

# MODERNITY AND TANIZAKI JUN'ICHIRO'S STYLE REFORM: THE THOUGHT PROCESS LEADING TO "THE TASTE FOR CLASSICAL JAPANESE HISTORY OR LITERATURE"<sup>1</sup>

Yoshiki Hidaka\*

hidakay@is6.so-net.ne.jp

**Abstract:** *At the beginning of the Shōwa period, Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's prose goes through a phase that is generally known as "koten kaiki", the return to classicism: he publishes numerous novels that have as their background and subject Japanese history, or are inspired by the Japanese classics. On the other hand, it must be noted that during the same period Tanizaki had also been showing a keen interest in topics such as the rapid urbanization of Japan, the advance of capitalist practices in the publishing circles, the pressure exerted by Marxism, and other similar developments challenging the established cultural and literary values.*

*During this period, Tanizaki refers to the artistic value of his works using the expression "kokushi-shumi naishi wabun-shumi", which roughly translates as "the taste for classical Japanese history or literature". However, what Tanizaki tried to achieve by turning his gaze upon Japan's pre-modernity was neither the mere use of historical places and events as background for his stories, nor the imitation of the style of Japanese classics.*

*In my paper, I am planning to analyze Tanizaki's "koten kaiki" not so much as a way of reviving a long-gone past, but rather as an attempt at understanding the essence of the age that we call "kindai", i.e., the modern age; by looking closely at the discursive structure of several of his works written during this period, my purpose is to ultimately make visible the connection between Tanizaki's ideas about language and literature, and the way he conceived of culture at large.*

**Keywords:** *Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, "A Blind Man's Tale", modernity, classical Japanese literature, style reform, translation*

The present work aims to look at one aspect of Japanese modernity as illustrated by the style reform carried out in the works of Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, especially the historical novel *A Blind Man's Tale*<sup>2</sup>.

In the novel, a blind practitioner of Japanese massage recounts events from his life by the side of one of the most famous Japanese heroines of the Warring

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from Japanese by Irina Holca (Osaka University).

\* **Associate professor, Ph.D.**, - *Nara University of Education, Japan.*

<sup>2</sup> Published in September 1931, in the *Chūō Kōron* magazine. Japanese title: *Mōmoku Monogatari*.

States period (*Sengoku Jidai*<sup>3</sup>), Lady Oichi. The subtitle of my paper uses a phrase coined by Tanizaki himself in the preface to the 1932 edition of the novel:

*The four pieces that form this volume are independent novellas, although linked together by the author's taste for classical Japanese history or literature. It is quite possible that I will continue to write in a similar vein in the future too, but since I do not necessarily plan to do it, I have decided, just in case, to gather these four pieces in this volume here, for the time being (p.1)<sup>4</sup>.*

The “four pieces” mentioned in the preface refer to *A Blind Man's Tale* and three other historical novels published during the same period. These novels provide us with an insight into the problems related to modernity that preoccupied Tanizaki at the beginning of the Shōwa era.

During the 1920s and the 1930s, Japan saw modernity take over everything, from artistic manifestations to economic development. In an age dominated by a renewed interest for Western culture, when art and literature were experimenting with ever more avant-garde trends, why did Tanizaki choose to turn his eyes to “pure Japanese-ness”? While nowadays Tanizaki is indeed regarded as a novelist who has written extensively about old Japan, until this period the concepts of “classical Japanese literature” or “history” had never been associated with his name; quite on the contrary, as a matter of fact. All of a sudden, when other writers around him were embracing modernism, he had decided to veer towards the old, “for the time being”. His attitude is also clearly expressed by the fact that he does not “necessarily plan” to write in the same vein, and has gathered the four novellas in one volume, “just in case”.

At a time when Japan's modernism was in full bloom, what was this “taste for classical Japanese history and literature” that Tanizaki discovered? What made him look for it? What was the meaning of his discovery? By analyzing Tanizaki's experiments with literary style, I will further on attempt to shed light on one of the aspects of Japanese modernity.

### **1. About Tanizaki Jun'ichirō**

When comparing Tanizaki with other Japanese writers, one comes across quite a few special, or even peculiar traits that distinguish him from everybody else. If I were to focus on only one of these peculiarities, it would be the fact that, since his debut in 1910, and until his death in 1965, Tanizaki continued to be a popular, top-selling writer. In other words, for 55 years, he never stopped writing, and his works never stopped selling.

This is an unprecedented occurrence in the history of modern Japanese literature. Natsume Sōseki was indeed popular as a professional writer for the *Asahi Shinbun* newspaper, but he died after only 10 years of activity; Akutagawa

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<sup>3</sup> From the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>4</sup> Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, *Mōmoku Monogatari's* Preface (*Hashigaki*), 1932, Chūō Kōron Publishers, Tokyo.

Ryūnosuke made his debut in the first half of the Taishō<sup>5</sup> period, but committed suicide at the beginning of Shōwa<sup>6</sup>. Dazai Osamu was very popular, but he too committed suicide, ending his literary activity after only 15 years. On the other hand, both Shimazaki Tōson and Shiga Naoya lived well into old age, but the former did not always sell well, while the latter had a period of 10 years when he completely stopped writing and lived off royalties and his inheritance. By comparison, we can say Tanizaki's example is a rare one; not only did he keep publishing and selling, but he was also able to survive the changes going on in the Japanese society, from the Meiji<sup>7</sup> era, all the way through Taishō and the pre-war and post-war Shōwa.

How was it possible for Tanizaki to maintain his popularity for such a long time? One explanation lies in the fact that he did not have a consistent style; or rather, that he refused to have one, and kept changing it on purpose. Generally speaking, his work can be divided into four periods, each with its specific style<sup>8</sup>:

1. the 1910s: Estheticism

(*Shisei [The Tattooer]*, 1910; *Kyōfu [The Terror]*, 1913; *Otsuya-goroshi [The Murder of Otsuya]*, 1915; *Kin to Gin [Gold and Silver]*, 1918, etc.)

2. the 1920s: Interest for urban consumerist culture, film, etc.

(*Chijin no Ai [Naomi]*, 1925; *Tomoda to Matsunaga no Hanashi [The Story of Tomoda and Matsunaga]*, 1926; *Manji [Quicksand]*, 1928-31, etc.)

3. the 1930s& 1940s: Return to classicism, rediscovery of Japanese beauty

(*Tade Kuu Mushi [Some Prefer Nettles]*, 1928; *Mōmoku Monogatari [A Blind Man's Tale]*, 1931; *Shunkinshō [A Portrait of Shunkin]*, 1933; *Sasame Yuki [The Makioka Sisters]*, 1943-1947, etc.)

4. the 1950s: Interest in contemporary manners

(*Kagi [The Key]*, 1956; *Yume no Ukihashi [The Bridge of Dreams]*, 1960; *Fūten Rōjin Nikki*, 1962, etc.)

Tanizaki's inclination towards estheticism in the first years after his debut is often discussed as part of the general tendency in the literary movements of the time. As far as his second creative period is concerned, one must link it to the introduction of the motion picture, as well as other elements of modern culture to Japan in the 1920s; Tanizaki was a forerunner of the modernist movement, and the first Japanese to found and run a film company; also, at a time when it was not popular yet, he lived in a western style residence, enjoying the advantages of urban consumerism. That is probably why in the 1920s and 1930, when modernism had taken over all the Japanese society, he had actually already begun to take his distance from it, regarding it with a critical eye. In his third creative phase, Tanizaki changed both his writing style (from one influenced by the translation of western literature to a purely Japanese one), and the contents of his

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<sup>5</sup> July 30, 1912 to December 25, 1926.

<sup>6</sup> December 25, 1926 to January 7, 1989.

<sup>7</sup> November 8, 1868 to July 30, 1912.

<sup>8</sup> Classification based on Gomibuchi Noritsugu's *Kotoba wo Taberu: Tanizaki Jun'ichirō 1920-1931*, 2009, Serika Shobō Publishing House, Tokyo (p.30).

novels, laying an ever greater emphasis on classical imagery and motifs. In the 1950s, after the war, he entered the fourth and last stage, starting to show a special interest in contemporary mores.

As mentioned above, *A Blind Man's Tale* belongs to the third period, the so-called *koten kaiki*, i.e., return to classicism. While Tanizaki was taking this peculiar stance in his writing, the Japanese literary circles were dominated, as it is often pointed out by historians, by three different trends. First of all, we have Japanese naturalism, a movement that had been at the centre of the world of letters ever since the Meiji period, and had given birth to the *shi-shōsetsu*, an autobiographical novel in the realist vein. Then, from the middle of the Taishō era, proletarian literature, under the influence of Marxist ideas, as well as the modernist movement of the *shinkankaku-ha* (Neo-sensualism) having as its representatives writers such as Kawabata Yasunari and Yokomitsu Ri'ichi, also made their appearance on the literary stage; the contrasts and conflicts between these three movements are normally used to describe this period of Japanese literary history.

Nevertheless, one aspect that should not be ignored is the fact that, towards the end of the Taishō period, the so-called popular novel (*taishū shōsetsu*) was born, and its influence and readership were on the rise. At first, especially when seen from the point of view of traditional literature, the popular novel was placed outside the realm of “art”, and considered worthless and even vulgar. But at the end of Taishō and the beginning of Shōwa, a time came when the magazine *Kingu*, which was publishing mainly popular literature, sold more than one million copies. The significance of this figure is clear when we think that Natsume Sōseki's *Kokoro*, also published during Taishō (1915), only sold three thousand copies. Of course, the gap is to be partly attributed to the different media (magazine versus book), and to the fact that most readers during that period did not buy books, but instead borrowed them from libraries. Nevertheless, the *Kingu* phenomenon, combined with the so called *enpon* boom<sup>9</sup>, contributed greatly to the popularization of literature, and was perceived as a tectonic movement of unprecedented force by all people related to the literary world in one way or another.

The causes of these transformations can be traced back to the outbreak of the First World War and the Great Kantō Earthquake<sup>10</sup>, which had given a great impulse to the urbanization of Japan, as well as to the adoption of consumerist modes, pushing the Japanese society further towards capitalism. As a result, the publishing world too was transformed, seeing an unexpected increase in the overall number of readers, as the book, magazine and newspaper business became an enormous and greatly profitable market.

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<sup>9</sup> At the beginning of the Shōwa period, cheap anthologies (1 yen/ volume) from various publishing houses became very popular; the first was the *Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Japanese Literature [Genkin Nihon Bungaku Zenshū]*, which appeared from Kaizōsha in 1926.

<sup>10</sup> A devastating earthquake (7.9M) that hit Tokyo and the surrounding area on September 1, 1923. It was followed by a 10-meter high tsunami; combined with the casualties from the fire that subsequently broke out in Tokyo, and the typhoon that struck the region on the same day, the number of dead and missing surpassed 140,000.

Novelists who used to consider themselves popular if they could sell a couple of thousand copies were suddenly faced with the existence of magazines that sold millions, and thus were forced to reconsider their methods and style, worried that their literature might not survive the wave of the future.

On the literary scene of the 20s and 30s, many writers changed their style, and one of them was Tanizaki. Sensitive to the times and to his readers as he had always been, the reasons behind his style reform are not difficult to imagine.

## 2. Tanizaki's Preoccupation with History

The table below contains the works written by Tanizaki during the 1920s and 1930s, as well as the media they were published in.

yr/mth	title	magazine/newspaper
1923.9	The Great Kantō Earthquake:	Tanizaki moves from Tōkyō to Kansai
1924.3	<i>Chijin no Ai [Naomi]</i>	<i>Ōsaka Asahi</i> (-1924.6), <i>Josei</i> (1924.11-1925.7)
1928.3	* <i>Jōzetsu Roku</i> <i>Manji [Quicksand]</i>	
3	<i>Kuroshiro</i>	<i>Kaizō</i> (-1930.4)
12	<i>Tade Kuu Mushi [Some Prefer Nettles]</i>	<i>Tōkyō Asahi</i> , <i>Ōsaka Asahi</i> (-1928.7) <i>Osaka Mainichi</i> (-1929.6)
1930.5	<i>Rangiku Monogatari</i>	
1931.1	<i>Yoshino Kuzu</i>	<i>Tōkyō Asahi</i> , <i>Ōsaka Asahi</i> (-1930.9)
9	<i>Mōmoku Monogatari [A Blind Man's Tale]</i>	<i>Chūō Kōron</i> (-1931.2) <i>Chūō Kōron</i>
10	<i>Bushūkō Hiwa [The Secret History of the Lord of Musashi]</i>	<i>Shinseinen</i> (-1932.11)
1932.11	<i>Ashikari</i>	
1933.6	<i>Shunkinshō [A Portrait of Shunkin]</i>	<i>Kaizō</i> (-1932.12) <i>Chūō Kōron</i>
	* <i>In'ei Raisan</i> * <i>Bunshō Tokuhon</i>	
1935.1	<i>Kikigaki Shō</i>	
1936.1	<i>Neko to Shōzō to Futari no Onna</i>	<i>Tōkyō Nichinichi</i> , <i>Ōsaka Mainichi</i> (-1935.6)
	* <i>Jun'ichirō Yaku Genji Monogatari</i>	<i>Kaizō</i> (+1936.7)

As shown in the table above, after the Great Kantō Earthquake, Tanizaki moved to Kansai, and, except for a very short period during the war, when he was temporarily evacuated, he lived there until the end of his life. Previous studies often refer to this move as the cause of Tanizaki's new interest for classical Japanese beauty. It cannot be denied that moving to Kansai, an area in which rich Japanese traditions were still alive, opened Tanizaki's eyes, and triggered the so-called return to classicism. Nevertheless, what I would like to focus on here is

the fact that he started writing the works usually included in the *koten kaiki* phase around 1928, and that he refers to this new tendency using the expression “taste for Japanese history or literature”. In other words, for Tanizaki the return to classicism does not simply mean a penchant for classical literature and writing style, but also a “taste for history”.

But what drew Tanizaki’s attention to history, then? It is not impossible to understand his newly awoken interest, if we think of it as an attempt to discover something new inside the old, in order to keep up with the modernist tendencies of the age. Nevertheless, his preference for history has one more explanation, which I will try to enlarge upon next.

At a time when discussions about the value and meaning of literature were becoming more and more actual, as the popular novel was gaining in on the traditional genres, Tanizaki himself was showing a great interest in this newly born type of literature. As mentioned before, popular literature was shaping a market of unprecedented size, and Tanizaki had already realized that the enormous number of new readers cannot be ignored. Most writers who stood by the “artistic value” of literature considered the popular novel “vulgar”, and attached value exclusively to the traditional naturalistic novel. On the other hand, Tanizaki’s stance was that “vulgar” literature had an intrinsic value, which should by no means be ignored. Let us also note here that, during this age, most of the popular novels tended to be “period” novels, with a very strong emphasis on historical discourse.

The popular novels published until the 1920s, such as, for example, Nakazato Kaizan’s *Daibosatsu Tōge*<sup>11</sup>, had as a subject the deeds of some great hero, on the background of the social upheavals before and after the Meiji Restoration. These novels usually followed a very predictable pattern, and the historical discourse was only used to frame it: a villain would show up, and then a great swordsman would come and defeat him. Both of them would be of rather low social standing, and only their mastery in wielding the sword would be exceptional; in the end, with an almost supernatural feat of courage and swordsmanship, the hero would put down the villain. Pent-up tensions, solved with the swish of a sword: a structure simple enough for the common reader to understand. In a nutshell, the writer of popular novels from the 20s would use the reader’s knowledge about history, setting his novel in a comprehensible, and to some extent predictable frame.

Tanizaki was not a stranger to the historical approach of the “period” novel, whose development he had observed with great interest during this period. Especially, he must have given a lot of thought to the relationship between history and the readers of popular literature. This special relation was the reason behind his style reform, deeply rooted in his “taste for classical Japanese literature”.

In the essay *Jōzetsu Roku*<sup>12</sup> Tanizaki praises Kaizan’s *Daibosatsu Tōge*, quoting Izumi Kyōka: “That is not a mere popular novel”. Kyōka’s formulation, “a

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<sup>11</sup> published in installments between 1913 and 1941, in the newspapers *Miyako*, *Mainichi*, and *Yomiuri*.

<sup>12</sup> published in installments in the monthly magazine *Kaizō*, between February and December 1937 (Kaizōsha, Tokyo).

mere popular novel”, shows that a distinction was already being made between “mere” popular novels, that were of little value, and novels such as Kaizan’s. Tanizaki’s stance is that by no means should all popular novels be ignored because of their assumed “vulgarity”; on the contrary, those whose “value” has been recognized should be accepted and praised accordingly.

It is from this standpoint that he actually wrote *Rangiku Monogatari*, a novel very similar to the popular literature of the time. In the preface to this work<sup>13</sup>, Tanizaki enlarges upon his views on history as follows:

*Generally speaking, I think very few people are familiar with the events that happened around this time. At the beginning of the period, there is the Ōnin War, and towards the end, the rise in power of Oda Nobunaga; in short, this is the dawn of the Warring States period, and, while in the provinces various lords are working to establish their spheres of influence, at the center there is really no hero worth mentioning, no epoch-making event worth using one’s brush on. I did not choose this period because I wanted to bring to the fore some unknown historical reality or character, but because the general public’s lack of familiarity would allow me to imagine things more freely. When it comes to something well-known by everybody, it would be embarrassing for me, in front of both my ancestors and my contemporaries, to interpret and change events as it suits me, but in the case of a somewhat obscure age, I felt I could spread my wings without restraint. That’s also why I tried to stay away from central locations such as Kyōto or Kamakura, and instead chose the Chūgoku region.*

As the quotation clearly shows, *Rangiku Monogatari* deals with a less well-known period in history, because this allows the author “to imagine things more freely”, a liberty he would not be able to take, had he chosen as the stage of his work a more familiar setting.

In a subsequent text about Naoki Sanjūgo’s historical novels, Tanizaki praises, once again, the tradition of war tales *gunki*, the genre that is at the basis of *Rangiku Monogatari*. His words show that his intention was to use the historical discourse of a certain age as a matrix, and pour into it a story meant to attract as many common readers as possible.

On the other hand, the focus of my present paper, *A Blind Man’s Tale*, has a structure that is the exact opposite of *Rangiku Monogatari*’s. The story revolves around Lady Oichi, probably the most famous heroine in Japanese history, whose name is known by everybody in Japan. In other words, this novel is set in an age that will not allow the author to “interpret and change events as it suits [him]”, or “spread [his] wings without restraint”. In the next chapter, let us look into the details of this change of style.

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<sup>13</sup> *Asahi Shinbun* newspaper, Osaka and Tokyo editions, March 14, 1930.

### 3. The Position of *A Blind Man's Tale*

This novel tells the story of Yaichi, a 66 year old blind masseur born in Ōmi Nagahama; he recounts the 13 years spent in the service of Lady Oichi to one of his customers, whom he calls *danna-sama*, “my lord”. At the age of 18 or 19, Yaichi was apprenticed to the *daimyō* Asai Nagamasa; his singing skills were recognized, and soon afterwards he started working in the lord’s household. The lady of the house, Oichi, is famous for her beauty; although he cannot see her, Yaichi thinks that, through massage, he can imagine her appearance, and even read into her soul. He is allowed to get near a lady of such high standing only because he is blind, and therefore he considers his blindness a blessing. After a while, Nagamasa is defeated by Nobunaga and commits suicide; as a result, Oichi and her daughters are sent to live with one of Nobunaga’s retainers, Hashiba Hideyoshi. When Hideyoshi falls for Oichi, Yaichi is able to see through his feelings, because they are also his own; this brings him to the realization that, as far as matters of the heart are concerned, there is no difference between high and low. After Nobunaga’s death, Oichi marries Shibata Katsuie, but the jealous Hideyoshi attacks him, forcing Oichi and Katsuie to take their own lives. Later on, Hideyoshi falls in love with Oichi’s daughter Chacha, who had been saved from the family tragedy by Yaichi. Although he would have been happy to serve the family for another generation, Yaichi is treated coldly by Chacha, and in the end has to leave the castle.

As summarized above, *A Blind Man's Tale* is the story told by Yaichi, the blind masseur who served the most famous tragic heroine of the Warring States period, Lady Oichi, Oda Nobunaga’s sister and Asai Nagamasa’s wife. In order to clarify the significance of this novel, let us take a look at one of the letters Tanizaki sent to Shimanaka Yūsaku, the president of the *Chūō Kōron* Publishing House. The purpose of this letter is, basically, to ask for an advance on the publication money. The serialization of a novel in a magazine or newspaper from the *Chūō Kōron* was usually contracted with the condition of subsequently publishing the said work in book form, also from the *Chūō Kōron* Publishing House. As part of the contract, Tanizaki was entitled to 10%- 15% of the royalties— this is the money he is writing about to Shimanaka. The letter reads:

*At long last, I was able to finish writing “A Blind Man’s Tale”. I was thinking about putting it together into a volume with “Yoshino Kuzu” and another short piece that I wrote for Sano’s magazine, what do you think of that? In my opinion, these three novels won’t be very popular with the general public, so I was thinking that, instead of trying to sell a lot of copies, we’d better publish the volume as a luxury book. I have a total of 400 handwritten pages; if you don’t mind, I’d like to use letters that are slightly bigger than usual, and take care of the binding design myself.*

*Right now, I am also writing a piece for Shinseinen, a sort of historical novel with a twist of sexual perversity in it, which I am planning to publish in book form from you, later. Unfortunately, the content of this novel is completely different from the other three, so I don’t think they could be published in the same volume; should you consider that 400 pages*

are not enough, you must give me time to write something else. (August 5, 1931)<sup>14</sup>

The “historical novel with a twist of sexual perversity” serialized in *Shinseinen* is *Bushūkō Hiwa*; Tanizaki writes about it, comparing it with *A Blind Man’s Tale* in another letter, too:

*Bushūkō Hiwa*, the novel which I am currently writing for *Shinseinen*, is one I feel confident will be well-received by the general public and will sell quite a few copies— a thing I cannot really say about “*A Blind Man’s Tale*”. I am also sure that, if I were to offer it, any publishing house would gladly give me at least half of the royalties in advance; but since I did make a promise to publish it from your company, and we have been doing business together for a long time now, I hope you would be willing to pay me part of the money in advance. (April 18, 1932)<sup>15</sup>

As the quoted letters show, Tanizaki regards *Bushūkō Hiwa* and *Mōmoku Monogatari* [*A Blind Man’s Tale*] as two novels at the antipodes, as far as their chances to sell are concerned. Interestingly enough, they are both historical novels, so how exactly are they different?

*Bushūkō Hiwa* is from the same category as *Rangiku Monogatari*; as I have explained in a previous section, they both deal with a period in history or location that people are “less familiar” with, and the main characters are fictional, characteristics which clearly distinguish them from the type of historical discourse from *Mōmoku Monogatari*. To sum it up, during the same period, Tanizaki tried to write two types of historical novels, one quite similar to the “popular novel” (*Bushūkō Hiwa*), and a completely new type, illustrated by *Mōmoku Monogatari*.

The media where these novels were published are also of importance to the present analysis. *Shinseinen*, the magazine where *Bushūkō Hiwa* appeared, is a typical example of the modern media of the time; numerous illustrations decorated its pages, and mystery stories were often published in it. On the other hand, *Mōmoku Monogatari* was published in one of the major general magazines. Also, when republished as a hard-cover, Tanizaki expressed his wish to have it made into a “luxury book”, and personally supervised the cover design. *Mōmoku Monogatari* was printed on *washi* (Japanese paper), and bound in the traditional style of classical Japanese books (*wa-toji-bon*). The title was hand-written by Matsuko, Tanizaki’s wife, while the front page illustration, showing a portrait of Chacha, was executed by the Japanese-style painter Kitano Tsunetomi (1880-1947).

Instead of making a book that “would sell”, Tanizaki chose to put his time and effort into making a “luxury book”; by reducing the number of printed copies, and at the same time increasing the price per copy, he was able to raise the rank of his novel, and place it among those with “artistic value”.

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted from Mizukami Tsutomu (editor), *Tanizaki Sensei no Shokan: Aru Shuppansha Shachō he no Tegami wo Yomu*, 1991, Chūō Kōron Publishing House, Tokyo (p.57).

<sup>15</sup> Quoted from Mizukami Tsutomu (editor), *Tanizaki Sensei no Shokan: Aru Shuppansha Shachō he no Tegami wo Yomu*, 1991, Chūō Kōron Publishing House, Tokyo (pp.76-77).

#### 4. Naratology in *A Blind Man's Tale*

In this chapter, I would like to focus on the narrative characteristics of *A Blind Man's Tale*. Yaichi's special position as a narrator can be inferred from the quotation below, a fragment from the opening paragraphs of the novel:

*I'm sure you know that Odani Castle belonged to Lord Asai Nagamasa, a fine young man who had already made a name for himself as a general. His father, old Lord Hisamasa, was still alive, but there were rumors that they didn't get along very well. People said that his father was to blame. Most of the samurai, even the chief retainers, seemed to take sides with Nagamasa. (p.206)<sup>16</sup>*

While massaging his customer, whom he refers to as *danna-sama* (Your Lordship), Yaichi starts telling him the story of his life. As seen in the quotation, Yaichi is recounting something based on the assumption that the listener already knows the story. "I'm sure I don't have to tell you this, do I?", Yaichi repeats, asking for confirmation from his listener, although the latter never responds. As readers, even if we do not know the details of Yaichi's story, we are made to continue reading, pretending that we do. This is the type of "implied" listener (and reader) that Yaichi's narrative asks for. Let us take a look at the following fragment, too:

*Meanwhile Nobunaga and Nagamasa had a falling out, and there was fighting between the two families. Now when did that happen? Wasn't the Battle of Anegawa in 1570, the first year of the Genki Period? I'm sure a gentleman like you, who can read, knows far better than I do about such things. (p.211)*

In order to be able to assume the same position in the text as Yaichi's silent listener, the reader must act on the premise that he "can read" and "knows far better", even if that is not true; otherwise, he cannot continue reading. The narrator of *Mōmoku Monogatari* is forcing his reader to have, or to pretend to have, the same knowledge and understanding of history as the "hidden" listener.

Both *danna-sama* and the reader have heard about the people in Yaichi's story from books, and know that they are historical personalities. On the other hand, for Yaichi, they are part of a private experience, and he knows them on an extremely personal level. In other words, *A Blind Man's Tale* advances by combining the listener/ reader's general perception of history, as it can be learned from a book, with Yaichi's very personal story. Needless to say that, in order to understand the appeal of Yaichi's account, one must be aware of the historical background hinted at, and this is *A Blind Man's Tale's* most outstanding narrative characteristic.

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<sup>16</sup> The quotations in English from *A Blind Man's Tale* belong to Howard Hibbett, in *Seven Japanese Tales*, 1967, Tuttle Publishing, Tokyo (special edition for Japan and Okinawa). Page numbers are indicated after each quotation.

The novel Tanizaki wrote in 1931 has probably been able to awaken the same kind of interest among readers, from 1931 until the present day. Yaichi's story lives on and gains significance between the gaps embedded in the "common understanding" of history that Yaichi bases his story on. If Tanizaki and his reader are able to share this contextual knowledge, then the reader's position will practically overlap with that of *danna-sama*, regardless of whether the reader actually knows in detail the historical events that lie at the foundation of the novel or not. If the reader cannot identify with *danna-sama*, who is supposed to know the underlying "history", then he cannot possibly follow Yaichi's story. This is the trick hidden inside the structure of *A Blind Man's Tale*; a trick that makes the experience of Yaichi's silent listener in 1617 equal to that of all readers, from 1931 onwards.

Let us not forget that Yaichi is a very peculiar character; as a blind man, he is allowed to enter into the private rooms of ladies, and even touch their skin. Thus, he can try to imagine their beauty based on what his hands tell him, and he finds great pleasure in talking about his experiences. From this point of view, *Mōmoku Monogatari* contains a very marked fetishistic element, but we are only made aware of it at the crossroads of Yaichi's personal story and History.

### 5. The Polyphonic Story

In this section, I would like to discuss another element that plays an important role in the structure of *A Blind Man's Tale*. To illustrate it, I shall quote below the episode where, after the fall of Odani, Nagamasa's castle, several of his retainers are brought before the winning lord Oda Nobunaga:

*You there!" Nobunaga greeted them. "You got your master Nagamasa to turn against me, and gave me all these years of trouble, didn't you?"*

*Lord Iwami, a strong-willed man, replied: "My master was not a two faced general like you, My Lord."*

*This so engaged Nobunaga that he cried out: "Fool! What would a samurai stupid enough to be taken alive know about it?" And he rapped him over the head with the butt end of his spear.*

*But Lord Iwami never flinched. "Does it soothe Your Lordship's feelings to beat a person who is bound hand and foot?" he asked scornfully. That is certainly a curious attitude for a great general to take." Nobunaga executed him on the spot. (p.231)*

This scene is not one directly witnessed by Yaichi, and many other such episodes about the bravery of warriors are introduced into *A Blind Man's Tale*, as rumors and stories that he heard from others. It can be said that this technique is used to ensure that *Mōmoku Monogatari* has all the formal attributes of a historical novel. Thus, Yaichi acts not only as a re-teller of personal experiences, but also as a locus where various stories about the age and its people accumulate.

An important aspect here is that all the episodes that Yaichi has heard about from others are based on one pretext or another. For example, in the first half of

the novel, a famous historical document, *Asai Sandai-ki*<sup>17</sup> is frequently used. The episode quoted above also draws heavily on the contents of this record; not only is the story almost the same, but also the description of the characters and the sequence of events overlap with those in *Asai Sandai-ki* to such an extent that, rather than saying that Tanizaki was influenced by the historical document, it would be far more appropriate to say that he actually “translated” and included it in his own text.

When pointing out the existence of a pretext, it is not my intention to suggest that *A Blind Man's Tale* might not be an entirely original literary work. My contention is that the use of the contents, but also of the language in the pretext might hold the key to a better understanding of this novel's distinctive features. With this in mind, I would like to consider one more time the struggle between “history” and “story”, by looking at the following fragment, in the second half of the novel, where Yaichi says, referring the episode where he witnesses the suicide of the Katsui clan, at the fall of their castle:

*Well, this is about as much as I remember, but I am sure that you have heard of these gentlemen before, since their names were everyone's lips at the time. Indeed, there were some splendid men among them. (p.273)*

In the English version this part is missing, but Yaichi refers to “some splendid men whose name will live on in the coming ages”. It is not clear what he means by “the coming ages” (*nochi-no-se*), but, if we remember that the implied listener and the reader are supposed to share the same position, it is probably correct to say that Yaichi is talking about a distant future, beyond his own age.

I have mentioned above that one of Yaichi's main functions in the text is to act as a locus where various stories about the period and its heroes accumulate; here, it is indeed significant to notice that the only personal and direct experiences that he recounts are the ones connected to Lady Oichi, while the rest of the story consists of episodes about lords and warriors that he merely heard from others, or was able to infer post-factum. In other words, Yaichi is, to some extent, just an excuse for bringing together all these different threads, giving them a reason to exist on a unified timeline; the reader will surely realize that the overall story transcends Yaichi's powers of cognition.

Yaichi's story contains what he himself had been able to feel and perceive about Oichi, as well as the polyphony made up of all sorts of information originating from Lady Oichi, other servants, the princess, Lord Kyōgoku Takatsugu and various other rumors circulating around them. All these discourses are input first into Yaichi's memory, then, after being condensed, are woven into one unified story. Nevertheless, for the reader of historical novels, who is supposed to proceed with his reading under the influence of a certain “general knowledge of history”, Yaichi's story is born as part of a process of comparing and contracting this “general knowledge” with one's own knowledge about history. On

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<sup>17</sup> The record of the Asai family, describing their rise as *daimyō* of Ōmi, their confrontation with the Oda clan, and their subsequent ruin, written by Kia Yūzan, and supposedly published around 1671.

the other hand, the fragments from historical documents that Tanizaki translates and introduces in his own text have an inherent “otherness” that contributes to its polyphony, at the reader’s level.

The most distinctive characteristic of *A Blind Man’s Tale* is that its polyphony transcends the listener (*danna-sama*)’s position, and succeeds in placing the reader in the middle of a narrative structure constructed by a multitude of voices, a position which overlaps with Yaichi’s. The purpose of this structure is to allow the reader to share a very personal experience, told by a multitude of separate voices. Here lies, doubtlessly, the main reason why Tanizaki turned his eyes to the historical novel during this time and age: by connecting “story” and “history”, he knew it would be possible to make the modern readers feel the appeal of his novels.

After 1935, Tanizaki made his interest for classical literature clear, translating *Genji Monogatari* [*The Tale of Genji*] into modern Japanese three times. Thus, looking back, it is possible to say that Tanizaki’s process of rediscovering the “classical Japanese style”, based, as it was in *Mōmoku Monogatari* and other works from the same period, on inserting fragments from historical documents into his novels, was mediated by translation. One great concern for Tanizaki during this period was finding ways to make the most of the hidden possibilities of classical literature, by integrating it into the modern system. Painfully aware of the shortcomings of modern Japanese, he was thus led to experiment with translating classical texts, in order to achieve the style reform he felt necessary. While on the surface appearing to have shifted to an older version of Japan in response to the advancing wave of modernity, Tanizaki was in effect experimenting with a new and more dynamic language that could better fit his purposes.

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