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# Shiina Rinzō: imaging hope and despair in occupation Japan<sup>1</sup>

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A brief look at the history of Japan between 1868 and 1945 will show a nation in which attempts to flesh out and delineate the image of the ‘imagined community’ of which Benedict Anderson writes in his seminal study, *Imagined communities*, were all-consuming and centrally led (Anderson, 1991). Particularly in the immediate aftermath of the Meiji Restoration of 1867–68 and then again in the 1920s and 30s, the attempt to flesh out a more concrete image of this ‘imagined community’ was carefully orchestrated by the respective ruling oligarchies determined to speed up the process of establishing Japan as a modern nation-state. During the former era, such moves were inspired by the need for total reassessment of the national reality following the shift from the loose-knit federation of *han* (domains) of the preceding shogunal era to the early attempts at establishing a clearly defined centralized political structure in the wake of the imperial restoration; in the build-up to the Pacific War, they were orchestrated by the military, increasingly determined to subvert the propaganda machine for its own expansionist purposes in East Asia.

These attempts assumed a variety of guises, with each identifiable as contributing to the carefully choreographed attempts to define the parameters of the emerging national identity. In the early Meiji era, the process was reflected in the creation of a Japanese variant of a national Constitution (1889), the Imperial Rescript on Education (1890) and other measures integral to the democratic process, official support for the *genbun itchi* movement seeking rapprochement between the spoken and written forms of the language, and encouragement for the emergence of a distinctly national variant of the prose narrative genre (in the guise of the *shōsetsu*, the Japanese narrative form all too frequently loosely equated with the Western novel, but actually firmly rooted in Japan’s own narrative (*kokubungaku*) tradition). Thereafter, in the Taisho/early Showa era (1920–30), a similar process of close control over the images of emerging nationhood can be seen in the immediate and harsh supervision of all forms of social and political dissent (as evidenced in the fate of the proletarian literary movement); the forced political apostasies (*tenkō*) induced, with high rates of success, in the 1930s on those interred for left-wing sympathies; and in the strict control over the educational syllabus. The tenor of the times may have differed considerably. In each case, however, such efforts were explicitly identified with the broader goal of perpetuating the sense of a homogeneous community, one that had withstood the test of antiquity and that had succumbed to external pressure only when this was seen as in the national interest.

With defeat in the Pacific War in 1945, however, the very notion of ‘community’ was under threat, the future of the nation dependent, as never before, on the response of the international community. Viewed in a different light,

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on a presentation given at the second workshop of the ‘Narrating and Imaging the Nation’ project, arranged by the AHRB Centre for Asian and African Literatures, SOAS, University of London. A draft of this paper was presented at a symposium on Shiina Rinzō arranged by the Centre for Research on Christianity at Meiji Gakuin University, Tokyo and subsequently distributed to members of the Centre. The author would like to thank both audiences for some thought-provoking questions.

however, the slate was, in a very real sense, clean—the possibilities, indeed the need, for revised terms of reference for this ‘imagined community’ now of paramount importance. Defeat, then, represented a clear historical disjunction: with defeat, the healthy body of the nation had been dismembered. But this and the concomitant disavowal of Japan’s militarist past acted, if anything, as a spur to expressions of nationhood as critics acknowledged the need for this diseased body to be re-membered in the post-war era to articulate the new nationhood. As critics such as Igarashi Yoshikuni and Aoki Tamotsu have noted, the ensuing attempts to produce a new national identity were far-reaching, seeking as they did to encompass the memories of loss and devastation through the realm of everyday culture rather than through abstract political discourse.

Before such reconstruction could be achieved, however, Japan first had to deal with its recent past—and the discourse therefore begins with production of the official narrative, what Igarashi describes as the ‘foundational narrative’ (Igarashi, 2000: 14 ff.). Integral to this centrally-inspired ‘official’ narrative were two events—the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the emperor’s so-called ‘divine’ decision to end the War—which provided the grounds on which Japan’s post-war leadership would seek both to render comprehensible the events of 1945 and to establish the discourse that could explain away the tension created by acceptance of defeat. Once formulated, this narrative was offered by the Emperor to the citizens of Japan. It was this version of the narrative that seeped into the popular imagination; the result was what Igarashi portrays as a deliberate reconfiguration of Japan’s national image, ‘a narrative of conversion’ from militarist to peaceful state, one that prepared the stage for post-war Japan’s phenomenal growth in the economic arena (Igarashi, 2000: 26).

As Igarashi is first to acknowledge, central to this ‘foundational narrative’ was the ongoing debate with regard to Japan’s cultural identity. The famous 1942 symposium entitled ‘Overcoming Modernity’ had sought to dampen the shrill cultural nationalism of wartime propaganda (with Anglo–US ideology as the ‘modernity’ which required ‘overcoming’)—and this in turn led to the much-discussed *shutaisei* debate (with its implicit linking of modernity with a strong self). Much has been written on these debates.<sup>2</sup> But, as Aoki Tamotsu has noted in his recent incisive study of the transformation effected on post-war Japan’s cultural identity, it was only with the ensuing development of a *Nihon bunka-ron*, a discourse on Japanese uniqueness initially inspired by these earlier debates but quickly developing a momentum of its own, that the debate entered the popular consciousness. Aoki identifies four stages in the development of this *Nihon bunka-ron*:

- Negative perception of Japanese distinctiveness (1945–54);
- perception of historical relativism (1955–63);
- positive perception of Japan’s distinctiveness (early period 1964–76; later 1976–83);
- move from distinctiveness to universality (1984–present).<sup>3</sup>

Aoki’s focus is inevitably on the growing sense of optimism spurred by burgeoning economic success. At the same time, however, he is at pains to locate the roots of this process within the widespread sense of disillusionment with traditional Japanese culture that found such vehement expression in the

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed consideration of the significance of these debates see Korschman (1996) and Kersten (1996).

<sup>3</sup> For a brief discussion of these stages see Pinnington (2001).

immediate aftermath of the Pacific War: the ‘economic miracle’ of the 1950s and 60s is clearly premised on acknowledgement of the extent of the dis-ease and uncertainty that ensued in the immediate aftermath of defeat.

The focus of this paper will thus be on the first of Aoki’s four periods: the immediate post-war period (1945–54) during which Japan struggled to come to terms with defeat followed by Occupation—and embarked on its first tentative steps towards recovery. Needless to say, the call for such recovery was not limited to the economic sector: as noted above, the *kokutai* (national body) itself had been dismembered—and the immediate challenge during this period was for radical reassessment of the relationship between the nation and the individual under the new order. The task was multifaceted—and a significant, if rarely discussed, contribution in this regard was made by that generation of authors who had come of age during the era of military build-up in the 1930s and who found themselves, in 1945, confronted, as if for the first time, with the concept of ‘the future’. These were the so-called *Sengoha*, the first generation of post-war writers, whose core members included the likes of Shiina Rinzō, Noma Hiroshi and Haniya Yutaka.

Here was a group of writers, representative of a generation for whom war was the only knowable reality, the vast majority of whom bore the added stigma of having committed *tenkō*. Arrested for violations of the Peace Preservation Law, 1925, which was designed to root out all those whose political ideologies were perceived as a threat to the burgeoning war effort, the majority of these *Sengoha* authors had suffered imprisonment and torture for their political ideologies during their formative years and found themselves obliged to live with concomitant feelings of guilt and betrayal, most notably *vis-à-vis* colleagues who had resisted the pressure to sign a declaration of *tenkō*.

Such sentiments represent a core strand, particularly in the early writings of the *Sengoha*. At the same time, however, a reading of these texts suggests that capitulation to the demands of the authorities was the result not merely of physical fear of the consequences of resistance, but equally to the coercive power of the *kokutai*, the national body. As Patricia Steinhoff has noted, a critical pull here was the sense of national identity: increasingly, as the country descended into war, the implications of a left-wing ideological commitment were consciously and explicitly contrasted by the authorities with the need for commitment to the *kokutai*. As the situation deteriorated, so the force of such appeals proved ever more irresistible. But, as Steinhoff notes, there were other factors that contributed in equal measure to such recantations:

The emotional ties which drew [those who committed *tenkō*,] the *tenkōsha* away from the [Communist] Party and its ideology were the social bonds linking that person to Japanese society. The critical areas were his sense of identity as a Japanese; his sense of belonging within his family; and his sense of connection to social groups through commitment to particular persons (Steinhoff, 1988: 88).

Particularly in the case of those *tenkōsha* who subsequently turned to literature, therefore, the emotional force which resulted in *tenkō* was both the elemental desire to live—and the more specific desire to live *in order to* give expression to their personal creative self. Significantly, however, *tenkō* under such circumstances did not necessarily lead to immediate re-integration into society: there was no inevitable or immediate transition back into the nation or family. Instead, in many cases, these individuals were left even more isolated and alone.

Such is certainly the case with the majority of the *Sengoha* and in this

paper I intend to consider from this perspective the early texts of Shiina Rinzō, the author most typically identified with the *Sengoha*. In so doing, I shall be considering the extent to which his literary texts, written during the Occupation era, reflect what Aoki has described as the all-pervasive and ‘negative perception of Japanese distinctiveness’—and, by extension, the manner in which his literature helped to shape and modify the ‘imagined community’ of Japan.

*Writing the ruins*

In his critical study of Shiina, the critic Takadō Kaname portrays the author as, in all senses, a writer born ‘out of the ruins’—not only the physical ruins of Occupation Japan, but also the ruins that pervaded his inner being:

Both physically and spiritually, it was ruins that moulded Shiina inexorably into a unique writer. Unable to look down on these ruins from above, he was forced to crawl around hopelessly within them. But the knowledge that he had escaped the calamities of the War alive would have made every day precious and yet, paradoxically, totally empty (Takadō, 1989: 8).

Indeed, as Shiina himself acknowledged as he emerged from the War, he was obliged to confront the ultimate question:

Why am I alive? That is the stubborn question with which I am continually confronted. I have lost all hope in the history of mankind and cannot believe in its future. All I can believe in is the end of mankind. . . . When I hear such words as the ‘happiness of mankind’ and ‘peace’, I just want to burst out laughing (SRZ, 14: 34).

The issue lies at the heart of Shiina’s early prose narratives, most notably in the portrayal of the first person narrator, Sumaki, of the two early novellas with which Shiina announced his arrival on the literary scene, *Shin ’ya no shuen* (The midnight banquet, 1947) and *Omoki nagare no naka ni* (Within the sluggish stream, 1947). Sumaki’s evocations of his abject circumstances are among the most poignant on record for this period. As he acknowledges in *Omoki nagare*:

I have no future and the past has been destroyed. I am merely a solitary ruin. My heart is weighed down by the realisation that I was destroyed in the very process of my birth. I was destroyed the very moment I received my destiny. All that remains of me is a solitary ruin that is living for a concrete death (SRZ, 1: 98).

There can be few more honest literary portrayals of the depths plumbed by so many in Japan in the immediate post-war period. At the same time, however, Shiina is here clearly evoking more than the physical ruins of Occupation Japan: these are not the ruins of something now past its heyday. The emphasis here is on Sumaki’s spiritual state, one devoid of past or future, existing merely as an empty present. To be sure, neither Shiina, nor even the *Sengoha* as a group, held a monopoly on writing of the destructive effects, on both society and the individual, of defeat in 1945. Others, most notably the *Buraiha* (Decadents) literary coterie fronted by Dazai Osamu, also sought to portray in their works the ignominy of defeat, and the individual devoid of anything in which to place his trust except himself. In the case of Shiina, however, even such trust in the self is lacking—and it is this that marks his literature out from that of the majority of his peers (for whom the influences of the pre-war *shishōsetsu* (I-novel) form of self-referential prose narrative remained paramount).

On the one hand, therefore, one can concur with Takadō's evaluation of Shiina's corpus as, quite literally a 'literature of circumstances', subjective depictions of the circumstances of ruin (Takadō, 1989: 16). But, as Shiina's various creations seek to define the various parameters of life within the ruins, it emerges at the same time as a literature of existence. Herein lies the oxymoron—in the attempted fusion of the subjective depictions of the 'circumstances of ruin' and the objective analysis of existence within such ruins.

There is, then, a fundamental paradox underpinning Shiina's literature, a paradox that the author saw as an inevitable consequence of his own past. The issue was one that Shiina addressed directly in a subsequent consideration of the meaning of post-war literature:

Everything essential to man is born of the impossible ... Post-war literature is characterised by a passion for the impossible. And it is this very passion that represents the fiery lance that destroys the ugly nihilism which lies at the heart of all degeneration (SRZ, 14: 27).

The point was taken up by Shiina's colleague in the *Sengoha*, Haniya Yutaka:

For Shiina—as well as for me—all literature stems from a continuing challenge to attempt to say that which cannot be said, to transmit that which can never be transmitted, to describe the impossible as if it were possible (cited in Takadō, 1989: 16).

Both comments contain echoes of the well-known exhortation, issued by the Emperor, in his famous radio broadcast of 15 August 1945 accepting the terms of the Potsdam Declaration, for the citizens of Japan to 'endure the unendurable'. The challenge for Shiina and his compatriots in the *Sengoha* was to capture the essence of this paradox—to give literary expression to this opposition. Throughout this paper, therefore, I shall be focusing on this 'passion for the impossible'—on this determination to communicate that which is intrinsically incommunicable—and citing it as integral to Shiina's attempt to shape discussions regarding Japan's post-war identity, an attempt which, however modest, I am suggesting was more influential than has hitherto been acknowledged.

The technique deployed by the *Sengoha*—and I am citing Shiina as the most influential proponent of this—is one that can be described as 'paradoxical inversion', whereby elements, traditionally perceived as antithetical nodes of a binary tension, are subjected to gradual rapprochement, or fusion. Shiina's oeuvre is replete with examples of this technique as, during the course of the narratives, qualities initially depicted as irreconcilable opposites, come to be seen more as elements of a dynamic tension in which the one is ultimately only definable in terms of the other, as two sides of a fundamentally symbiotic relationship. This is evidenced at the textual level by a preponderance, throughout Shiina's oeuvre, of passages in which a particular narrative depiction is followed by an immediate inversion, effected by use of a conjunction of negation (such as 'but', 'however', 'and yet', etc.), that serves to draw attention to the inherent symbiosis between qualities more traditionally placed in opposition.

To Shiina, therefore, no depiction of hope is possible without consideration of its inverse, absolute despair: as the author himself was to suggest, 'Despair is impossible without hope and, equally, hope is not possible without despair' (SRZ, 20: 23–4). Similarly, the brightness which, I shall be arguing, does ultimately permeate his texts, is a brightness premised on a knowledge of darkness. Shiina may have been dismissed by many as merely depicting the

despair and emptiness of existence in Occupation Japan; such depictions, I suggest, fall short of the mark in missing the carefully-crafted dichotomy, the hope beyond the despair, the light beyond the darkness. Significantly, it was this quality that was explicitly recognized by Shiina's peer, Haniya Yutaka, who suggested:

Shiina's greatest contribution was the introduction of dialectics into Japanese literature. He deals with the paradox of despair and freedom in their naked form and combines ideas with a reality suffused with the humour of the common people (cited in Hibbard, 1973: 211).

At this point however, we should support the argument with closer consideration of the texts in question and, for the purposes of this paper, I shall be focusing specifically on *Shin'ya no shuen*, Shiina's maiden work, and *Eien naru joshō* (The eternal preface, 1948), his first full-length prose narrative.

*The midnight banquet*

On the one hand, *The midnight banquet* is a narrative depiction of the straitened 'circumstances' in which Shiina's first-person narrator, Sumaki, finds himself immediately after the war and, although we must clearly avoid any facile identification of Shiina, as author, with his narrator, in view of the subjective and confessional tenor of the 'I-novel' tradition in which Shiina and his readers were steeped, one cannot ignore the autobiographical element within this and subsequent stories. Living in an old, bombed-out warehouse, converted into the most rudimentary of apartments, the atmosphere evoked from the outset is one of unmitigated gloom—to the extent that Sumaki recalls with nostalgia his days in prison:

Now, when it rains all day long, I feel stifled. Even when in prison, I could inhale the spray from the rain through the window and could contemplate the tall, red brick wall as it gradually changed hue in the rain to an ugly mud colour. When Spring came, I could see, beyond the iron bars and iron grillwork, begonias blossoming along the edge of the wall. But all I can do in this room is pace back and forth (*SRZ*, 1: 4).

Struggling to endure such meaninglessness, Sumaki not surprisingly finds himself questioning the very purpose of his present life:

I am devoid of all memories. And not for me the dreams of a shining future. All that exists is the unendurable present. *But*, to one forlorn of hope, just because the present is hard to endure does not mean any hope of improvement. What can be improved? And how? ... All that remains for me is to endure the unendurable present (*SRZ*, 1: 11, emphasis added).

On the basis of such passages, it is hardly surprising that Shiina was categorized as an 'author of despair';<sup>4</sup> the reputation was in large measure self-inflicted. Almost immediately, however, comes evidence of an overtly intrusive narrator, one determined to penetrate beyond the immediate pain and misery, by drawing attention to the fact that Sumaki is not simply succumbing to his despair. The inversion is first evidenced in Sumaki's response to his 'depressing' neighbours:

All [my neighbours] incite in me a profound sense of despair. They reduce

<sup>4</sup> This categorization is presented as the received wisdom, and subsequently challenged, by Yamagata (1988: 68 ff.).

the various yearnings of my heart to a sense of hopeless despair. *And yet*, somehow I find contentment in the fact that I have begun to love my despair. Of course, that is a melancholy sort of love. *And yet*, my melancholy affords me the same kind of pleasure as that one feels when climbing into bed at night (*SRZ*, 1: 11, emphasis added).

The stark opposition incorporated into such portrayals is clearly not designed to denigrate the extent of Sumaki's despair: this remains as real and abject as ever. The protagonist has, however, moved on—to an acceptance that such despair and suffering are not meaningless, painful emotions that must be endured for no apparent reason, but rather natural feelings which enable him to confront a deeper level of his being. The experience is invaluable and, by the end of the novella, Sumaki is in a position to unravel some of his confusion, to make some sort of sense of that which has earlier been presented as a clash of irrationally conflicting emotions. Disturbed from sleep by the incessant snoring of his neighbour, for example, he is now in a position to place a more positive gloss on his circumstances:

Toda's miserable groans penetrated to my room and I was left merely to endure it. To me, to endure is to live. Through endurance, I gain release from all burdens. And through endurance, I am enabled to experience that intoxicating feeling of indifference. What else can one do in this world but endure? (*SRZ*, 1: 30).

Significantly, to Sumaki, it is not through living but through 'endurance' that he experiences 'release from all burdens', and as this philosophy is broached, there is initially a decisive break between these two opposing sentiments. In depicting the one as running gradually, but smoothly, into the other, however, the narrative succeeds paradoxically in transforming 'passive' endurance into 'active' living.

By this stage, the pattern of fusion is firmly established and the concluding section of the work is devoted predominantly to consideration of the dichotomy already intimated as central to Sumaki's interpretation of his circumstances—that between love and hate. Shortly after reaching the above conclusion, for example, the protagonist is summoned by Senzō, his uncle and landlord, and physically struck for a display of insolence. Sumaki's reaction, however, betrays a clear determination to counter such hatred with love:

I felt my head become lighter and brighter. I was aware of being alive and burst out laughing. The laughter stemmed from my heart (*SRZ*, 1: 34).

Even in the face of an act of outward cruelty, hatred is here transformed into happiness by means of the narrative device of paradoxical inversion.

Shiina's reputation as a prominent spokesman for the *Sengoha* had been established, his means of addressing the confusion and contradictions of the age firmly signalled. Clearly, as Shiina's maiden work, however, *The midnight banquet* cannot be read as a mature and complete consideration of the various paradoxes with which the author found himself confronted in immediate post-war society and, even at the end of the novella, several of the contradictions in Sumaki's life remain unresolved. The work is, however, significant in establishing the prototype; in his subsequent works, Shiina's shift from initial despair at being trapped in the ruins to an attempt to laugh at life and to extricate his characters from its vicissitudes finds more explicit portrayal. The transition is evident in the ensuing novella, *Within the sluggish stream* (1947); but it is not until publication in the following year of his first full-length novel, *The eternal*

*preface*, that Shiina depicts a character, Yasuta, who is beginning to live for the present.

#### The eternal preface

From the outset, Yasuta is depicted as a character for whom living for the present represents the apogee of freedom, happiness and peace. The novel may start *in medias res*—with Yasuta returning from a visit to the hospital during which he has been diagnosed with a terminal illness and given less than six months to live. But his immediate response is to display a passion for life—to argue that ‘there is nothing as important as life’ (*SRZ*, 1: 396)—and to suggest that it is this passion, stemming from acknowledgement of impending death, that enables him to seek out freedom. As he stops for breath on a bridge, for example, Yasuta’s reaction is hardly that to be expected of one so recently brought face-to-face with his own mortality:

As he stared at the water, it glowed with the brightness, not of the current night, but of day. And that brightness evoked within his whole being a sense of peace that resembled the tenderness and warmth that accompanies feelings of resignation. That was a totally and unexpectedly fresh emotion (*SRZ*, 1: 326–7).

Ironically, it is only as he finds himself confronted by impending and inescapable death that Yasuta begins to live, and to seek to influence not only his own destiny but also that of those around him. Whereas previously he had been hounded by a constant fear of death, even to the extent of attempting suicide, he now finds himself imbued with a new sense of hope and liberation. This internal conflict is clearly delineated in a poignant passage as the protagonist confronts his own present reality:

‘I knew that my lungs were gone’, he murmured to himself. ‘But I had no idea that even my heart was gone! At this stage, everything is hopeless. Even walking is hopeless’. When Yasuta finally reached the bridge, he leaned against the balustrade, as though no longer able even to stand. Everything before him was dark and he felt as though he were about to keel over and die. The people spewing forth from the station passed hurriedly behind him, urged on by the darkness of the night. But he no longer had the strength to think. Yasuta sighed and gazed once more at the foot of the bridge. The water seemed remote, as though he were looking down into a valley from the top of a mountain (*SRZ*, 1: 325–6).

The passage betrays a sense of stoic and resigned acceptance of impending death. The narrative continues, however, with a clear indication that Yasuta will not merely succumb to self-pity and a sense of nihilism:

Someone was standing immediately beside him. The man appeared to be a young labourer and kept glancing at the station as though waiting for someone. Yasuta felt a wave of emotion. He was profoundly moved by the fact that, having just been forewarned of his own impending death, he was able to discern someone beside him. He felt saved (*SRZ*, 1: 326).

Again, this is hardly a typical human reaction. Why does recognition of the presence of a fellow human being move him in this way? And why does he feel ‘saved’ as a result of this experience? Once more, it is the text itself that must provide the answers, and the narrative stresses that it is only on being forewarned of impending death that Yasuta can look on mankind more objectively. The sense of envy he consequently experiences causes a shudder to run

down his spine. But, at this point, the protagonist is overcome by ‘an unexpected, mysterious and inexplicable emotion’, a mixture of ‘fear and weird exhilaration verging on sexual ecstasy’ (SRZ, 1: 329). A similar emotion is repeated a few pages later, with the narrative, on this occasion, emphasizing that Yasuta ‘experienced a sense of revelation ... He was somehow free, albeit this was a chilly sense of freedom’ (SRZ, 1: 334).

It is not just impending death, however, that enables Yasuta to secure a sense of liberation: freedom also stems from the sense of solidarity he had come to detect amongst his neighbours, whom he saw as united by the need to work in order to survive the trauma of post-war reality. To Yasuta, confronted by death, the issue appears clear-cut:

Can there be anything quite so meaningless in this world as working merely to stay alive? The true meaning of work is the pain of enduring the burden of this meaninglessness (SRZ, 1: 378).

There remains, however, one further ingredient without which the perception of ‘absolute freedom’, Yasuta’s constant mantra, remains incomplete, and it is only following further protracted self-examination that Yasuta is able to complete the puzzle:

Freedom? Without passion, how can anyone live this meaningless life? Real freedom—that which lends meaning to meaninglessness—that something is only to be found within passion (SRZ, 1: 417).

The vision would appear to stem from the author’s reading of the likes of Dostoevsky and Camus. However, in that the existential awakening that occurs within Yasuta is accompanied by a corresponding social awakening without which his sense of solidarity with his fellow humans would remain an impossibility, Yasuta can also be viewed as the personification of the author’s aim, outlined elsewhere, to emulate Camus in achieving a ‘simultaneous establishment of existential realism and social realism’ (SRZ, 15: 12).

At this point, *The eternal preface* would appear to have reached a denouement similar to that achieved in the earlier novellas. The attempt to determine a *raison d’être* for those devoid of all meaning and future to life is, however, merely one pole of the contradictory vision of life with which Yasuta finds himself confronted following his warning of impending death. Equally significant is the protagonist’s simultaneous concern with the new-found meaning to his current existence as, confronted with death, he is obliged to confess:

I may not even have one month left to live. Everything *should* seem totally meaningless to me, shouldn’t it? (SRZ, 1: 379).

Confronted by colleagues weighed down by the monotony of their lives, Yasuta is here expressing surprise that his current life should seem so full of meaning. At this stage, the only explanation the narrator is able to proffer in response to this paradox is that ‘death is somehow acting as the fount of his life force’ (*shi ga kare no ikiru chikara no gensen de aru*) (SRZ, 1: 390). In this, however, the protagonist is not the pawn of a manipulative author; Shiina is not suggesting that the world, in all its ugliness, appears beautiful to the dying man. Rather, in portraying death as an overwhelming reality, he succeeds, paradoxically, in reasserting life, however meaningless and cruel.

First indications of such authorial intrusion occur in the depiction of the evolving relationship between Yasuta and his landlady, Okane. Throughout the novel, Shiina is at pains to stress the contrast between the elderly, and singularly unprepossessing Okane, and Tomiko, the beautiful sister of Ginjirō,

Yasuta's friend from his days as a young Army recruit. Significantly, however, when forced to choose between the two, it is to Okane, epitome of all that the younger Yasuta would have rejected, that the protagonist turns. His impulsive decision to leave the distraught Tomiko upstairs and to turn instead to Okane, asleep with her two sons downstairs, leaves even Yasuta perplexed:

How could he account for the sense of solidarity that existed [between himself and Okane]? It was certainly not based on love. And they were certainly not united by common interests. No, this was their understanding of their own social destinies, accumulated over the centuries, a mutual—and, as such, secret and demonic—understanding of life, derived from their own cursed experiences of life ...

It was as though returning to Okane entailed returning to himself. He couldn't help repeating to himself that Okane and he were one and the same. Whatever he might do or think, she represented a place which he could never leave (SRZ, 1: 399–400).

In his attraction to Okane, Yasuta senses a paradoxical 'predilection for the ugly' (SRZ, 1: 358, 366), 'a feeling of empathy only possible between the oppressed and accursed' (SRZ, 1: 359). The paradox involved in this allure is not lost on the protagonist—but again the text appears at pains to stress that this is not a situation whereby the ugly has come to appear beautiful; rather, the depiction involves a deliberate attempt, so prominent in Shiina's works, to focus on a certain quality through paradoxical consideration of its inverse.

For all the narrative subversion, however, Yasuta himself is still unable to account for his own positive attitude and he is left to muse:

What had happened to those dark and oppressive feelings towards life which he had harboured in the past? There is no doubt that this was his real self. No doubt at all. All that had happened was that he had been confronted by death. *And yet*, why did he now feel so full of the joys of life? (SRZ, 1: 425, emphasis added).

Yasuta may find his response to adversity inexplicable. But, by this stage, there are clear textual allusions to the metamorphosis that has been effected on his inner being as a result of confrontation with imminent death—as he comes to recognize death and meaninglessness as 'passions that led him to act, infinitely rich springs that gave him the power to live' (SRZ, 1: 435). Even more significant, however, is his conclusion that 'it is death—and death alone—that can turn the impossibility of eternity into a possibility' (SRZ, 1: 459).

The concept of the 'possibility of the [occurrence of the] impossible' (*fukanō no kanō*) (SRZ, 1: 465) had been broached and, in emphasizing the essential dichotomy inherent in human existence, the motif stands as a perfect symbol of the technique of 'paradoxical inversion' that lies at the heart of the novel. To the protagonist, there are three potential catalysts for the 'occurrence of the impossible': it can be caused 'by means of coincidence, ... by means of God, ... [or] by means of social activism' (SRZ, 1: 465). Each represents an alternative means whereby the individual attempts to assign meaning to the inherent duality of existence and, as such, in a manner reminiscent of Dostoevsky, each is personified at the textual level—with Tomiko attempting to resolve contradictions through faith in coincidence, Ginjirō convinced of the supremacy of God, and Yamamoto, Yasuta's mentor with regard to social issues, attempting to secure his *raison d'être* through ideological activism.

To Yasuta, however, none is able to address the basic dichotomy—none succeeds in making a 'possibility of the impossible'—and he is forced to

conclude: 'I can't believe in any of these' (SRZ, 1: 465). Prior to receipt of his medical prognosis, Yasuta, too, might well have resorted to some such crutch in a desperate attempt to unravel the paradox of living a meaningless existence; by this stage, however, he is content to accept the essential paradox of human existence as such, and he continues:

Without hatred, there can be no love. This is an indisputable law of nature that has been rediscovered and reconfirmed time and again during the course of history. *And yet*, he had lost the power to hate; it was as though it had been stripped away from his physical being. In which case, he didn't love anything; he couldn't love anything (SRZ, 1: 466, emphasis added).

Yasuta has now come to recognize the transformation that has been effected within himself as a result of confrontation with death, and he is in a position to admit:

Did I ever forget death even before I came to be confronted with impending death? Hadn't death always stood in front of me, driving me ever further towards loneliness and isolating me ever more from those around me? *And yet*, death had now quite clearly changed me. What was the difference between that death and this death? I myself have no idea (SRZ, 1: 460, emphasis added).

The difference between the two visions of death is that whereas death had previously been viewed as cutting him off from the world and driving him towards isolation, impending death now seems to enhance his attachment to life and to create a sense of solidarity with those around him. But this is a difference in result, not a causal difference. The conclusion seemingly reached by Shiina is that the true reason for this transformation can never be expressed in literature; all the author can do is to portray the transformation that takes place and hint at the motivating force behind it, leaving the cause of this shrouded in the emptiness that lies at the heart of the novel. The distinction is nevertheless important, as it is this metamorphosis within the protagonist that accounts for his paradoxical reaction to the death, by suicide, of Ginjirō. Whereas, in the past, Yasuta had always placed his trust in Ginjirō as both friend and doctor, the narrative depiction of events immediately after Ginjirō succeeds in realizing his desire for death provides further evidence of 'paradoxical inversion':

For some reason, Yasuta smiled, a sense of bright fulfilment and powerful tension at his breast. Goodbye, Takeuchi-san. I no longer have any need of you. The 'you' that resided in my heart has died. Disappeared without trace. I have no need of the dead. Goodbye, Takeuchi-san (SRZ, 1: 470).

Again, the reaction can hardly be described as a typical human response. In the context of the evolving relationship between the two men, however, Yasuta's response to Ginjirō's death is a logical extension of recent developments, an explicit unravelling of that which had previously been entrusted to the level of paradox. A brief consideration of this evolving relationship should serve to illustrate the significance of Shiina's narrative technique in this regard.

All the textual evidence suggests that, in the past, the two men had enjoyed a relationship based on mutual trust and respect. All that remains of that in the narrative present, however, is a relationship riddled with contradiction, with the two men initially established as the embodiment of opposite poles. Thus, to Yasuta, being alive has come to represent the apogee of freedom; to Ginjirō, on the other hand, 'to choose death for oneself is not merely right, it

is the true meaning of freedom' (*SRZ*, 1: 429). At this stage, it is not the dying Yasuta who is contemplating suicide, but rather Ginjirō, a man condemned to live, who accounts for his continued existence with the following ironic outburst:

It's obvious [why I'm alive], isn't it? Because I can't die! If I could just die, I'd be happy to leave this world with all its problems. Freedom? Rubbish! Happiness? A crazy delusion! Peace? A fantastic rumour! All the ultimate principles of man are but the dreams of fools, aren't they? (*SRZ*, 1: 383).

Superficially, therefore, both men are close to death, yet unable to die; and both continue to walk down a path that is leading to nowhere but death. But whereas Ginjirō yearns for death, both for himself and for Yasuta, the latter, whilst accepting the reality of impending death for himself, can still smile at Ginjirō—even when the latter strikes him. Confronted by death, he makes a positive commitment to life—and is even imbued with a certain passion for life. Ginjirō, on the other hand, determines to die in the face of life, with existence coming to be dismissed as a mere abstraction.

The contrast is a deliberate narrative device: in emphasizing the various oppositions inherent in this relationship, the narrative succeeds in deploying each man as a means whereby the other comes to know more about his own self. The technique is developed particularly with regard to Ginjirō's insights into Yasuta—and it is consequently significant that it is this suicidal friend, and not the protagonist himself, who comes closest to solving the mystery of why Yasuta feels more alive when confronted with death than he had before receipt of the negative prognosis. As Ginjirō remarks during one particularly heated exchange:

Anyway, I've finally come to understand how you carry on living with that stupid smile on your face. You keep yourself busy all day long, concerning yourself with a string of irrelevant trifles in an attempt to put death out of your mind.... It's a pathetic slave mentality.... You've changed. Since being told you're dying, you've changed completely. Once you know you're about to die, everything seems absurd (*SRZ*, 1: 427–8).

At this stage, the contrast between the spiritually broken Ginjirō and the physically broken Yasuta could not be sharper. In keeping with the evolving pattern, however, deployment of this opposition is a narrative device designed to place greater emphasis on the symbiotic relationship between the two men. And, as if to reinforce the gradual nature of the evolution thereby effected, it is only at the end of the novel, with the physical demise of both men, that this rapprochement is brought about fully.

Ginjirō is the first to die, but his death is viewed by Yasuta not as the end of life, but as 'a wonderful eternal preface' (*SRZ*, 1: 472); to Yasuta, this represents the start of something greater, and subsequent depictions of the protagonist, even in the throes of his own demise, are consequently the most optimistic to date. As if to reinforce the intimacy ultimately achieved by the two men, Shiina's initial draft of the novel concluded with the protagonist's death, too, portrayed as 'one more eternal preface'.<sup>5</sup> Significantly, however, this final depiction is omitted from the revised edition of the text (that which appears in *SRZ* 1), apparently deemed over-explicit.

<sup>5</sup> See *Gendai Nihon kirisutokyō bungaku zenshū* 4: 138.

### Conclusion

Less than eighteen months may have separated composition of *The midnight banquet* and *The eternal preface*. The months in question represented, however, a period of immense social readjustment to a new normalcy in which those of the *Sengoha* generation in particular were obliged to accommodate the previously unconscionable concept of 'the future'. For Shiina, more specifically, the intervening months were definitive: it was during this period that he succeeded in releasing himself from the most intrusive of the police shackles that had dogged his every movement since his release from jail and in securing employment as a railway clerk. Seen thus, the latter of the two works under consideration offers a valuable new perspective on the earlier novella, *The midnight banquet*.

At the time of its publication, *The eternal preface* was seen as a further vivid portrayal of the ruins of war, another attempt to depict the means deployed by those on the margins of society to survive the harsh economic reality of the times.<sup>6</sup> On closer examination, however, the development, in the interim, of a more considered vision of human freedom is marked. The evolving vision is embodied in the two protagonists considered above: in contrast to Sumaki, condemned to live among the post-war ruins, Yasuta is condemned to death—and it is only then, with Yasuta's nascent dreams of a future seemingly shattered, that he is liberated from the metaphorical shackles and empowered to begin to live.

Put differently, Sumaki and Yasuta can be seen as successive examples of the 'Shiina hero', each captured as he seeks to come to terms with the intensely personal process of individuation upon which he is engaged. Each, in his own way, seeks to emerge, in true Jungian fashion, as 'a psychological in-dividual ... a separate, indivisible unity or whole' (Jung, 1953–77: 275–6). But whereas the portrayal of Sumaki remains largely focused on individual growth, that of Yasuta, in its attempt to grapple with the social consequences of his emerging consciousness, ultimately emerges as part of a broader schema, that of giving concrete expression to the role and position of the individual in the nation-building project in which, ultimately, the entire nation was engaged at the time.

There is, in short, a critical distance inserted by the author between himself and his more 'mature' protagonist, Yasuta, a distance that mirrors the author's own struggle to transcend his abject circumstances which remained, after all, a *sine qua non* for his attempts to portray the individual in Occupation Japan in all his ignominy. In place of his earlier protagonist who, as suggested above, often emerges as little more than a barely disguised authorial mouthpiece, Shiina here posits another Self—one who can be viewed as the saved version of his former self—and suggests that it is this Self who provides for the enhanced perspective from which events in *The eternal preface* are viewed.

It is, I would suggest, in this regard that the full extent of Shiina's contribution to the post-war literary scene is best appreciated. In contrast to so many of the patriotic effusions of his immediate predecessors, writing only a few years earlier and yet under totally differing social conditions, Shiina's fictions represent a landmark series of texts, a corpus that provides us with powerful reminders of the link that exists between individuals, struggling to reconcile their current plight with some kind of a 'future', and the evolving national consciousness. Most critics have acknowledged, in Shiina's protagonists, symbols of the poor, the weak and the oppressed. The paradox with which most of these commentators were reluctant to engage was that, whilst remaining

<sup>6</sup> See Takadō (1989) for detail regarding the immediate reception of this work.

silent on social issues, Shiina was able, by virtue of the personalities of his characters, to wax eloquent on the very same subject. The resulting evocations of post-war Japan are vivid, leading the critic, Sasabuchi Tomoichi to conclude:

What really strikes the reader of Shiina's literature is that which might be described as the goodwill of the masses. That is the quality lacking in literature to date and reflects the beautiful humanness of the man (Sasabuchi, 1968: 146).

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