

## Article

# From *Kawaraban* to *Reportage*: Toward A Theory for Japanese Literary Journalism

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## Introduction

The term “literary journalism” is a contentious one; few have wholly agreed on the true nature of this genre, whose “pedigree,” as theorist Mark Kramer argues, is quite distinguished, dating at least from the seventeenth century, yet whose theorization is a relatively recent thing.<sup>1</sup> It is, in fact, only in the past few decades that the genre has been properly named, presumably in part as a response to the so-called “New Journalism” advanced in the 1960s by Tom Wolfe and other radical journalists.

The body of writing dedicated to defining and exploring literary journalism is nonetheless substantial, and our understanding of this deceptively complex genre grows apace. Superficially, “literary journalism” is made up of two straightforward terms, each of which has a reasonably clear meaning in itself. It is when they are joined that friction develops, for they are—or have become in the minds of many of their practitioners—mutually exclusive endeavors. We understand “literary” to suggest subjective writing, expressed in an artistic, entertaining style that carries a strong aroma of the author’s creativity, manipulation of language, setting, characters, and the plot itself. Style (including recent experiments with plainstyle) is nearly always a crucial factor; how something is said matters quite as much—and often more—than what is said.

Journalism, to the contrary, is reputed to be on the objective side of things, a claim made ever more stringently by practicing journalists as academic voices challenge whether language permits the existence of objectivity at all. In actual practice, journalism continues to focus on *what* is said, and to be interested primarily in four of the five famous W’s: who, what, when, and where; the *why*—motivation—is murky, messy, and speculative in too many cases to interest the fact-bent daily news reporter. Professional journalists, as a rule, avoid playing with style; are not (supposed to be) allowed to manipulate facts, quotes, or events; refrain from authorial commentary (except in editorial); and generally pursue a self-effacing manner that places events—never the author—at the forefront of the story.

So, how have these two apparently conflicting notions come together? How and why is literature also journalism, and vice versa?

In the first place, like most literary theories, the practice of literary journalism came long before anyone thought to ask what it really was. Some theorists trace the genre back

to Daniel Defoe's groundbreaking *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), which purported to tell the story of the outbreak of bubonic plague in London of 1665. The work was presented as factual—and to some extent it was—yet also fictional.<sup>2)</sup> Theorist and literary historian Lennard Davis, on the other hand, argues that news reportage began even earlier, with sixteenth-century “news ballads,” single sheet printings that covered events of their time, from floods and other natural disasters to the executions of criminals.

[I]f we move backward . . . from the full-blown narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the earlier printed prose narratives, we arrive at a common point, what the sixteenth century called “novels”—that is, printed news ballads and tales. The first intersection of print and narrative that was a genuine product of the technology of moveable type (and not simply the printed version of earlier nonprinted forms) was the news ballad of the sixteenth century which was called, among others things, a “novel.” The early prose narratives of the sixteenth century—tales of criminals, brief accounts of jokes and jests, Boccaccio-like love intrigues—were also called “novels.”<sup>3)</sup>

What Davis views as the origin of the modern novel, we may also see as proto-literary journalism. It is, as Linda Hutcheon argues, only since the nineteenth century that literature and history have been considered mutually exclusive disciplines,<sup>4)</sup> so why should journalism—history's close cousin—be different? In fact, in the early “news ballads” we see the urge to tell a story that is both new and news, a genre of writing that, even in its earliest days, surely relied on an interested readership eager for fresh tales, for its very survival.

Modern literary journalism, since that time, has developed its own distinct parameters, despite its lack of a formal, universally accepted definition. Modern literary journalists in the English language—writers like Joan Didion, Tom Wolfe, Norman Mailer, Hunter S. Thompson, Truman Capote, and dozens more—trace their art back through Ernest Hemingway, George Orwell, Stephen Crane, Charles Dickens.

But why does literary journalism exist at all? Theorists have considerably differing views on the subject. Phyllis Flus suggests that the genre serves as a means to narrowing the gap in respectability between the (privileged) “imaginative freedom and creativity” of literary writing, and the “discursive and mundane” nature of journalism.<sup>5)</sup> Ben Yagoda argues in his introduction to *The Art of Fact* that the genre assumes by its very nature a basis in fact and currency, and that its literary designs lie in the experimental, innovative efforts of its author. “Innovation is . . . important because, like portrait painting, rebounding, playing blues guitar, or doing quantum physics, high-level literary journalism is a tradition, with each practitioner standing on the shoulders of his or her predecessors.”<sup>6)</sup> This is no doubt true, and lends a distinctly Modernist tone to the notion of literary journalism, with special emphasis on “literary.” Yagoda's discourse resonates with that of Kramer, who is most concerned with the positioning, vis-à-vis the events narrated, of the writer's own subjectivity and “voice:” “the narrator of literary journalism has a personality, is a whole person, intimate, frank, ironic, wry, puzzled, judgmental, even self-

mocking—qualities academics and daily news reporters dutifully avoid as unprofessional and unobjective.”<sup>7)</sup>

Others, such as Norman Sims, argue more for the functionality of literary journalism, noting its capacity for bringing a sense of depth and immediacy to a story that might otherwise be little more (to readers) than a series of nameless, faceless statistics. Its function, therefore, is to rehumanize those caught up in events larger than themselves, and at the same time to show us “a very tiny part of the human condition,” for “the facts of the case are woven into a story and consequently become secondary to the tale of the people involved.”<sup>8)</sup> Taking up a similar theme, Shelley Fisher Fishken notes that literary journalism often presents “the stories of people who were dismissed and devalued because they had the ‘wrong’ race, class, gender, ethnicity, or sexual preference. They were stories of the powerless, their pain invisible, their cries inaudible, their membership in the human community implicitly denied.”<sup>9)</sup> Paul Many, in a related vein, suggests that the vaunted “objectivity” of conventional journalism actually leads to de-sensitization for reporters and readers alike. “What finally results from an over emphasis on such ‘objectivity’ is a gutless, institutional writing that causes readers to get cynical and jaded, and finally turns many off. Journalists also experience the same blunting of emotion in reporting such stripped-down stage sets of reality.”<sup>10)</sup>

### Literary Journalism in Japan

The history of literary journalism in Japan bears certain similarities to that of its English-language counterpart. Most prominent of these is the development of the *kawaraban*, or “clay-tile editions” in the late sixteenth century, so-named because early versions were said to have been carved into the soft clay of roof tiles, though no examples of this remain. Unlike the “news ballads” of which Davis writes, however, the *kawaraban* were, to some extent, contraband (perhaps explaining the need for a breakable—hence quickly disposable—medium), as the reporting of current events was forbidden by the Tokugawa government. *Kawaraban*, like “news ballads,” were used to report everything from wars and natural disasters to local gossip. The earliest extant example is a single-sheet depicting the victorious siege of Osaka castle by Tokugawa forces in 1614, but as one looks through the hundreds of sheets that followed over the ensuing two centuries, one notes that those depicting gossip—particularly of entertainers in the pleasure quarters—grow in frequency, along with somewhat more daring lampoons of government officials, often in the form of animals.<sup>11)</sup>

With the advent of Meiji, as in many other areas of its social, economic, and political development, Japan sought to develop its own Western-style press, partially in response to the establishment of several English-language newspapers in Japan during the early years of the new era. These ranged from newspapers written in a very dense, difficult style, devoted almost solely to political and economic news, which came to be known as *ōshimbun*, or “large newspapers,” to those written primarily in phonetic *hiragana* and *katakana* script, dealing mainly with local gossip and thus carrying on the tradition of the *kawaraban*. These were known as *koshimbun* (“small newspapers”), and, intended for a

less literate audience, were often read aloud to crowds to encourage sales. Indeed, one of Japan's oldest and most respected newspapers, the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, began as one of these, as its name—"read-and-sell"—clearly reflects.<sup>12)</sup>

This gives us a brief sense of where and how the modern Japanese press originated, but not how or why literary journalism has become so prominent. One could argue that a discernible split, though by no means a formal one, between so-called "serious" or "objective" journalism and what might be termed "popular" or "subjective" reportage occurred between the mid-1870s and the end of the century, as more seriously-minded pioneer journalists such as Fukuchi Gen'ichirō (1841-1906) took a comparatively high road toward a modern press, beginning with Fukuchi's coverage of the Satsuma Rebellion of 1877.<sup>13)</sup> By contrast, former *gesaku* writers such as Kanagaki Robun (1829-1894) and Kubota Hikosaku (1846-1898)—the last gasp of Edo-era vulgar fiction—turned to producing embellished accounts of actual current events, perhaps best exemplified in their coverage (among many others) of the *dokufu*, or "poison woman" incidents, sensational crimes committed by desperate women between the 1870s and 1880s.<sup>14)</sup>

Such experiments with embellished, even lurid reportage were relatively short-lived, however, and it would be a mistake to suggest that the literary journalism that followed in Japan bore much resemblance to such writing. It was, rather, the efforts of men like Fukuchi, whose vision of the Japanese press was far ahead of its time, that succeeded in developing a press that was, if not always founded on individual newsgathering, at least dedicated to producing factual reporting.

One could, nonetheless, point to at least one precedent established by Kanagaki and Kubota, namely, the close relationship that would develop between fiction writers and the world of journalism. Whereas writers such as Dickens, Crane, Orwell, Hemingway, Capote, Mailer, and so on, were and are comparatively rare in the West, it is remarkable to note how many of Japan's most important writers also doubled as newspaper men in the era prior to the Second World War, a trend that continues, though on a smaller scale, to the present day.

### **Writing War: The *Tokuhain* (Special Correspondents)**

How have such writers been drawn into the journalism game? In prewar Japan, it would seem, this was simply the natural fall-back for many writers; Kunikida Doppo (1871-1908), one of Japan's early modern Romantic writers, worked on and off as a reporter and editor for the *Kokumin Shimbun* in the late 19th century, and even spent several months aboard an Imperial Navy frigate during the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95), culminating in the publication of *Aite tsūshin* (Communiqué to a beloved brother; 1894-95). Tayama Katai (1872-1930), a leading writer of the Naturalist movement in the early twentieth century, served as a combat photographer with the Imperial Army during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05), resulting in numerous texts detailing conditions he saw at the front.<sup>15)</sup>

It was, however, the Second World War that succeeded in mobilizing dozens of Japan's major writers, however they may have been coerced, into writing news. And while most dutifully produced upbeat tales of the exploits of the Imperial Army, a few actually dared

risk the wrath of the wartime government by touching upon “taboo” subjects: incompetent administrative practices are noted, for instance, in Ibuse Masuji’s (1898-1993) *Hana no machi* (1942; *City of Flowers*), though he cautiously avoided the truly dangerous issue of how Allied POWs were being treated on the Malay Peninsula; and the killing of civilians at Nanjing in 1937 forms the heart of Ishikawa Tatsuzō’s (1905-1985) highly controversial *Ikite iru heitai* (1946; *Living Soldiers*), the attempted publication of which in 1944 nearly landed Ishikawa and his publisher in military prison.<sup>16)</sup>

Most war reporting prior to the early 1960s was, however, essentially propaganda owing to fear of reprisal from successive civil and military administrations that severely limited freedom of the press from the Meiji period through the end of the Allied Occupation that followed the Second World War.<sup>17)</sup> It was, in fact, not until American participation in the Vietnam conflict got underway late in 1964 that Japanese reporters had the opportunity to write more or less freely about war without fear of reprisal from their own government, presumably because Japan, publicly, at least, remained neutral.<sup>18)</sup> This did not, of course, protect Japanese reporters from harm at the hands of the North and South Vietnamese, as Okamura Akihiko (1929-1985) discovered when Ngo Dinh Diem’s secret police grabbed him from the sidewalk as he photographed a bloody Saigon demonstration in 1964; his capture was followed immediately by a daring rescue by other foreign correspondents, who literally snatched him from the state security headquarters in Saigon before he could be taken into its hidden interrogation rooms.<sup>19)</sup> Okamura was less fortunate when he voluntarily surrendered to a Vietcong unit in the so-called “iron triangle” north of Saigon in March of 1965; suspected of being a U.S. spy, he was held as a prisoner of war for nearly two months before being sent back to Saigon. His trip did, however, gain him a personal interview with President Huynh Than Phat of the Provisional People’s Government in South Vietnam, which at that time existed in hiding among the guerrillas in the jungle. Japan’s new freedom of the press also did not protect correspondents from the risks of combat, as novelist Kaikō Takeshi (1930-1989) learned when, accompanying a “search-and-destroy” mission north of Saigon on February 14, 1965, the 200-man ARVN unit he had joined was ambushed and nearly annihilated, leaving him, his photographer, and a mere seventeen survivors to flee for the safety of their base camp to the south.<sup>20)</sup>

What was the purpose of reporting such as this? In Okamura’s case as well as Kaikō’s, it seems to have been the simple desire to step outside of orthodox reporting, to disengage from “official” news sources such as USIS press conferences (half-affectionately known as the “Five O’Clock Follies” among reporters), to share with readers something they could never find from those sources. Troop movements, new initiatives with the local populace, and the political turmoil of Vietnam aside, Kaikō used his talent as a novelist to create vivid impressions of the Vietnamese countryside, the smells of its cities, the mood of its soldiers in the field. He was also able to share the sensation of what it meant to be under fire. Okamura’s accounts of the Vietcong, similarly, rounded out the more conventional accounts of writers like Oda Makoto (1932-2007), whose reports from Hanoi were strongly influenced by his open sympathy for the North Vietnamese cause—a sympathy echoed through much of Japan. Our vision of the Vietcong through Okamura’s eyes, by contrast,

is not only close-up, real and immediate, but also strikes one as unusually balanced in its political perspective (in part by Okamura's simultaneous sense of admiration and fear of his "hosts").<sup>21)</sup>

### Natural Disaster Coverage

Not all Japanese literary journalism, of course, has been devoted to war reportage; indeed, just as producers of the pre-Meiji period *kawaraban* were equally interested in natural disasters such as fires, floods, typhoons, and earthquakes, so too modern literary journalists in Japan have found such events suitable material for reaching more deeply into the "human condition," to borrow Sim's phrase.

One such event occurred on September 1, 1923, when the Great Kantō Earthquake (*Kantō daishinsai*) struck Tokyo, Yokohama, and Odawara. As a result of the earthquake and the fires that followed, more than 140,000 residents of these areas perished. Among the dead were several hundred Korean immigrants who were lynched by angry mobs convinced by rumors that the Koreans had been looting Japanese shops, and even that they were plotting an insurrection.

Japanese novelists and other literati were swift to offer their accounts of the earthquake, perhaps not so much by way of sharing the main event—the earthquake itself was hardly news—but to provide microcosmic perspectives to an event simply too massive—too sublime—to be related through the conventional newspaper story. What made their accounts all the more intriguing was how each writer worked within his own established position in the overall literary community. In his "Daishin zakki" (1923; Ruminations on the earthquake), for instance, Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1892-1927) pokes satirical fun at those who spread rumors about the Koreans, noting that "as a good citizen, I am bound to believe that all those fires were set by Bolsheviks and lawless Koreans. Moreover, as a good citizen, I'm duty-bound to despise Kikuchi Kan, who doesn't even pretend to believe those stories."<sup>22)</sup> Masamune Hakuchō (1879-1962), perhaps influenced by his Christianity, finds the earthquake a humbling experience; against such power, what do all the debates about socialism really amount to? Yet even Masamune cannot resist noting the "vaguely erotic" stories he hears of half-naked women fleeing the destruction.<sup>23)</sup>

Rather more poignant is the story of the Korean-Japanese poet Kim Soun (1907-1981), who writes bitterly of being surrounded by an angry mob as he defiantly wears Korean-style robes while taking refuge in Osaka after the quake, only to be rescued by a Japanese religious leader. Kim's message is to judge people individually, not as a mob, precisely the error that led to the slaughter of the Koreans. A militant account of this tale is Akita Ujaku's (1883-1962) play *Gaikotsu no buchō* (1924; Dance of the skeletons), in which Korean refugees from the earthquake are hunted down like escaped criminals; the conclusion of the play is that the Japanese are trapped in a "rusty dead morality," and cannot grasp that those they persecute are as human as themselves. Akita's project in this piece, like Kim's, is to shed a humanist and humanizing light on the victims of the 1923 earthquake, to suggest that both the Korean victims of vigilante violence and the Japanese themselves need to be examined on an individual basis to be understood.

What is perhaps most interesting about the literary reportage of these events, however, is how rapidly the earthquake itself was dispensed with in favor of a vast assortment of approaches to its contours. The Korean issue was, obviously, potentially a political hotbed that came at a time when the Japanese authorities were already concerned (as Akutagawa's comments above seem to suggest) about the rise of workers' movements and socialism in the world; but what is one to make of Akutagawa's satirical tone, or even the more lyrical passages in Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's (1886-1965) writing, in Tayama Katai's, that seems actually to aestheticize the carnage? Clearly, in the prewar era, even a natural disaster of epic proportions could be exploited as something artistic, even "beautiful."

This aestheticization of devastation, by contrast, is nowhere present in accounts of the Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake that struck shortly before dawn on January 17, 1995; rather, we see a more conscious focus on two aspects of the earthquake: anger toward the inability of the local governmental infrastructure to cope with the disaster, and the traumatic effect the earthquake wrought on its victims. One of the first pieces published after the earthquake was the brief memoir of Tanaka Yasuo (b. 1956), whose career as a novelist began in 1980 and has intermingled with his life as a politician. Tanaka traveled to Kansai on January 21, four days after the disaster, riding around the affected areas on a 50cc scooter, distributing bottled water and other necessities to whomever he met. Tanaka's memoirs of this period, entirely non-fictional, also touch on the theme of relief efforts by various government agencies, many of which were simply overwhelmed by the scope of the crisis.<sup>24)</sup>

A similar sentiment, but more pointed, is reflected in novelist Oda Makoto's 2002 novel, *Fukai oto* (Sounds of the deep), which covers the travails of a woman rescued from the rubble of her home by a man whose estranged son, like the woman's daughter, roasted to death in the sea of flames that followed the quake. In some of his more poignant moments, Oda reflects on how little progress has been made since the Second World War; given that water mains were quickly destroyed during the earthquake, fire hydrants were rendered useless, forcing citizens—as they did during Allied bombing raids in 1944-45—to fight fires with bucket brigades.

Among the more bizarre approaches to the earthquake is Murakami Haruki's (b. 1949) collection of short stories, *Kami no kodomotachi wa mina odoru* (2000; All the god's children dance), which really does not count as journalism in any sense, save that it draws attention to the lingering presence of post-traumatic stress disorder among those who survived the earthquake. Some of these works concern those who lost loved ones in the quake, or else simply—like Murakami himself—left the city of Kobe prior to its destruction. The final two works in the collection, on the other hand, are more apocalyptic, presaging the next "Great Kantō Earthquake," which is long overdue. The first of these, "Kaeru-kun, Tokyo o sukuu" (1999; Mr. Frog will save Tokyo), is a fantasy in which a frog battles a gigantic subterranean worm, who is occasionally awakened by all the noise from the city above him and shows his irritation by moving, causing terrible earthquakes. The underlying hint of the story is, of course, that there really is no saving Tokyo from what will come; it is only a matter of time. The second story, "Hachimitsu pai" (2000; Honey pie), concerns a little girl who suffers nightly from horrifying dreams in which the "Jishin

no otoko,” or “earthquake man,” is coming to put her and her family into a little box. Here Murakami plays on one of his favorite themes—death—but a constant underlying message is that, while Kobe’s traumas are played out in the present, those of Tokyo remain in the future, possibly just around the next corner. Despite his obviously fictional writing, and his often lyrical passages, however, Murakami never really comes to the point of making “art” out of the anguish of the earthquake’s victims, whether they were present in Kobe on that day or not.

### Crime and Other Social Issues

Historically speaking, Japanese literary journalism has ridden the vicissitudes of current events, just like anywhere else. Japan’s postwar history, as anyone can see, has had its moments of relative calm, and its periods of chaotic change, conflict, and confusion. Between 1952 and 1970, for instance, during which time Japan was rocked by scandals, anti-government protest movements, workers’ strikes, and its indirect participation in the conflicts in Southeast Asia, there was a great deal to write about, and novelists poured out of the woodwork to exert their newfound freedom of expression on such topics as the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the war in Vietnam, the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, the postwar manhunts (and trials) of Nazi war criminals, government scandals, the rise of Communism in China (and Japan’s growing alienation from its neighbor), and so on.

The 1970s and 1980s, by contrast, were relatively calm, not because all the problems had been solved, but because, it seems, many had grown disillusioned with criticizing people and agencies that did not appear to respond. At the same time, of course, the Japanese economy was showing dramatic signs of improvement, including a booming export of products to the United States. Steady economic growth meant, among other things, better pay and job security, and significant rises in standards of living. While there were still important issues to write about—domestic terrorism, nuclear power, the Nixon “shock” and the oil crisis, Lockheed and Recruit—the country was, as a whole, enjoying a greater sense of peace and prosperity than any previous time in the postwar.

More recently—particularly in the past decade—Japanese writers, along with their readers, have grown increasingly concerned about the rise of crime in Japan, especially crime committed by young people. Indeed, juvenile issues of all types, from teenage prostitution (euphemistically termed *enjo kōsai*, or “compensated dating”) to truancy (*futōkō*), the *hikikomori* (“shut-in”) phenomenon to bullying (*ijime*), and finally assault, extortion, even murder, have seriously shaken the faith of many Japanese in the oft-touted tranquility and homogeneity of their society. As these concerns reached crisis stage in the late 1990s and early twenty-first century, a number of major Japanese novelists, walking in the footsteps of their predecessors, took up their pens and began to write about them.

Easily the most widely discussed case of juvenile crime in the late 1990s was the infamous “Sakakibara jiken” in Osaka, in which a fourteen year-old boy—known always in the press as “Shōnen A” due to privacy laws regarding juvenile criminal suspects—murdered a primary school student, then beheaded the corpse and buried it in a nearby



park. The sheer savagery of this act forced the mainstream press, along with most of its audience, to label the young perpetrator an “insane monster.” It was, then, left to the literary journalists to explore this boy’s life and background, to provide in-depth reportage that might help to explain, as Norman Sims might have said, the *why* of the case.

Among the more conventional in-depth journalistic responses to the Sakakibara incident were Itō Yoshirō’s *“Shōnen A” no kokuhaku* (1999; Confessions of “Youth A”) and Takayama Fumihiko’s *“Shōnen A:” 14-sai no shōzō* (1998; “Youth A:” Portrait of a 14 year-old). Itō’s work was really more of a rehearsal of the various “Shōnen A” cases perpetrated in Japan during the past couple of decades, and his thesis, in a simple nutshell, is that these children are linked either by physical and mental abuse at home or, equally serious, by neglect. “For dinner, Hisashi’s mother would merely leave money on the table; in the evenings, he watched TV at his friends’ homes, then returned home to end his day. All he dreamed of was being treated kindly, and he was continually betrayed in this desire; one hopes that in this one case, at least, we may stop using terms like ‘monster’ and ‘devil,’”<sup>25)</sup> writes Itō in his first chapter, a theme repeated near the end when he describes these juvenile acts of violence as “an SOS from the children,” and argues that “more than severe penalties for child offenders, it seems to me that giving them love is a better way of helping them stand up again.”<sup>26)</sup>

Focused solely on the Sakakibara incident, Takayama’s analysis sheds somewhat more detailed—and perhaps more emotionally balanced—light on this particular case, and what he finds is disturbing: that the teenager in question came from a somewhat bizarre family whose hatred of cats led them, as a family, to stone cats that wandered into their garden; that he himself had a history of killing and dismembering small animals; that every room in the house had televisions and video game sets, leading to isolationism among the family members; that the boy was most intrigued by the worst sorts of horror films; that he had a cultish fascination with Adolf Hitler, and read *Mein Kampf* repeatedly, often doodling swastikas in his room.<sup>27)</sup>

These images return in more literary form in the hands, yet again, of Murakami Haruki, whose 2002 novel *Umibe no Kafka* (*Kafka on the shore*), while best read as a work describing responses to traumatic situations throughout Japan’s modern history—his three protagonists spent their childhoods during the Second World War, the late 1960s, and the late 1980s, respectively—seems to play on some of this information; Murakami’s hero, Tamura Kafka, is a fifteen year-old reliving the Oedipus myth, but the murder, dismemberment, and consumption of cats is an important theme, as is Kafka’s own fascination with Adolf Eichmann and the history of the rise and fall of Nazi Germany. Murakami’s message, however, is clearly rehabilitative: while in fact Tamura Kafka actually does murder his father, and seduce his own mother, these events take place in a metaphysical realm, carried out on victims who are only questionably real, at least for Kafka; he may, indeed, be hallucinating throughout the book. Either way, Murakami presents him as a sympathetic hero driven by fate to these terrible acts, and more importantly, as a young man trying to reconstitute himself as a positive-facing individual through them.

A similar theme was taken up by Murakami Ryū (b. 1952) in his highly unsettling

novel *Kyōseichū* (2000; Symbiotic worm), in which a young *hikikomori*—a pathological condition in which the patient isolates himself or herself from the world—is tormented by Internet bullies, and finally exacts his vengeance upon them using surplus nerve gas buried during the war by the Japanese Imperial Army, using a method more or less identical to the one used by AUM Shinrikyō cult members in their March 20, 1995 sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway system.<sup>28)</sup>

Japanese literature of the past few years has abounded with reactions to events such as the Sakakibara incident, some of them—Takami Kōshun's (b. 1969) *Battle Royale* (1997), for instance—indicting the Japanese social system itself for driving children to compete to the death (in school, in the race for university education, for the best jobs); others merely playing on the theme that most terrified the Japanese public at the time: the notion that children, as well as adults, could be driven to the most barbarous acts. Critic Nakamata Akio argues this to be the case in Kuroda Akira's (b. 1977) novel *Made in Japan* (2000), whose major theme is children exploited by the child pornography industry, but which ends with the severed head of one of the children resting on a towel atop a table. In such images as these, the author drew the public hysteria regarding the Sakakibara incident—as well as numerous other incidents of violence involving children—into her fictional world, offering a new, imaginative angle on a news story that had not yet made the shift into history.

### Literary Journalism and the “Journalistic Novel”

It certainly may be argued, of course, that works like *Battle Royale*, *Made in Japan*, *Kyōseichū*, *Umibe no Kafka*, have no place being discussed as journalism, which is—as our earlier definition suggested—always nonfiction, always true; occasionally manipulated, but never made up. Some may argue the same about Kaikō Takeshi's *Kagayakeru yami*, which contains both fictional and nonfictional elements. Such arguments are valid, and if one takes an unproblematic approach to the epistemological questions of “truth” and “reality,” they are more or less impossible to refute.

But can we, now or ever, afford to be unproblematic about such matters? In the first place, is it even possible to know, for certain, what is truth and what fiction? If we go no further, our response to the question becomes an epistemological cop-out. Yet, even if such is the case, whether there is such a thing as an absolute, objective reality or truth outside of ourselves, it is virtually impossible for the individual to apprehend that truth or reality without doing so through the lens of the subjective self, which instantly, automatically forces that “objective” reality across the border, so to speak, into the realm of the subjective.

This is not, of course, to deny the reality of events themselves. Looking, for instance, at the Sino-Japanese War, the Great Kantō Earthquake, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Sakakibara incident, and so forth, there is no denying the essential events themselves: Chinese and Japanese troops clashed and died; Tokyo collapsed and burned; Hiroshima and Nagasaki were incinerated; an elementary student was killed and dismembered by a fourteen year-old boy. These we do not dispute; but once

we represent them, narrativize them and tell their stories, the events change. The objective event that once lay outside our experience becomes something internal to us, and in processing its realities (plural, not singular) we rewrite and reconstitute that story into a subjective one with which we can deal. This is essentially the same strategy employed by Roland Barthes in the process of demystifying “mythologies,” that is, cultural narratives (concerning history, race relations, politics) half a century ago;<sup>29)</sup> that Hayden White brought to bear in his argument that history is not events but our selection and presentation of events;<sup>30)</sup> or that Linda Hutcheon raises yet again when she argues more recently that both fiction and nonfictional discourse (though she mentions only history here) “derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs,”<sup>31)</sup> and goes on to note that postmodern fictions—of which some of the above may or may not qualify, depending upon one’s definition of the postmodern—“openly assert that there are only *truths* in the plural, and never one Truth; and there is rarely falseness *per se*, just others’ truths.”<sup>32)</sup>

If this is the case, then the argument for maintaining of such strict boundaries between, say, literary journalism and what might be termed the *journalistic novel*—such as, I would argue, those listed above might qualify—becomes tenuous. What *is* critical, once we complete the end-run around the veracity debate, or even the genre debate, is what a given text actually does. To pose a question that may seem a little odd coming at the end of this essay: what is the ultimate function of the orthodox news story, the literary journalism piece, or even the journalistic novel?

It is tempting to say that the first informs, the second persuades, and the third entertains, and to some degree this is true, but my point would be that, particularly in Japan, news articles in the mainstream print media (I mean chiefly the three major newspapers: the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, the *Asahi Shimbun*, and the *Mainichi Shimbun*), are often written not merely to inform readers of the facts, but to inform the public of the collective *party line*, the official view of a particular event or character in an event. This is particularly true in the cases of murder suspects, who are usually painted in the media as monsters long before they ever come to trial. The role of the literary journalist—that is, the writer of subjective, nonfiction *reportage*, as it were—is frequently to offer the other side, sometimes to tell the accused’s side of the story, other times to put a human face on the various participants, as with Murakami Haruki’s two books on the AUM Shinrikyō incident.<sup>33)</sup> And finally, the work of journalistic fiction—novels and stories written based on real events that remain part of the news cycle, possible only in a country where publication turnaround is days and weeks, rather than months and years—provides yet another take on the event, the participants, or events and participants similar enough to these that the public makes the connection.<sup>34)</sup> And while the first and second types of reporting frequently offer competing views of a story, ironically it may be the third that provides the most thought-provoking narrative, the one that allows readers to empathize, “get into the head” of the perpetrator, the victim, or the innocent bystander.

There can be little doubt, then, that the genre of literary journalism—including what I have termed the “journalistic novel”—has played a critical role in the formulation of public opinion regarding major current events, and will continue to do so in the future. As

Japan's mainstream mass media, with its close ties to government, business, and industry, continues to follow a relatively safe, conservative, homogeneous line, and its handful of professional literary journalists write the other side of that debate, it remains the task of the *literati*, even as it did in the days of Kunikida Doppo, Tayama Katai, and Natsume Sōseki (1867-1916), to offer the unexpected, sometimes radical, always in-depth and fascinating side to Japan's major news stories.

### **Conclusion: The Press Clubs and Literary Journalism**

Hutcheon has argued convincingly that the New Journalism of the 1960s, a movement begun by Tom Wolfe as a rejection of mainstream reporting, was born out of mistrust toward “official” sources of information, particularly those originating in the U.S. government. “The Vietnam War,” writes Hutcheon, “created a real distrust of the official ‘facts’ as presented by the military and the media, and in addition, the ideology of the 1960s had licenced a revolt against homogenized forms of experience.”<sup>35)</sup>

This statement, excepting the reference to Vietnam, could well formulate a manifesto for Japanese literary journalists of the postwar period. One reason that literary journalism has been so critical a presence in Japan has been the ubiquitous presence of the press clubs, organizations closely tied to major government organs, businesses, and industrial organizations that often receive their information directly from those sources, reporting it more or less as it comes to them. While this is, rightly, perceived by many as a subversion of the genuine “free press,” in the sense that it negates the advantages of investigation and newsgathering by reporters who dig stories out, the more troubling aspect of the press clubs is the understanding among the major news outlets—print and electronic—on what will be reported and what is to be suppressed.

Murakami Gen'ichi, an historian and commentator on the Japanese press, has argued that the press clubs formed in the prewar days when reporters from the major newspapers would gather at lunchtime and share what they had learned that day.<sup>36)</sup> What began as a friendly gesture toward cooperative reporting has led, according to Murakami, to increasingly rigid strictures in the present era that have largely homogenized news reporting. “Because of this agreement system,” writes Murakami, “the sense of competition among various news agencies has markedly decreased, and ‘scoop’ articles [*tokudane*] have all but disappeared . . .”<sup>37)</sup> It is also difficult to deny that largely uniform reporting creates the illusion of accuracy, even of truth, for those who read it.

While Murakami's critique of the Japanese press is at times overstated—he grants, but under-emphasizes, the fact that the Japanese are among the best informed public in the world—his concerns about the press clubs do suggest a system in which the alternative voice, to say nothing of an actual opposition press, is in fact lacking. As early as 1980 social commentator Hidaka Rokurō (b. 1917) argued that the postwar Japanese press, unable to reconfigure its wartime role as a tool of the government, merely continued to disseminate uncritically the postwar government's agenda.<sup>38)</sup> Even more vociferous on the collusion between government and the mass media has been radical journalist Honda Katsuichi (b. 1932), whose virulent critiques are directed not only at government, industry

and big business, but at the press itself. “The mass media’s connection to the powers that be is a frightful thing indeed,” writes Honda. “Given the tendency of power to corrupt, it is necessary for journalism to continue to criticize the powerful almost as a matter of course. There cannot be a coincidence of interests.”<sup>39)</sup> Historian William de Lange, echoing Honda, asserts not only the highly problematic matter of “the exceptionally close relationship between the reporters and their news source,” but that “the Japanese press club has developed into an institution that has an unchallenged monopoly on the flow of news . . .” and that this has led to “the artless regurgitation of press room announcement and, hence, is generally referred to as ‘announcement journalism’ (*happyō jānarizumu*).”<sup>40)</sup> Interestingly, Honda relates this “coincidence of interests,” in part at least, to the economic survival of the press, particularly of weekly and monthly magazines; unlike in many countries, subscription and home delivery of magazines in Japan is not the norm—instead, they are sold at kiosks and news stands—leaving the magazine industry dependent upon major corporations for large subscriptions. Printing something damaging about one of these corporations, he argues, can lead to cancellations that represent a significant loss to the publishing company.<sup>41)</sup>

But it is the homogenization of reporting that concerns most critics of the press club system. “With the papers working together to make sure no one is left out or behind, writes Maggie Farley, “front pages of the major papers consistently feature the same stories and sometimes even the same headlines.”<sup>42)</sup> While far less damning than Honda or de Lange in her criticism of the press club system, Farley nonetheless does find something ominous in the manner in which members of press clubs bond together, sharing information with one another, yet not necessarily with the general public. “The close relationships cultivated in and out of the club, therefore, may make the reporters more informed but leave the public less so.”<sup>43)</sup>

If this is indeed the case—and most commentators are agreed, to a greater or lesser extent, that it is—then where are Japanese readers to turn in order to hear an alternative voice, another perspective on events whose reporting in the major press organs is relatively homogenous? The answer, clearly, is to those who, as journalist Sakurai Yoshiko expresses it, stand outside the system. “To be able to report from the scene of the action is a spectacular thing, but in Japan we never see anyone doing this who isn’t already ‘ruined’ in his or her career. This manner of evaluating our journalists is one of Japan’s great weaknesses.”<sup>44)</sup>

What Japan *does* have going for it is the longstanding relationship that has existed between its professional literati—of whom the above mentioned writers are only a handful—and the current events that require a fresh slant, an unhindered approach, a disinterested (and yet, unquestionably subjective) perspective. It is, in fact, one of the great paradoxes of Japanese literary journalism that the most genuine accounts of its current history are to be found not among the “objective” writings of its detached, professional journalists, but rather in the subjective, personally tainted ruminations of its most gifted crafters of narrative prose. This is, however, an untroubling paradox; rather, if the essay above has demonstrated anything, surely it is that the relationship between the literary artist and current events, which demonstrably existed in the early Tokugawa

period, and may be even older, remains just as critical today. One might even argue that the genre is more important in Japan than in most societies, since its practitioners, working in a social system that has for centuries assumed and accepted some form of central control over “official” news, have rarely shrunk from their self-appointed task of telling what American radio announcer Paul Harvey might call “the rest of the story.”

## Notes

- 1) Mark Kramer, “Breakable Rules for Literary Journalists” in Norman Sims and Mark Kramer, eds., *Literary Journalism* (1995), 21.
- 2) See Robert Mayer, “The Reception of *A Journal of the Plague Year* and the Nexus of Fiction and History in the Novel” in *English Literary History* No. 57 (1990); also see Kramer (1995). The work to which they refer is Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, 1722.
- 3) Lennard Davis, *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel* (1983), 45-46.
- 4) Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), 105.
- 5) Phyllis Flus, *The Politics and Poetics of Journalistic Narrative* (1994), 2.
- 6) Ben Yagoda, “Preface” to Ben Yagoda and Kevin Kerrane, eds., *The Art of Fact* (1998), 14.
- 7) Kramer (1995), 23.
- 8) Norman Sims, *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century* (1990), 13. Cf. Sims, “The Art of Literary Journalism” in Norman Sims and Mark Kramer, eds., *Literary Journalism* (1995).
- 9) Shelley Fisher Fishken, “The Borderlands of Culture: Writing by W.E.B. Du Bois, James Agee, Tylie Olsen, and Gloria Anzaldua” in *Literary Journalism*, edited by Norman Sims and Mark Kramer (1995), 133.
- 10) Paul Many, “Literary Journalism: Newspapers’ Last, Best Hope” in *The Connecticut Review* 18:1 (Spring, 1996), 64-65.
- 11) For more on this subject, see Peter Duus, “Weapons of the weak, weapons of the strong—the development of the Japanese political cartoon” in *Journal of Asian Studies* 60:4 (Nov. 2001).
- 12) See in this regard Honda Yasuo, *Shimbun shōsetsu no tanjō* (1998). For more on “large” and “small” newspapers in general, see also Okitsu Kaname, “Bakumatsu kaikaki bungaku kenkyū” in *Meiji kaikaki bungakushū* (1966).
- 13) For an excellent study of Fukuchi Gen’ichirō’s contribution to modern Japanese journalism, see James Huffman’s *Politics of the Meiji Press: The Life of Fukuchi Gen’ichirō* (1980).
- 14) I have dealt with Kanagaki’s reportage of the Takahashi O-Den case of 1876-77 in some detail in “Who’s Afraid of Takahashi O-Den? ‘Poison Woman’ Stories and Literary Journalism in Early Meiji Japan” in *Japanese Language and Literature* 38:2 (2004).
- 15) However, Tayama’s stories on the subject, “Ippeisotsu” (1907) and “Ippeisotsu jūsatsumo” (1917) were published somewhat too late to be read as journalism, as was Sakurai Tadayoshi’s memoir of that conflict *Nikudan* (1906).
- 16) As with Tayama and Sakurai’s writings on the Russo-Japanese War, brilliant works such as Ibuse’s *Kuroi ame* (1956) and Ōoka Shōhei’s *Nobi* (1952) and *Reite senki* (1967-69) are not mentioned here; given the many years that intervened between the works and the events they narrate, they lack the currency to be legitimately termed “journalism.”
- 17) For more on this subject, see Jay Rubin, “From Wholesomeness to Decadence: The Censorship of Literature under the Allied Occupation” in the *Journal of Japanese Studies* 11:1 (Winter 1985).

- 18) For a fascinating account of how the Japanese government worked behind the scenes in support of the U.S. military, see Thomas R.H. Havens, *Fire Across the Sea* (1987).
- 19) Related in Okamura Akihiko, *Minami Vetonamu jūgunki* (1965).
- 20) See Kaikō Takeshi, *Betonamu senki* (1965) and *Kagayakeru yami* (1968).
- 21) This was rather unusual among Japanese correspondents in Vietnam; Oda was pro-North, as noted above, and even Honda Katsuichi, one of Japan's most quintessentially professional reporters, was openly sympathetic to the North Vietnamese. Kaikō Takeshi, despite being a founder of the Beheiren (Peace in Vietnam Committee), over the course of three tours in Vietnam (1964-65, 1968, 1973) grew disillusioned, and later mistrustful, of North Vietnamese intentions toward the south.
- 22) Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, "Daishin zakki" in *Kantō Daishinsai* (1996), 222. Kikuchi Kan (1888-1948), a well-known novelist and playwright, was among his closest friends.
- 23) Masamune Hakuchō, "Bunmei no chikara no hakujakusa" in *Kantō Daishinsai* (1996), 224-225.
- 24) See Tanaka Yasuo, *Kōbe shinsai nikki* (1996).
- 25) Itō Yoshirō, "*Shōnen A*" no kokuhaku (1999), 16.
- 26) Itō (1999), 241.
- 27) Takayama Fumihiko, "*Shōnen A*:" 14-sai no shōzō (1998).
- 28) For further analysis of *Kyōseichū* and other novels by Murakami Ryū as journalistic fiction, see Strecher, "(R) evolution in the Land of the Lonely: Murakami Ryū and the Project to Overcome Modernity" in *Japanese Studies* 28:3 (Dec. 2008).
- 29) See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (1972).
- 30) See Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973).
- 31) Hutcheon (1988), 105.
- 32) Hutcheon (1988), 109.
- 33) These were *Andāguraundo* (1997) and *Yakusoku sareta basho de: Underground 2* (1998).
- 34) In the United States, by contrast, it is the television news media that has seen increasing crossover in recent years. Fox News, for instance, makes no secret of the fact that its reporting is biased to the conservative agenda, presumably in response to the perception of a left-leaning bias in many other news stations; and Robin Meade's "Morning Express" on CNN demonstrates how far this once respected news network has drifted into entertainment-oriented pseudo-journalism.
- 35) Linda Hutcheon (1988), 115.
- 36) Murakami Gen'ichi, *Kisha kurabu tte nan da!?* (2001), 69-70.
- 37) Murakami Gen'ichi (2001), 82. The "agreements" of which Murakami writes are the *kokuban kyōtei*, or "blackboard agreements," in which editorial staff keep a detailed accounting on a blackboard of what, when, and how various news items are to be reported.
- 38) See especially Hidaka Rokurō, *The Price of Affluence: Dilemmas of Contemporary Japan* (1984); and *Sengo shisō o kangaeru* (1980).
- 39) Honda Katsuichi, *The Impoverished Spirit in Contemporary Japan* (1993), 219.
- 40) William de Lange, *A History of Japanese Journalism* (1998), 181-187.
- 41) Honda Katsuichi, *Masukomi ka, jōnarizumu ka* (2000), 114-115.
- 42) Maggie Farley, "Japan's Press and the Politics of Scandal" in Susan Pharr and Ellie Krauss, eds., *Media and Politics in Japan* (1996), 137.
- 43) Farley (1996), 138.

- 44) Sakurai Yoshiko, "Nihon no masukomi yo: Aru beki sugata o tachikaere" (2005), 5-6.

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