 47). By contrast, Yoshiko’s subjectivity only emerges in and through language and only in and through reference to the multiple discourses circulating in the late Meiji era. Her continual refashioning of her subjectivity vis-à-vis different literary genres only highlights this fact. Finally, to the extent that I-novels were theorized as this “direct transcription of the author’s lived experience”, and to the extent that *genbun’itchi* was a “transparent vehicle”, Naturalist novelists might be read as attempting to bypass the difficulties and felicities of reading and interpretation. Yoshiko’s letters, which highlight everywhere and always the difficult and imprecise work of hermeneutics, thus contradict such claims.

While *Futon*’s letters are a particularly cogent example of this purposeful distinction between the Naturalist novel and the letter, scholars who examine other I-novels that deploy the embedded letter trope have also found it necessary to differentiate between the two forms of writing. Morita Sōhei (1881–1949) famously penned *Black Smoke* (*Baien* 煤煙) after Sōseki prodded him to explain his attempt at lover’s suicide with Hiratsuka Raichō (1886–1971), but throughout the narrative, letters penned by the woman protagonist, Tomoko, are frequently situated as the site of confusion, incomprehension, and opacity. That these letters are purported word-for-word transcriptions of Raichō’s actual epistles to Sōhei only further intensifies the text’s need to differentiate them from the novel itself. Elsewhere, criticism on Chikamatsu Shūkō’s *Wakaretaru tsuma* cycle has typically denigrated the eponymous first story, *A Letter to the Wife Who Left Me* (*Wakaretaru tsuma ni okuru tegami* 別れたる妻に送る手紙), as an incomplete or aborted attempt at epistolary fiction. Yamamoto Yoshiaki, for example, argues that precisely because Chikamatsu struggled to write novels, he had to resort to the letter form to produce his story (Yamamoto 2013). That *Suspicion* (*Giwaku* 疑惑), a story whose use of epistolary elements is limited to an introductory address to the narrator’s wife, has been so highly lauded is undoubtedly due to its excision of precisely such accoutrements. In these texts, as in *Futon*, the letter thus emerges as a kind of outside force that defines by exclusion what and how the I-novel signifies, thereby staking a claim for the importance of a form of writing that itself has all too frequently been marginalized in the study of modern Japanese literature.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See: (Seki 2003), (Hirata 1999), (Kuroda 2005), and (Yamaguchi 2011). Seki and Hirata show how the development of *genbun'itchi* was both an obstacle to be overcome and a tool to be deployed by early women writers of fiction. For his part, Yamaguchi attempts to pinpoint the developments that led to the convergence of letters and literature, pointing to the sudden interest in interiority and the widespread adoption of moveable type as significant contributing factors. Kuroda, explicitly building on Yamaguchi's earlier research, points to the publication of letters and diary entries in the 1902 publication of Kitamura Tōkoku's (1868–1894) complete works (*Zenshū* 全集) as the watershed moment in which letters were rendered structurally isomorphic with literature.
- <sup>2</sup> Tayama Katai was a journalist, literary critic, magazine editor, travelogue and fiction writer active during the late Meiji, Taisho, and Showa periods. One of the most influential authors of Japanese Naturalist fiction, his major works include *"The End of Juuemon"*, (*Juuemon no saigo* 重右衛門の最後, 1902), *The Quilt* (*Futon* 蒲団, 1907), *Life* (*Sei* 生, 1908), *Country Teacher* (*Inaka kyōshi* 田舎教師, 1909), etc. His *Futon* is typically pegged as the progenitor of the I-novel and has often been read as perverting the course of modern Japanese realist fiction, delimiting its scope to solipsistic records of the author's personal life that typically included more salacious and scandalous elements.
- <sup>3</sup> Two of the most well-argued takes on Yoshiko's letters include Fujimori (1993) and Levy (2006, particularly pp. 147–93).
- <sup>4</sup> The term *genbun'itchi* (言文一致, literally the "reconciliation of speech and writing"), first deployed by the scholar of Dutch learning Kanda Kōhei (1830–1898), was a Meiji-era (1868–1912) language reform movement that sought to suture the spoken and written components of the Japanese language which, from the Kamakura period (1185–1333) onward, had typically been viewed as incommensurate. Motivated in part by a desire to achieve parity with their Western counterparts, Japanese language reformers sought to produce a written vernacular more direct, immediate, efficient, and impartial than the range of styles extant in early Meiji. While complete saturation of the vernacular would not be achieved until after World War II, what emerged in the late 19th and early 20th century—a phonocentric style that "gradually came to be viewed as a transcription of the living voice"—would have wide-ranging consequences for the field of Japanese literature, if not Japanese culture more broadly (Suzuki 1996, p. 45). Suzuki (1996, pp. 42–47) offers a brief overview of the movement, while Karatani (1993, pp. 11–75) offers perhaps the most sophisticated theorization of the movement's effect on literature.
- <sup>5</sup> Begun in 1900 by the *tanka/haiku* poet Masaoka Shiki (1867–1902), the *shaseibun* movement advocated the "direct transcription of things as observed, without verbal embellishment or rhetorical exaggeration" (Suzuki 1996, p. 46). Leaders of the movement, which was itself related to the nature sketching (*shizen no suketchi* 自然のスケッチ) of the Naturalist writer Kunikida Doppo, encouraged the use of *genbun'itchi* because of its perceived direct transcription of reality.
- <sup>6</sup> As a Japanese literary movement, scholars typically divide Naturalism into two phases. The early phase, appearing in 1900 and lasting only a handful of years, is characterized by a facile and incomplete adoption and adaptation of Emile Zola's (1840–1902) determinism, which stressed the roles genetics and environment played in shaping one's behavior. Late Naturalism, spanning the years 1906–1910, "is characterized as a factual description of the author's private life, without the wider social dimension found in European naturalism" (Suzuki 1996, p. 79). Suzuki significantly complicates and extends upon this description in conversation with *Futon*. See: Suzuki (1996, pp. 69–92).
- <sup>7</sup> Depending on one's stance, the I-novel (*watakushi shōsetsu* or *shishōsetsu* 私小説) is either an indigenous and autobiographical literary form in which a single-voiced narrator objectively recounts the facts of the author's life, or it is less a codified literary genre than a meta-narrative or discourse whose characteristics were defined post factum and projected back onto a set of pre-existing texts. In English-language scholarship, Edward Fowler and Irmela Hijiya-Kirschner adopt the former stance, while Tomi Suzuki professes the latter.
- <sup>8</sup> According to unpublished data provided by the Research Group on Model Writing Composition Texts (*Bunhan kenkyū kai* 文範研究会), the years from 1875 to 1922 saw the publication of (at least) 79 style guides on letters. Of those 79, a full 50 were published from 1900 to 1922, suggesting a considerable increase in interest in the form.
- <sup>9</sup> To the best of my knowledge, almost no writers consider the possibility that letters could, or should, avoid straightforward, sincere expression. Sasaki Nobutsuna is the one exception to the rule, arguing that in messages admonishing the recipient, roundabout expression may be more effective. See: (Chikuhakuen 1906).
- <sup>10</sup> See: (Diaries 1906). The *bundan* (文壇) is typically described as a loose coterie of influential writers and publishers who both dictate access to favored publishing outlets and occupy seats on prestigious literary prize committees. Though less powerful in modern times as publishing outlets and prize committees have democratized and diversified, the *bundan* system was a stubborn roadblock—or significant boon—for writers attempting to make a name for themselves in the Meiji, Taisho, and early Showa eras.
- <sup>11</sup> A trend best exemplified by Katai's publication of "Frank Expression" (*Rokotsunaru byōsha* 露骨なる描写), in *Sun* (*Taiyō* 太陽) in February 1904.
- <sup>12</sup> Suzuki indeed devotes an entire chapter to the topic. See (Suzuki 1996, pp. 48–65).
- <sup>13</sup> The most well-known of these arguments is: (Nakamura 1958).
- <sup>14</sup> This fact Katai himself would willingly assert. See: (Nagayo 1915, p. 74).
- <sup>15</sup> The international phenomenon of the New Woman was a feminist ideal that sought to deploy radical social change to challenge the long-entrenched patriarchal establishment. Initially emerging in England in the late 19th century, and most famously embod-

ied in the female characters of Henry James's (1843–1916) novels, the term began circulating in early 20th century Japan owing to the rapid translation of Western scholarship. In the Japanese context, the moniker New Woman is most closely associated with the feminist magazine *Bluestockings* (*Seitō* 青鞥, 1911–1916) and its coterie of women writers and thinkers, though in common parlance it has been used to denote any women understood as “new” in their individual eras. New Women are typically identified by such physical markers as new forms of dress and hair styles, and their visible flaunting of traditional mores, and less visibly through their high rates of education. For a detailed overview of the phenomenon in both international and Japanese contexts, see (Malony et al. 2016, pp. 224–68).

As far as I can tell, more than an appellation for existing young women, the 墮落女学生 was a media phenomenon popularized by such print media as the *Mainichi Shimbun*, whose 35-article series 「女学生墮落物語」 was apparently intended to be moral hectoring as much as it was “news.” See: (Watanabe 1992).

I owe this excellent and persuasive reading to the suggestion of an anonymous reviewer.

Of course, the development of *genbun'itchi* had significant practical consequences for Japanese fiction. If by deploying the neutral *-ru* and *-ta* verb endings Japanese writers had finally uncovered a method for mimicking the third-person, omniscient narrator present in so much imported Western fiction, the rapid adoption of the vernacular in fiction also meant the denigration—and ultimately the disappearance—of the myriad styles and subject positions available to premodern writers. At the turn of the 20th century, however, and as my argument seeks to make clear, the trajectory of the *genbun'itchi*-versus-the-rest narrative was yet to be determined.

Other writers expressed similar sentiments. Yoda Gakkai, for example, described a similar feeling when reading the letters of Rai San'yō. See: (Gakkai 1905).

Among others, Shibusawa Eiichi advanced a similar argument: “The act of writing a letter is like meeting someone face to face. In other words, it is a matter of getting one person to fully understand what another person means to express.” 「手紙を書くというふことは、猶人と対面する如きものである。要は当方の意のある所を、遺憾なく十分に、先方に会得せしむるにあると思ふ。」 See: (Shibusawa 1905, p. 4).

Fujimori and Levy continue to set the standard here.

For a discussion of Japanese modernism's penchant for mixing high and low culture, see: (Gardner 2003).

Natsume Sōseki (1867–1916) is widely recognized as the most significant writer within the canon of modern Japanese literature.

Seki Reiko even notes this narrative dominated the period. See (Seki 2003, p. 52).

Kuroda summarizes this argument thusly:

明治三十年代後半、「公衆に向かって書く」「アート」としての「手紙文学」「手紙小説」という制度がメディアによって創設され、そして明治四十年代にかけてその呼称とともに普及してゆく。この事態の背後には、〈手紙〉が未だ〈文学〉たり得ないという「西欧」の〈文学〉に対する劣等感ともいべき危機的認識があったと同時に、当時の文芸思潮が〈文学〉に要求した要素を〈手紙〉という言説形式が保持しているのだという共有された強固な認識があったのだといえるだろう。その要素はすなわち、書き手の「感情」「面目」「真情」などと言い換えられもする一連の心性のことで、〈手紙〉にはそうした書き手の心性が十全に表象されているという〈信仰〉にも似た〈共同幻想〉が広範に分有されているのである。

In the latter half of the Meiji 30s, the system of “Epistolary Literature and Epistolary Novels as ‘art’ ‘written for a public audience’” was established by certain media before circulating more widely in the 40s together with those appellations. Underlying these developments was the sense of crisis—or otherwise put, the sense of inferiority—vis-à-vis the West because letters had not yet attained the status of literature proper in Japan. There was also the widely shared assumption that the form of the letter contained the essential elements demanded by contemporary literary discourse. To wit, letters contained the writers’ “emotion”, “appearance”, or “sentiment”, or what otherwise might be termed their “mentality”, and the idea that letters perfectly expressed this mentality took on the character of religious creed, a kind of widely proliferated shared illusion (Kuroda 2005, p. 11).

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