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The Defeat of Rationality and the Triumph of Mother "Chaos": Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's Journey

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Summary

Akutagawa Ryūnosuke did not write a single love story. In fact Women do not appear in his narratives nearly as often as men do. When they do appear, many are portrayed as selfish, aggressive, deceitful, dominating and ultimately destructive, while male figures are often described as victims of female dominance and venom. This is one aspect which characterizes Akutagawa's writings.

Another aspect is the way in which Akutagawa confronted nature as a hostile entity to his sense of well being. This is all but unprecedented in the Japanese literary tradition, making him unique among his contemporaries. To him nature represented a savage, irrational and malevolent power always posing as a threat to man's rationality.

Akutagawa's distrust of both women and nature has a lot to do with the two of his three mothers. One was his maternal aunt Fuki, who appointed herself as his surrogate mother and dominated him throughout his life. The other, Fuku, was his biological mother who went insane after giving birth to him and died when he was about ten. He dreaded that the seed of her insanity inside him would eventually sprout and claim its victim. Thus he identified life with his insane first mother, characterizing it as an irrational and chaotic entity.

"Life is an Olympic Game hosted by a group of lunatics" said Akutagawa. An examination of his life and works in the light of his relationship with his two mothers' chaotic faces swirling around him and how they finally defeated him.

Key words

MOTHER, EGOISM, RESENTMENT, DOMINANCE, MISOGYNY, MADNESS, INSANITY, EVIL, IRRATIONALITY, NATURE, LIFE, CHAOS, DEFEAT.

Akutagawa Ryūosuke (1892–1927) had three mothers: a biological mother who went insane eight months after his birth and died when he was ten; a legal mother, the wife of a maternal uncle who adopted Akutagawa; and finally a

surrogate mother, a maternal, spinster aunt who had lived all her life in her brother's household and who fastened upon the young Akutagawa in pursuit of her own agenda.

Of the three, Akutagawa Tomo, his legal mother, appears to have played a subordinate role in shaping her son's personality. All accounts paint her as a lady weak in constitution and retiring in temperament. In sharp contrast, Akutagawa Fuki, the aunt who pushed aside her gentle sister-in-law to appoint herself his foster mother, played a key role in molding his concepts of human relationships—in particular, I will argue, his construction of women.

Much has been written as to why Fuki remained unmarried all her life. Some attribute it to a childhood accident in which her brother poked her in the eye, resulting in her becoming cross-eyed. Others maintain that in her youth she was raped by an uncle, which rendered her ineligible for marriage, at least in her mind. Whatever happened it must have been of considerable significance, a significance almost certainly negative and behind her decision to cause her to forgo any idea of marriage. Only a tiny minority of women who grew up in the Meiji Japan stepped aside from what was the normal career path for women to lead single lives, and the psychological strain on such dissident must have been immense. Given these pressures, it is easy to imagine how Fuki the spinster might have seized on the infant Akutagawa, to the exclusion of both his biological and legal mothers. Legitimacy as a "mother" without the need for marriage: it would not have been an easy temptation for Fuki to resist.

She might have been forgiven for considering herself better qualified than either of her rivals. She was far more assertive than her sisters-in-law, and more talented to boot: a licensed master of Itchū-bushi music and also apprenticed under a well-known master of painting. Judging from some of the remarks in Akutagawa's writings, her devotion to him was faultless. Discussing the members of his household, he referred to her as follows:

> Apart from my father and mother, an aunt lives with us. She has looked after me with special care and still does. Not only do I resemble her more than any other member of the family, but also she and I have the most in common in our values. I am not sure how I would have turned out without her. Nobody objected to my career as a writer. I think it's because my parents and my aunt love literature. They might have objected had I expressed a desire to be a businessman or an engineer. (*ARZ* 4: 163)[1]

Toshizō Niihara, Akutagawa's biological father, wanted to have his son back when Akutagawa was a young boy. He tried his best to lure the boy back to him with any and every imaginable enticement, but Akutagawa would not say yes to him: "none of his attempts have succeeded. It was because I loved my parents and

particularly my aunt" (*ARZ* 3: 307). The depth of his affection toward Aunt Fuki is also evident from a letter to Kyō Tsuneto, his best friend at school, before his marriage: "I intend to name my first child after the person I consider most memorable. That person is my aunt to whom I owe the most. So I will name the child Fukiko if it is a girl, Fukihiko if it is a boy." (*ARZ* 7: 169)

Nevertheless, the reality of Akutagawa's relationship with Fuki is far more complex than the tokens of affection presented above. While no one can question either Akutagawa's love for Fuki nor hers for him, there are strong indications that his reaction to her was more ambivalent than it first appears. Our task here is made more difficult by the fact that he detested the confessional mode, the *watakushi-shōsetsu* (I-novel) style fashionable among his contemporaries, and that he was cautious about revealing his innermost feelings about his family members. Even so, once we open our eyes to the possibility, equivocal hints break surface here and there in his narratives, as apparently insignificant yet ominous as the tips of icebergs. For instance in "A Pigmy's Words" (Shuju no kotoba, 1923–27) he says: "The first act of the life's tragedy begins the moment we form a parent-child relationship" (*ARZ* 5: 95), a sentiment not easily reconciled with the entire absence of tension between him and his surrogate mother. In a letter to a friend the year he graduated from Tokyo First Higher School, he wrote: ". . . I think I exist for myself. I sometimes think that even the kindred bond is unexpectedly weak in a clash of interests" (*ARZ* 7: 24), hinting at a budding awareness of egoism both in himself and in those close to him. One day, he noticed a dummy in a tailor's window and was struck by how much he resembled it, in perpetual deference to his parents and aunt (*ARZ* 4: 61). Tok in *Kappa* (Kappa, 1927; tr. 1950, 1964, 1971), Akutagawa's surreal satire on human society, tells the visitor to Kappaland that nothing is more absurd than a *kappa* life, as the greatest pleasure of *kappa* parents, husbands and wives, and siblings is to torture each other. (*ARZ* 3: 348)

This smoldering sense of dissatisfaction, the half-buried conviction that he has somehow been prevented from living his own life, finds fuller expression in *A Life of a Certain Fool* (Aru ahō no isshō, 1927; tr. 1970). The first passage below describes an incident which happened the day after his wedding:

> 14. His Marriage
>
> The day after his wedding he scolded his bride: "I wouldn't like you to waste money especially when you are new to this house." This criticism, if the truth be told, was the one from his aunt who had told him to deliver it to his wife. His wife apologized not only to him but to the aunt, before the pot of yellow daffodils she had bought as a gift for him. (*ARZ* 4: 56)

Three things are discernible here: Akutagawa's muffled feeling of resentment towards Fuki; her extraordinary hold over him; and the fact she remains the central character even though the heading is "His Marriage." More revealing still is the section entitled "The House":

> 3. The House
>
> He occupied an upstairs room of their suburban house. The upstairs was strangely tilted due to the soft ground. His aunt often quarreled with him in this room. Occasionally his parents intervened but he loved his aunt more than anyone.
>
> His aunt who never married was almost sixty years old when he was twenty.
>
> He often pondered in the upstairs room that those who loved each other were destined to torture each other, all the while sensing the unsettling tilt of the floor. (*ARZ* 4: 53)

This passage seems to imply that Akutagawa believed his relationship with Fuki was not what it should be—it was tilted, out of true, like the upstairs room. In 1927, after Akutagawa's suicide, one of his closest friends and colleagues, Satō Haruo (1892–1964), published an article quoting Akutagawa as saying, "It is— who made my life miserable, but then I owe this person more than anyone" (Satō 157). Satō substituted a blank space for the name of the person but Yoshida Seiichi later identified her as Fuki (Yoshida 12).

What emerges as the complementary dark side of Akutagawa's affection toward Fuki is a definite resentment, and its source may well have been the egotism that he perceived in her as his surrogate mother. It was quite possible that as she aged, she demanded his attention and love, and reminded him who had nurtured him in his youth. It is equally possible that since Fuki was after all only his aunt, he took this as a sign of selfishness, rather than dismissing it as nothing more than what any aging mother would do in a moment of loneliness or depression. Fuki, who was in any case more than ordinarily assertive, might have begun to demand a great deal from Akutagawa, and have become possessive of him. Judging from the only concrete incident we are given—his wife innocently buying for her husband a pot of yellow daffodils, unexpectedly bringing upon herself Fuki's ire—I am inclined to think that Fuki had an unusually strong hold on him, and that he came to resent it.

Since Fuki was the dominant female, and indeed the dominant person, in Akutagawa's life, she could not have failed to play a major role in shaping his concept of women. Many female figures in his works are portrayed as selfish,

aggressive, deceitful, dominating, sinister and ultimately destructive, while male figures are often described as victims of female dominance and venom. In contrast to Natsume Sōseki (1868–1916), whom Akutagawa regarded as his mentor, he never wrote a love story or any story where a character develops a positive sentiment toward another. Instead, he relished uncovering human egotism in the least expected places. In "A Pigmy's Words" he says:

> Love and Death
>
> The reason why romantic love reminds me of death may be based upon the evolutionary theory. Male spiders and bees end up being killed by their females immediately after copulation. When I saw the opera *Carmen* performed by travelling Italian singers, I couldn't help but see a female bee in Carmen's every action. (*ARZ* 5: 100)

In fact, there are no more than a handful of species where the females make a meal out of males they have just mated with, but he fastens on this anomaly to deduce a universal statement on love. Clearly, it was a motivated choice; it seems to point to a perception of women as aggressors and vampires. In one short piece, "A Woman" (Onna, 1920), he comes back to the female spider, this time one that had captured a bee:

> Silently the female spider began to suck the bee's blood.
>
> Cutting through the midday solitude, the shameless light of the sun showed the female spider proud of its butchery and plunder. With a belly resembling grey velvet, tiny glassy eyes, and ugly legs with protruding joints as if afflicted with leprosy, the repulsive spider was on the dead bee for a long while, just like "evil" itself. (*ARZ* 2: 178)

It is perhaps the metaphorical framework that makes Akutagawa feel relaxed enough to reveal his innermost feelings here. The choice of words like *'butchery, plunder, leprosy, repulsive, and evil'* to describe the female spider leaves us in no doubt as to how he sees women, as the title of the piece clearly indicates.

There is no doubt that women do not appear in Akutagawa's works nearly as often as men do, and when they do appear their characters are often given a generous infusion of the properties he attributed to the female spider. "The Bandits" (Chutō, 1917), for instance, is a failed attempt to write a popular story based upon the improbable combination of the 11th century *Konjaku monogatari* and Prosper Mérimée's *Carmen* (1845). Sakin, a Carmen-like figure, sets two brothers, Tarō and Jirō, against each other. Akutagawa depicts

Jirō torn between intense attraction towards and hatred of Sakin: "I am in love with Sakin but I hate her also. I find it hard to stomach her wantonness. She lies like nobody's business and she kills without a shred of conscience, something neither I nor Tarō can do" (*ARZ* 1: 149). Finally, she dies by the brothers' swords after betraying them. Again, Kesa of "Kesa and Morito" (Kesa to Morito, 1918; tr. 1952, 1956) is a cunning woman bent on controlling her destiny and that of the men around her even after her death. She manages to persuade her lover to kill her husband, but arranges the assassination so that her lover will end up killing her instead of him. She has come to believe that her lover has lost interest in her, and this is her way simultaneously to avenge herself on him and to posthumously restore her own honor by sacrificing her life for her husband.

In "Prince Susanō" (Susanō no mikoto, 1920; tr. 1989) Akutagawa traces the journey of Susanō, a mythical figure from the eighth-century *Kojiki*. When he arrives at the cave where Princess Ōketsu lives, he immediately notices a variety of weapons on the wall. Ōketsu fights him with the weapons, but he succeeds in subduing her, and is soon reigning over Ōketsu and her fifteen young sisters who live in nearby caves. The morning after an orgy, Susanō feels that these women are "like corpses skillfully made up with rouge and powder to hide death" (*ARZ* 2: 212). Later, when he chances to catch sight of the face of Princess Ōketsu asleep one evening, it reminds him of "the face of an old woman on the verge of death" (*ARZ* 2: 213). After Ōketsu and her sisters grow tired of him, they begin to mate with a huge black dog without any attempt at concealment. The women's caves (an obvious symbol for the vagina and female sexuality) are full of dangerous weapons; under their beautiful skin death is lurking; they are fickle and betray men with shameless blatancy. Nothing could be starker than the contrast between this idea of women and that held by Akutagawa's contemporaries like Tanizaki Jun'ichirō (1886–1965) who considered women the fountainhead of the life-force.

In 1921 Akutagawa wrote "In a Grove" (Yabu no naka, 1921; tr. 1952, 1987), perhaps his best work—at the very least, his best-known work, thanks to Kurosawa Akira (1910–1998) and his *Rashōmon* (1950). The story is made up of seven differing accounts of the circumstances surrounding a rape-murder involving a young *samurai*, his wife, and a marauding bandit. The first four provide circumstantial information, while the couple and the brigand give three totally conflicting, self-glorifying accounts of what happened in the grove. Most critics agree that the impossibility of absolute truth is the central theme of this puzzling narrative. My own interpretation is that the bandit acts as a catalyst to force the couple to face new and unpleasant truths about themselves.[2] Tied to a tree, the husband must witness the rape of his wife. After the rape, he hears her say the unthinkable: she pleads with the bandit to "kill that man" pointing to

him, her helpless husband. As in "The Bandits," "Kesa and Morito," and "Prince Susanō," the treachery of women is central to the story. Akutagawa, it seems, never grew tired of finding the hearts of spiders in the women he portrayed.

Not all of Akutagawa's women fall into the "spider women" category, however; and the exceptions are particularly interesting given his family circumstances. "The Old Woman" (Yōba, 1919) and "Agni" (Aguni no kami, 1920) feature elderly woman diviners endowed with supernatural powers. These old women, aggressive, selfish, and deceitful, enslave young, beautiful, and helpless women and control them like puppets. The general plot of these stories has male protagonists rescuing the pale beauties from the clutches of these old witches. The contrast between the conniving old hags and the innocent and virtuous virgins could not be more glaring. These innocent beauties are the natural complements of the "spider women," and serve to define his idea of female virtue and bias all the more clearly.

In this regard, a series of letters Akutagawa wrote to his then fiancée Fumiko, in 1916 and 1917, reveal candidly what it was that he wanted in a woman. Not surprisingly, his ideal was the antispider:

> Dear Fumi
>
> You have grown in height since I saw you last. You also put on some weight, I see. Please do not try to be thin. I would like it if you grow more. Try to retain the innocence of a child even when you grow. I hope you will keep your natural, caring personality. I would be sad if you grew clever but narrow-minded like many I see around me. I wish you would never be like *xxxxx*. She may be clever but she is not a good person. You see, she is without a shred of the honesty she must have been born with. What she has is a twisted cleverness. Please don't be like her. I hope you grow as straightforward as you have been. That is not a difficult thing to do. It simply means to be as you are . . . . I like you as you are now. Nobody is better than you are now. (Probably written in 1916; *ARZ* 7: 121–22)

If Akutagawa's tone in the letter above smacks of condescension, it is in part because of the age difference of eight years. Akutagawa was twenty-four and Fumiko only sixteen. The dominant message is a demand that Fumiko remain innocent. Akutagawa's suggestion that she should grow physically rather than developmentally may have an odd ring to modern ears, but he would not have been alone in desiring a woman to be innocent in the Japan of the Taishō period. In his letter of May 31, 1917, perhaps in answer to some expression of concern by Fumiko over her ignorance of literature, he writes: "It is perfectly all right for you not to understand such a thing as literature. In fact a Westerner

named Strindberg once said 'Women look most beautiful when they are sewing and nursing a child.' I think so also" (*ARZ* 7: 139). We might note, in passing, that such attitudes survived the end of Taishō: in the late fifties, another writer, Mishima Yukio (1925–1970), told his mother that his future wife should read no work of literature.

Thus, it is not unusual that a Japanese male of that period would desire a certain degree of docility from, and hence control over, a woman. Akutagawa's letters to his fiancée, however, are so full of entreaties for her innocence that one begins to wonder if his character or his situation imposed unusually strong demands in this area. In a letter dated September 28th, 1917, he assures Fumiko that everything will be fine in his household after their marriage, as she has a gentle, submissive quality (*sunaosa*) together with honesty:

> I expect no difficulty at all in your coming to my house. Do things in your natural way and everything will work out fine. Please rest assured that you will be okay here.
>
> In fact there are a lot of things here that only you can deal with. Your *sunaosa* and honesty will solve many problems, I can guarantee you. You would be making a serious mistake if you think cleverness accomplishes things. Cleverness does not, but honesty does. That is the best.
>
> Today's women simply don't understand this simple truth in life. Especially women who are rich and who are clever. Therefore happiness refuses to come their way. I suggest that you not allow them to influence you. (*ARZ* 7: 154)

Once again, we see Akutagawa assailing cleverness in women. Who are they? He becomes more concrete in a letter written about a month later, on October 30th:

> I sometimes meet naughty women writers and those women who aspire to be writers. It is when I see one of these women that I congratulate myself on you not being like them at all. Many authors I know are married to that kind of woman. Why they stay married to them is beyond me. Fumi-chan, please stay forever as you are now, and you will make me one happy man. (*ARZ* 7: 161)

We see from the above that one of Akutagawa's targets was the Taishō "liberated women" who wrote stories. It is interesting to observe that the women whom Akutagawa pursued later in his life did include "clever" women writers and women who wanted to be writers. To say one thing and to do another is perhaps only human, and at least it did not happen at the same time he was

courting Fumiko. But the point here is how much Akutagawa was obsessed with what he perceived as the innocence and docility of Fumiko. This must come partly from the general of the time milieu and partly from the threat posed by those liberated Taishō women who were challenging the existing social order. Nevertheless, a major component must have been formed as a reaction against the influence of Aunt Fuki, who loved him but still controlled him so tightly that he resented her egotism. Akutagawa's demand is essentially that Fumiko never become a Fuki. His repeated entreaties for Fumiko to remain child-like forever display the fear that she will turn into a strong-willed, controlling woman along the lines of the "spider-woman" in "The Old Woman" and "Agni."

Akutagawa's misogyny is blatant, and forms an almost too easy target for criticism. Nonetheless, it did not take shape in a vacuum: when we understand what Fuki was, we can see how she helped him become what he was. Of course, one can go on to blame Fuki's peculiarities on the uncle who allegedly raped her in her youth. However, if that indeed happened, it was hardly Akutagawa's fault.

Fuku, Akutagawa's biological mother, was not entirely devoid of influence on him despite the fact that he hardly knew her. He was only eight months old when he was removed from Fuku, who had gone insane shortly after his birth. Fuku remained at his father's home until she died when Akutagawa was ten. He rarely saw her during that period, but he knew she existed, and that she should have been his mother in fact as well as in name. Thus, she shaped him less by the presence of any particular qualities than by an absence that nurtured a deep sense of deprivation.

This sense of deprivation found expression in two ways. One was the idea that he drank not a drop of his mother's milk, and was thus inferior to others. In his autobiographical work "A Half of Daidōji Shinsuke's Life—a psychological landscape" (Daidōji Shinsuke no hansei—aru seishinteki fūkei, 1924), he wrote:

> Shinsuke never suckled at his mother's breasts. His weak mother did not give him even a drop of milk after giving birth . . . . He grew up drinking cow's milk from birth. He hated his fate. He had contempt for the milk bottles delivered to the kitchen every morning and envy for his friends who knew mothers' milk and little else . . . .
>
> Shinsuke was ashamed of knowing not mothers' milk but cow's milk. This, however, was his little secret, a secret that he would never let anyone know, and one which had acquired the patina of a superstition. He was an abnormally skinny boy with a large head. He was shy and sensitive, and his heart missed a beat just glancing at the sharpened knife of a butcher, very different from his father, who boasted of his bravery at the Fushimi–Toba

> battle. He did not know when this began, but he convinced himself that the difference from his father, and in fact his physical frailty in general, all stemmed from cow's milk. He knew his friends would find out this dreadful secret if he showed any sign of weakness, and so he accepted every challenge. (*ARZ* 3: 230–31)

The cow milk "secret" is a symbol for the pervasive sense of insecurity, deprivation, and inadequacy that underlay practically everything Akutagawa did. He was robbed of his rightful nurturer, he felt, and so became small, weak, unhealthy and far less than what he should have been. He has been dealt an unfair blow by life, and he can never forget it.

Another way in which he perceived himself deprived is that he believed he had inherited his mother's madness. In *Kappa* the protagonist, a human visitor to Kappaland, witnesses the curious customs surrounding a *kappa* birth:

> Just as we would, the Kappa calls in a doctor or a midwife to assist at the delivery. But when it comes the moment just before the child is born, the father—almost as if he is telephoning—puts his mouth to the mother's vagina and asks in a loud voice:
>
> "Is it your desire to be born into this world, or not? Think seriously about it before you reply."
>
> Bag followed this regular practice; kneeling on the floor so as to bring his mouth on a level with his wife's vagina, he asked the question a number of times, after which he rinsed his mouth with a liquid disinfectant that lay handy on the table.
>
> Then came the child's reply from inside its mother's womb; it seemed to be having no small amount of scruple, for the voice was weak and hesitant.
>
> "I do not wish to be born. In the first place it makes me shudder to think of all the things that I shall inherit from my father—the insanity alone is bad enough. And an additional factor is that I maintain that a Kappa's existence is evil." (Bownas 61–62)

Akutagawa was convinced that his mother's insanity lay within him like a ticking time-bomb, which would sooner or later explode and destroy his brain. If he was going to lose his reason, life was absurd. This view, that life was meaningless and even ridiculous, dogged him all his life and was the source of some of his most characteristic aphorisms:

> Life is like an Olympic game hosted by a group of lunatics. (*ARZ* 5: 77)
>
> Life is more hellish than hell. (*ARZ* 5: 80)
>
> Life is like a box of matches: it is silly to treat it seriously but it is dangerous not to treat it seriously. (*ARZ* 5: 77)
>
> Life is not worthy of even a line of Baudelaire. (*ARZ* 4: 52)
>
> Unfortunately for Him, God cannot commit suicide like we can. (*ARZ* 4: 63)

"The Record of the Dead" (Tenkibo, 1926) is one of the few works where Akutagawa writes of his feelings about his biological mother. It begins with a telling description of how the young Akutagawa regarded her:

> My mother was a madwoman. I have never loved my mother the way a son usually does. She had her hair wound around a comb, and would sit alone in the Niihara house in Shiba smoking with a long stem-pipe. Her face was tiny and her body was small. Her face was devoid of life, bearing a greyish tint. I once was reading *Xi Xiang ji* and the passage, "the breath from the mouth was like the earth and its smell was like the mud" instantly reminded me of her gaunt profile.
>
> Being thus, she never took care of me. I still remember how she struck me on the head out of the blue with her long stem-pipe when my adoptive mother and I went out of our way to pay a visit to her on the upper floor of the Niihara house. (*ARZ* 3: 305)

Two points emerge clearly from the passage above. One is his deep-seated resentment towards his birth mother: she did not do for him what mothers should do for their sons. The other is the animosity he displays towards the irrationality demonstrated by the incident in which he was suddenly struck by his mother for no cause. When he says, "Life is more hellish than hell" he expresses a fear that life does not operate rationally. He explains:

> The sufferings Hell provides are regulated. For instance in the Buddhist Hell of Starvation, if you try to eat the food in front of you, a fire breaks out on the food preventing you from eating it. But the sufferings life inflicts upon you are unfortunately not that simple. When you try to eat the food, a fire may break out or you may succeed in eating the food quite easily. After eating it, you may suffer from intestinal catarrh and then again you may easily digest

> it. To adjust to a world as lawless as this is a daunting task for anyone. (*ARZ* 5: 80–81)

Thus Akutagawa's negative perception of the world is based on his belief that the world lacks rationality; this in turn stems from his equation of his mad mother with the world.

That the world is a sick, decaying organism with no law or reason is a theme Akutagawa repeats in a large number of his stories. He often employs the image of a foul-smelling swamp in the background, an appropriate metaphor considering his reaction to his biological mother and her odor. One such story is "The Swamp" (Numachi, 1919; tr. 1965, 1969). The protagonist finds a small painting of a swamp at an art exhibit. The painting is unusual in using yellow exclusively—not a stroke of green to depict grass and trees around the marsh—but all the same it radiates a fierce energy. In fact the foreground is so precisely painted that he gets a vivid sensation of his feet sinking into the soft yellow mud. As he stands transfixed in front of the picture, a well-known art critic writing for a newspaper informs him in a condescending tone that it is the work of a madman who recently died, despairing of his art. The story ends with the protagonist declaring to the sneering art critic that the painting is indeed a masterpiece. Akutagawa is saying it is precisely his madness that has enabled the painter to see the truth and to present it on the canvas. By validating madness in a creative artist—Akutagawa was fascinated with Van Gogh's paintings—he sought to justify his art, and at the same time, to allay his fear of the insanity that he was convinced would some day take him for its own.

In the same year as "The Swamp," Akutagawa also wrote "Suspicion" (Giwaku, 1919), which attempts to deal with his maternal inheritance in a different way. The story is about a man who killed his wife trapped under a heap of earthquake rubble. The man insisted to himself he had to do so to save her from burning to death in the approaching fire, but he was also aware that their married life had not been what it should have been. Just at the point where he is to exchange marriage vows with a new and wealthy bride, he is overcome with fear and confesses what he did. He says:

> —since then they condemned me as a madman, and I have led a miserable life. I leave it to you to judge whether I am a madman or not. If I am a madman, I believe what made me so is a monster living inside the mind of us human beings. As long as that monster lives, those who laugh at me as being a madman may end up being just like me. (*ARZ* 2: 39)

Here Akutagawa attempts to universalize madness insisting that all of us have the monster crouched in the depths of our mind and that it may spring to the

surface in any crisis. In "The Swamp" Akutagawa made insanity an artist's special gift; in "Suspicion" he was more democratic, and parceled it out to everyone.

Akutagawa found yet another way to deal with this problem in a slightly later story entitled "The Garden" (Niwa, 1922; tr. 1964). It describes the protagonist's strenuous effort to restore a once beautiful garden which had belonged to a wealthy old family at the beginning of Meiji. The people living in the house are afflicted with a variety of sicknesses and slowly die off, one after another. The protagonist, the second son of the family, returns home after ten years of dissipation, but there is a suggestion that he too is not well, neither physically nor mentally. Seeing the ruinous state of the garden which used to boast several arbors, a lake, a waterfall, and some hills, he decides to restore it to its former glory. Restoration proves a difficult task, for he is physically weak, but little by little he makes progress, and by the end a semblance of the old garden has reemerged, though it remains imperfect. At the end, the protagonist falls ill and himself dies, made content by the thought that he has done everything he could to reclaim the garden from nature. Here nature is pictured as the implacable enemy of man. It stands poised to engulf what man has created, unless he struggles ceaselessly against its malevolent power. The author remarks that even before, when the garden was in its old splendour, one could sense the menacing force of nature in spring: ". . . especially in early spring, at the time when the young shoots of the trees are flourishing fully, one felt more keenly behind the man-made scenic beauty a savage power that made one uneasy." (*ARZ* 3: 35)

This confrontational stance against nature, while not rare in the West, is all but unprecedented in the Japanese literary tradition, whether premodern or modern, making Akutagawa unique among his contemporaries. Part of the reason for this is that Akutagawa identified life with his mother—"Life is an Olympic Game hosted by a group of lunatics"—and by extension identified nature with his mother. In other words, nature has a savage (irrational) power which was used to destroy man-made beauty (rational order). The only way to deal with it is to keep fighting it to the death. The only weapon available is one's rationality, or artistic sense, the tool Akutagawa adopted to combat his imagined insanity.

As the protagonist of "The Garden" strenuously tries to rebuild the old ruined garden, Akutagawa, particularly in the early stage of his writing career, took ancient material like the eleventh century *Konjaku monogatari* and re-fashioned it into new stories, usually with surprise endings. His approach to writing these narratives is fastidiously rational; with his polished and lucid style he argues the reader step by step to the desired ending. The structure of his initial stories (1916–1918) is distinguished by a remarkable rationality, with a clear-cut beginning, middle, and end, which his contemporaries not only lacked but also distrusted. Rationality was a tool, a sharp knife that could reshape the labyrinthine world according to his tastes. Akutagawa once advised students aspiring to be

writers to study mathematics instead of Japanese literature. This amply reflects his stance toward art and what it should do to, and with, life.

In this period he wrote some of his most accomplished works, including "Rashōmon" (Rashōmon, 1916; tr. 1952, 1964), "The Nose" (Hana, 1916; tr. 1955, 1961, 1964, 1989), "Yam Gruel" (Imogayu, 1916; tr. 1952) and "Hell Screen" (Jigokuhen, 1918; tr. 1948, 1961, 1989). "The Nose," for example, portrays a highranking Buddhist priest who is cursed by a nose of huge proportions. While outwardly maintaining his calm, he suffers deeply from embarrassment. The priest stumbles upon an esoteric treatment that succeeds in shrinking the object of his obsession to a normal size. The transformation, however, invites unexpected derision, now more open and unsparing. One morning, much to his surprise and relief, he wakes up to discover his nose returned to its monstrous size; "'nobody will laugh at me any more,' he whispered to himself. His long nose dangled in the autumn breeze of early morning" (Kojima, 205). The story turns on not only the priest's vanity but also the cruelty of people around him who insist on keeping him down. The style is effective and the structure watertight, and there is a pervasive sense of irony and humour which is generally speaking a rare commodity in modern Japanese literature. Natsume Sōseki, in a now famous letter to Akutagawa, praised the work for its polished style, refined humour, and fresh subject matter, and added that if Akutagawa wrote twenty or thirty stories like this one, he would be an outstanding writer.

"Hell Screen," another representative work from this period, is a macabre tale of an eccentric artist who values art over life. Yoshihide, the most renowned artist of his time, is commissioned by his feudal lord to paint the agonies of hell on a screen. Subjecting his models to every conceivable torture, Yoshihide finishes the screen save for the final and most dramatic scene. To complete it, he makes an outrageous request that he stage an actual burning of a courtly carriage with an elegant court lady trapped inside. The lord grants Yoshihide's wishes. The lady inside, however, turns out to be Yoshihide's beloved daughter, who previously spurned the lord's amorous advances. Yoshihide is initially shocked to recognize his daughter bound in the burning carriage, but he is soon overcome by his thirst to paint. Afterwards he hangs himself, leaving behind the finished screen, which is universally acclaimed as a masterpiece. Few stories of Akutagawa show more eloquently the triumph of art over life than "Hell Screen." Yoshihide the egoistic master artist literally sacrifices what he holds dearest in life for the sake of his art, since his life has meaning only when he is creating. Without art life is chaotic, sick, and absurd. That is what Akutagawa meant when he said, "life is not worthy of even a line of Baudelaire."

Akutagawa, whose reputation was firmly established in literary circles by 1918, was regarded as a major opponent of *shizenshugi* style which dominated Japanese literature in the early 1900s by thriving on sordid confessions. For the

next four years, 1919–1922, he continued to write stories in the same vein, borrowing material from old tales and giving them a complex modern interpretation dressed in a delicately textured prose. Representative works dating from this middle period include "Christ in Nanjin" (Nankin no Kirisuto, 1920; tr. 1960), "Tu Tzechun" (Toshishun, 1920; tr. 1964, 1965, 1968), "The Painting of an Autumn Mountain" (Shūzan-zu, 1921; tr. 1955) and "In a Grove." This period of maturation saw gradual changes in his style, such as the disappearance of humour, while at the same time he portrays the complexities of human existence. "In a Grove," discussed earlier, is a good example. The disappearance of humour indicates that Akutagawa had lost the distance from life he had been able to maintain before, and that his control over life through art was becoming less effective.

The final period of his literary career, 1923 to 1927, was marred by deteriorating health. His writing underwent a profound transformation. Gone were his superbly constructed period pieces. He now wrote not merely about contemporary life, but about his own life, thinly disguised, though he had once frowned on confessional writing. The most significant change was that he lost his desire to be a storyteller. Much of the work in the last period was autobiographical in tone; some even resembles embellished diary entries. Despite worsening health, he engaged in a celebrated literary dispute with Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, in which Akutagawa upheld poetic lyricism as the primary value in the novel and discredited the role of structure, a total reversal of his early stance toward literature.

The best-known story from this final period is *Kappa*, a satirical tale about amphibious elves known as *kappa* who appear in Japanese folklore. The choice of subject matter is anomalous for a period when his writings were mostly autobiographical, but it reflects precisely his fear and anger when confronted by the irrationality of life. The narrator accidentally falls into the subterranean world of the *kappa*. At first everything there seems the reverse of human activities: a baby *kappa* can refuse to be born and it is always the she-*kappa* who captures her mate. The world of *kappa* is no utopia; it has thievery, unemployment, exploitation, war, censorship, and suicide. The solutions for some of the problems are unorthodox—for example, the unemployed are eaten. Fascinated but weary, the narrator returns to human society, only to find himself committed to a mental hospital. He claims, however, that he still enjoys occasional visits from his old *kappa* friends, who tell him that his doctor, not he, is the one who suffers from a mental disease.

"Cogwheels" (Haguruma, 1927, tr. 1965), more typical of late Akutagawa in being straightforwardly autobiographical, is a terrifying account of an extraordinarily sensitive mind that is gradually losing its hold on reality and breaking down. This plotless work is dominated by bizarre but frightfully clear images that evoke paranoia, such as translucent cogwheels turning in midair. The protagonist, who looks like Akutagawa in his final years, feels that

everything—people, things, and nature—is united in a conspiracy against him and he is obsessed with decoding his surroundings in a classic paranoid style. On his way to a wedding in Tokyo an acquaintance tells him about a ghost appearing in broad daylight in a certain house. The ghost, he is told, wears a raincoat. The protagonist happens to see a man in a raincoat on the platform of a station: from then on he sees men in raincoats everywhere, and feels threatened each time. At the wedding banquet he notices a white maggot wriggling on a piece of meat. In a hotel room he goes into a panic when he discovers a pair of his slippers is missing. An apple offered to him by a man whom he visited turns into a unicorn in front of his eyes. He walks by the swing-frame with its swing missing and immediately he feels his heart constrict at the memory of a gallows. The list goes on, until toward the end he says, "The fact that someone was taking aim at me made me nervous and then translucent cogwheels one by one started to block my sight . . . ." (*ARZ* 4: 37). The very last lines of "Cogwheels" are: "I have no more energy to continue to write. It is excruciating to live in this kind of psychological condition. Would someone please strangle me while I am asleep?" (*ARZ* 4: 38). This posthumously published work demonstrates that the control Akutagawa had over life throughout his early period has completely collapsed, and that he believed that his greatest fear—the loss of his mind—had taken place. In one scene the protagonist has difficulty pronouncing a certain word and he says to himself, "This is what you would expect from the son of a madwoman" (*ARZ* 4: 29). Finally, Akutagawa must admit that he has lost his battle against the forces of irrationality and malevolence, the elements Fuku and Fuki represented in life. He could neither reason, nor could he create.

In "Cogwheels" there is a scene where the protagonist starts to read Shiga Naoya's (1883–1971) *A Dark Night's Passing* (An'ya kōro, 1921–37; tr. 1976):

> After he left, I lay down on the bed to begin to read *A Dark Night's Passing*. Each and every one of the protagonist's spiritual struggles was so real to me that it hurt me. I had to compare myself with the protagonist and felt how foolish I had been. I caught myself crying. My tears gave me a moment of repose. (*ARZ* 4: 26)

Like Akutagawa, Shiga was basically a writer of short stories—*A Dark Night's Passing* being the sole exception. Like him, Shiga was raised in his early childhood by people other than his parents, and he too lost his biological mother in his early teens. But in other areas they are a study in contrast: if Shiga was supremely confident in himself and his surroundings, Akutagawa was perpetually tortured by self-doubt; Shiga's works exude flowing lyricism, intuitive understanding, and what looks like a primitive life-force; Akutagawa's are

marked by polished refinement and meticulously built structure—at least in his early and middle periods; Shiga is the acknowledged master of autobiographical *watakushi shōsetsu*, Akutagawa the champion of fictionality and artistic embellishment in stories.

Nevertheless, subtle changes began to take place in Akutagawa's writing in his middle period, as we observed, and critics agree these changes derived from Shiga's influence. As early as 1917 Akutagawa confided to a friend in a letter (October 12th, 1917), ". . . ever since I read (Shiga's) 'Reconciliation' (Wakai, 1917) I don't feel like writing" (*ARZ* 7: 157). He said to Oana Ryūichi that he had been afraid of no writer except Shiga Naoya and added, "All of my works put together would not be equal to a single Shiga" (quoted in Oana 144).

What exactly Akutagawa was afraid of in Shiga was revealed in the celebrated literary dispute he engaged in with Tanizaki Jun'ichirō during 1927. By this time Akutagawa had thoroughly disavowed his old literary stance of fictionality, refined style, and architectural structure and shifted to Shiga's fluid, intuitive writing. Debating with Tanizaki, who advocated the efficacy of superbly crafted plots, Akutagawa cited Shiga as the best example of how inconsequential a plot is in a work and how important it is to have the "poetic spirit of Eastern tradition" (*ARZ* 5: 135). He backed his reference to the "poetic spirit" by citing two of Shiga's best works, "Night Fires" (Takibi, 1920; tr. 1975, 1979) and "Manazuru" (Manazuru, 1920; tr. 1977, 1979), both of which can be described as prose poems. Although Akutagawa failed to identify it explicitly, the most important quality in these pieces is the merger of man and the surrounding scenery in the climactic moment. It is this very lyrical moment of union between previously separated elements that Akutagawa was most envious of, precisely because he was constitutionally incapable of writing such a scene.

While Shiga shared a superficial resemblance with Akutagawa in the circumstances of his upbringing, he was genuinely loved and cared for by his grandparents, and was also loved by his biological mother who passed away when he was twelve. His relationship with his stepmother was mutually honest, and they were affectionate to each other. By all accounts there was nothing in his childhood that made the young Shiga suspicious of a hidden agenda in the people around him. It helped that his biological mother did not go insane and that his stepmother was not like Fuki. It was of still greater help that Shiga loved nature and had an animistic relationship with it. Nature energized him to the point of being medicinal, both physically and spiritually. Misogyny and the desire to reorder nature were both foreign to his thinking.

Two of the most impressive scenes from *A Dark Night's Passing* are the scene where Kensaku, the protagonist, first notices Naoko, the woman who will become his wife; and the famous Daisen scene where he finally merges

with the surroundings of this holy mountain. This is how Shiga describes Kensaku's emotion at seeing his future wife:

> She was a pleasing and wholesome sight, and he was immediately drawn to her. Her beauty was not so extraordinary, yet what he felt then was somehow more exquisite, more disturbing, than anything he felt before on seeing some attractive woman in passing. Like an adolescent with awakening passions he quickly looked away, made almost breathless by the acute happiness that came over him. (202–03)

It is worth repeating here that Akutagawa never wrote a single love story. He simply did not have the ability to put into words this immediate, throbbing reaction of a male who has instinctively embraced a woman. We are reminded of the twenty-four year old Akutagawa pathetically pleading with his future wife, Fumiko, not to mature any further.

In the celebrated Daisen scene Shiga depicts Kensaku's sensation of merging into nature as follows:

> He felt his exhaustion turn into a strange state of rapture. He could feel his mind and his body both gradually merging into this great nature that surrounded him. It was not nature that was visible to the eyes; rather, it was Like a limitless body of air that wrapped itself around him, this tiny creature no larger than a poppy seed. To be gently drawn into it, and there be restored, was a pleasure beyond the power of words to describe. The sensation was a little like that of the moment when, tired and without a single worry, one was in a state hardly distinguishable from sleep. He had experienced this feeling of being absorbed by nature before; but this was the first time that it was accompanied by such rapture. In previous instances, the feeling perhaps had been more that of being sucked in by nature than that of merging into it; and though there had been some pleasure attached to it, he had at the same time always tried instinctively to resist it, and on finding such resistance difficult, he had felt a distinct uneasiness. But this time, he had not the slightest will to resist; and contentedly, without a trace of the old uneasiness, he accepted nature's embrace. (400–01)

Accepting nature's embrace would equate with death for Akutagawa, since in his mind nature represents sickness, malevolence and irrationality. It is interesting, but perhaps rather perverse, not to say futile, to speculate on how the protagonist of "Cogwheels" would embrace either nature or a woman. Neither was a viable proposition for Akutagawa, as the requisite capacity was never nurtured by his mothers. Nevertheless, Akutagawa in his final years recognized the lyrical

beauty of such unions as described by Shiga and realized "how foolish I had been." I am not sure if he was indeed that great a fool, as he appears to have had little choice, given the nature of the co-authors who had helped write the script for his life-time journey. He once wrote, "Unfortunately for Him, God cannot commit suicide like we can." On a rainy July 24th, 1927 before he went to bed, he exploited this final advantage via an overdose of sleeping pills, as if to have revenge on the power of reason which failed to navigate him safely through what he perceived as the chaos of life.

Notes

1. Translations of quoted passages are mine except where indicated otherwise.
2. For a more detailed treatment of this subject see my article "In a Grove."

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要 約

理性の敗北、カオスの母の勝利——芥川龍之介の場合

鶴 田 欣 也

芥川龍之介は恋愛小説をひとつも書いていない。実際、彼の作品には女性は男性ほど現われない。しかし女性が登場するときは、利己的、攻撃

的、支配的、そして破壊的に描かれる。同時に男性はそういう女性の犠牲者として登場する。これが芥川の作品を特徴づける一側面だ。

もうひとつの側面は芥川が自然を一種の敵対者としてとり扱っていた点である。これは、日本文学の伝統に前例がなく、芥川の存在をかなりユニークなものとしている。芥川にとって自然は残忍で不合理、悪意に満ちた存在であり、人間の合理性に対する挑戦であった。

女性や自然に対する芥川の不信は、彼の二人の母親と関係があるように思われる。一人は母方の伯母フキで、芥川を幼少から世話をし、彼の一生を支配した女性である。もう一人は、彼の生母フクで彼を生むとすぐ発狂し、彼の十歳の時他界した。芥川は生母の狂気の種が自分の内部に潜み、いつかそれが開花するだろうと信じていた。したがって彼は人生を生母の延長としてとらえ、この世はカオス的でどこか狂っていると思っていた。

「人生は狂人の主催になったオリムピック大会に似たものである。」と芥川はいった。彼と母親たちとの関係という光のもとに彼の作品をおいてみると、いかに彼が母親たちのカオス的なものと戦い、その戦いに刀折れ、矢盡きて敗北してしまったかかがよく分かる。