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Ishikawa Jun, the Logic of the Gaze, and the Bodies of Modernism

Irena Hayter

Ishikawa Jun's Akutagawa prize-winning novel *Fugen* (The Bodhisattva, 1936) stands out in the literary landscape of the 1930s because of the rhetorical density of its language and its disregard for conventional realism.¹ It is concerned with writing itself, with the materiality of language. There is a dizzying variety of devices of citation and allusion; medieval European figures such as Joan of Arc and the poet Christine de Pisan (c. 1364 - c. 1430) are superimposed onto Buddhist legend in a story taking place in 1930s Tokyo. *Fugen* is a somewhat parodic take on the confessional form of the *shishōsetsu*, but it also draws on that favorite Western modernist trope, the work of art as the redemption of a fallen reality. It is then not surprising that critical writing on *Fugen* has focused almost exclusively on its rhetorical textures. Miryam Sas describes the language of *Fugen* with the Barthesian term "writerly" because it is animated by an intertextual imagination steeped in the cultural histories of both East and West.² The use of allusion in the novel has also been compared to the Edo-era aesthetic device of *mitate* that often mixes high and low and juxtaposes rarefied classical culture to the earthly world of Edo commoners.³ Both Sas and William Tyler emphasize how Ishikawa Jun's irreverent linkages bring together radically diverse contexts, undermining the idea of self-contained cultural traditions; how this palimpsestic structure spatializes the text, complicating the forward thrust of narrative and opening up non-linear possibilities of reading.

French modernism and Edoesque aesthetics might be historically and culturally heterogeneous, but they do meet in their focus on textual surfaces: as

Karatani Kōjin has observed, Edo was “a world without a point of view (a subject), one indifferent to meaning.... Japanese literature was without either interiority or objectivity: it offered a pure play of language.”⁴ In a way, the critics’ preoccupation with allusion and citation in *Fugen* has fetishized textuality, thus divorcing the novel from its immediate historical contexts and referentiality in general. I have argued elsewhere that the formal structures of *Fugen* emphasize mediation rather than immediacy and allegorically resist the collapse of *political* mediation in 1930s Japan and the swell of fascist desires for oneness with the emperor.⁵ In this essay I want to focus on gender, another problematic with which Ishikawa Jun’s novel has a markedly ambivalent relationship. Aside for a few scattered lines of dialogue, women in *Fugen* do not talk much; they are not given even what Catherine Ryu calls “a cultured, pitch-perfect feminine voice,” an invention of male cultural producers which conforms to established gender codes.⁶ Unlike Ōba Minako’s “The Smile of a Mountain Witch,” analyzed by Kelly Hansen in this special section, the first-person narration of *Fugen* does not give us access to the interiority of its women characters. They are most often perceived visually, by a detached objectifying gaze that at times indulges in fantasies of dismemberment. Despite the commonly held view that modern art is all about the purification of domains and the medium itself, for me this visual dynamic is fully aligned with modernist textuality. In Ishikawa Jun’s novel, women are often removed, veiled images or are reduced to aesthetic patterns. I argue that these are strategies of containment because woman stands not only for unruly nature, but also for a debased mass culture, both equally threatening for the refined modernist work of art. When women cannot be abstracted and aestheticized, they become only bodies—ample, sweaty, oily flesh—excessively material and unbearably close. In such situations the visual distance collapses; the narrator is infected with

desire and repulsion at the same time. Women's bodies disrupt his literary and spiritual quest for transcendence. My concern is with this contradictory dynamics of allure and disgust; with the will to *textualize* the female body and its frustration.

Purity and Danger

Among the Japanese writers who emerged in the 1930s, Ishikawa Jun (1898-1987) is probably the one most often situated within a French literary genealogy, rather than a native one. Biographical fact seems to support such accounts: Ishikawa studied French in the Foreign Language School (Gaigo gakkō, the predecessor of today's Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, whose illustrious alumni include Futabatei Shimei and Ōsugi Sakae) and taught it for a brief period at the Fukuoka Higher School. He debuted in the *bundan* with translations of André Gide. It is not that surprising, then, that the notable critical discussions of Ishikawa's work place him unanimously within the lineage of Gide, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Paul Valéry, modernists known for their concern with form and their heightened consciousness of language. In an important article on Ishikawa Jun titled "Junsui sanbun ni tsuite" (On Pure Prose), the critic Noguchi Takehiko, for example, discusses in depth Gide, Mallarmé's symbolist movement, and the preoccupation with the verbal.⁷ Chiba Sen'ichi's study of comparative modernism, on the other hand, includes a chapter on Ishikawa Jun, Gide, and the pure novel.⁸ William Tyler has also written about Ishikawa's desire to be identified as a "pure novel" (*junsui shōsetsu*) writer in the manner of the symbolists and Gide.⁹

The pure novel should not be confused with "pure literature" or *junbungaku*. "Pure literature" emerged as a discursive creation in Japan in the 1920s and it was associated with the *shishōsetsu* and its confessionalism and immediacy. The idea of the pure novel, on the other hand, is related to Gide's *Les faux-monnayeurs* (The

Counterfeiters, 1926). Gide's novel has an intrusive narrator who often addresses the readers, openly discusses the characters' inner lives and motivations and mulls over alternative plots, providing a level of meta-commentary. There is a character named Edouard who is writing a novel titled *The Counterfeiters*—which might in turn have a character writing the same novel and so on, in a mirroring of narratives *ad infinitum*. The *roman pur* owes much to Mallarmé's revolt against the tyranny of naturalism and the symbolist vision of aesthetic order and autonomy of representation. In his "Journal of *The Counterfeiters*" Gide argues that Balzac and the other great realists annexed to the form various heterogeneous and indigestible ingredients. He urges writers to "purge the novel of all elements that do not belong specifically to the novel."¹⁰ For Gide the novel is "the most lawless genre," but because of this intoxicating liberty, it has never dared forsake reality and never known "the deliberate avoidance of life."¹¹ Walter Benjamin, however, is sharply critical of the pure novel. For Benjamin, the novel as a genre was born out of cultural loss, of the slow death of storytelling as an intersubjective experience. Gide's pure novel is the solipsistic extreme reached by the genre:

[Gide] has set out to eliminate every straightforward, linear, paratactic narrative...in favor of ingenious, purely novelistic...devices. The attitude of the characters to what is being narrated, the attitude of the author towards them and to his technique—all this must become a component of the novel itself. In short, the *roman pur* is actually pure interiority; it acknowledges no exterior...¹²

In Benjamin's own troubled present, this withdrawal into pure *écriture* could amplify an experience of atomization and even indirectly open up the abandoned territories of orality and immediacy to the cultural forms of fascism.

Ishikawa Jun understood Gide's idea of the pure novel probably better than any of his Japanese contemporaries: in a 1933 essay he writes that Gide's was a stance that "investigates the technique of the novel through the pure novel."¹³ In a later text he reminisces how he read *The Counterfeiters* in the original while the novel was serialized in *La nouvelle revue française* in 1926. Ishikawa admits that he was quite taken with Gide's experiments and tells of his enduring affection for *Paludes* (Marshlands, 1895), an early work of Gide's that prefigures the *mise-en-abyme* structure of *The Counterfeiters* and its self-inscription of narrative.¹⁴

The *roman pur* is very different from the more politicized modernisms (on the right or on the left) that took issue with the social and technological effects of modernity on the individual and collective psyche and actively engaged with mass culture. It is part of the modernist defense described by Terry Eagleton:

Modernism is among other things a strategy whereby the work of art resists commodification, holds out by the skin of its teeth against those social forces which would degrade it to an exchangeable object... To fend such reduction to commodity status, the modernist work brackets off the referent or the real historical world, thickens its textures and deranges its forms to forestall instant consumability, and draws its language protectively around itself to become a mysteriously autotelic object.¹⁵

Reflexivity was there in the visual arts as well, in the flatness of the canvas and in the emphasis on the brushwork. Clement Greenberg's dictum is often quoted: "It is only by virtue of its medium that each art is unique and strictly itself. To restore the identity of an art the opacity of its medium must be emphasized."¹⁶

Despite its oppositional stance, modernism resonated with all those historical and technological regimes that demanded the specialization of the senses. The forces of technocratic modernity had a disjunctive affect on the human sensorium: each sensory path could be prized apart and commoditized. Radio separated hearing from seeing; photography required concentration on the visual; silent cinema, on the other hand, married the moving image to an unrelated musical script (in the case of Japan, it also added the commentary of a *benshi* narrator). The art historian Rosalind Krauss writes that sensory stratification permitted "an experience of rescue and retreat, a high ground uncontaminated by the instrumentality of the world of labor and science, a preserve of play and a mode of freedom...utopian and a bit illusory."¹⁷ The early modernists were often people on the margins of society, consciously refusing to live according to accepted bourgeois norms. Those who were exiles and immigrants in the big imperial metropolises were linguistically and culturally alienated. Hence the techniques of estrangement of dominant norms, ideological and aesthetic: the famed modernist rupture of representation could provide an experience of radical freedom.

On the other hand, modernism belongs to an historical context marked by the entry of women in the public sphere as both workers and consumers and a crisis of received gender roles. The avant-garde actually preserved the Romantic myth of the male artist as a demiurge, a patriarchal creator of a world, even if this world was fictional. The idea of the work of art as autonomous ties with the idea of the artist as a self-originating subject. "The artist," Baudelaire asserted, "stems mainly from

himself.”¹⁸ This willful denial of physiological reality reveals modernism’s anxieties about woman, nature, and all organic matter, the opposites of an aesthetic of textual surfaces. Woman, as another *fin-de-siècle* aesthete, Oscar Wilde, put it in his famous novel, is “the triumph of matter over mind.”¹⁹ *The Counterfeiters* is actually very close to *The Portrait Dorian Grey* in its portrayal of the crisis of male bourgeois authority and the theme of liberation from conventional morality. Both works privilege male-male relationships, homosexual or homosocial. Gide’s novel deconstructs the realist novel not only in terms of form; it also denatures its master plot of heterosexual romance. The novel presents various configurations of desire—heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual—and it is the bonds between men that emerge as more authentic and more honest.

Woman is nature, undisciplined and animalistic; female sexuality drains vital energies and is associated with corruption and decay. Parody and self-conscious textuality are strategies of sublimation, utopian attempts to transcend the body and master woman *qua* nature. But woman also represents the realm of the popular and its immediate sensory delights: modernism defines itself negatively, against the other of mass culture.²⁰

This rather suspect gender politics is also not unrelated to the fact that despite the narcissistic obsession with purely textual devices, literary modernism can be profoundly *visual*. It pays attention to the material nature of language and the form of words and characters on the page; it privileges spatial structures and experiments with point of view. Again, modernism is perhaps not that subversive because it affirms the primacy of the visual and the domination of the logic of the gaze in capitalist society. The objectifying eye of Western science and painting is a male eye. In the patriarchal economy of the look, woman is more often than not an object, not a subject.

Modernism needs to keep at a distance the anxieties stirred by the female body, to avoid contamination; this is why woman is often apprehended as an image. Writers adopted the new visibility of photography and film, the fragment and the close-up. Ishikawa Jun's *Fugen* is no exception and the following sections of this essay will explore the tensions between the modernist drive to pure textuality, the will to aestheticize woman, and the stubborn materiality of the female body.

Writing Against the Body

The narrative of *Fugen* follows for four days the misadventures of the narrator *watashi*, an aspiring writer, around Tokyo. Some of the characters—*watashi*'s close friend Bunzō, his greedy landlady Kuzuhara Yasuko, the pet shop owner Tabe Hikosuke and his wife Okumi—are introduced through anachronic flashbacks and digressions. Torn between the purity of art (identified with the Bodhisattva Fugen) and the coarse, but somehow irresistible world around him, *watashi* is struggling with his writing. The object of his vague platonic longing is Bunzō's sister Yukari, in hiding because of her involvement with the communists—yet he gets seduced quite willingly by Otsuna, a lush bar hostess involved with his friend Jinsaku. *Watashi* takes the risk to warn Yukari that the secret police know about her arranged meeting with her brother. Yukari manages to escape the trap, but the narrator's glimpse of her shatters his carefully constructed ideal: ruined by time, the face of this former avatar of beauty and purity is repulsively ugly. *Watashi* finds consolation in the arms of Otsuna and goes home to find that Bunzō has killed himself.

The concern with literary artifice is there from the very beginning of the novel:

Just as drops of water sparkle upon a lacquer tray like those magical color-changing sweets, but dissipate when you try to take them in your

fingertips, so your view of Tarui Moichi would change if you contemplated writing him into a novel. He would no longer seem such an extraordinary figure. This is because the zephyr from the realm of narrative is far different from the winds of this mundane world (*shaba*)...(623).²¹

The work points to its own mask in the very first sentence. The narrator discusses openly the conventions of the novel: the author's choice of characters, the idea that they are supposed to be somehow exceptional, larger than life. The passage also introduces the dichotomy between the sublime realm of art and our earthly everyday world and presents the theme of writing as transcendence, as a spiritual experience, that will become a recurring motif in the novel. At the same time, *Fugen* also covers the classic *topoi* of the *shishōsetsu*: the bohemian squalor of the struggling writer and his entanglements with dubious women from the demimonde. The confession, that master trope of the *shishōsetsu*, is, however, exposed as fiction: "From the very beginning I have been telling lies, but now I am at a loss as I seem to have lost even the ability to go on lying..."(415-416). Unlike the *shishōsetsu* writer and his purported honesty, *watashi* reveals himself to be a thoroughly unreliable narrator: he tells us that he sometimes avoids inconvenient details and openly manipulates his story, uncovering the process of creating narrative order:

I have the habit of taking up only things that I like and to kick away things I find unpleasant, and it is only natural that my story would suffer from an imbalance between the deep and the shallow, the rough and the refined...I would rather ask the others for a clever commentary (*chūshaku*) (424-425).

In this crucial reflexive aside, *watashi* admits that it has all been a fabrication. He is aware that he has not offered an explanation that will provide his story with closure or with a moral, that he is probably disqualified as a narrator. But he *himself* needs an explanation: in an exemplary modernist gesture, the work strives to incorporate a meta-narrative (its own interpretation).

The language of Ishikawa's earliest stories was close to the vernacular and the colloquial; contemporary reviewers compared him with other garrulous (*jōzetsuna*) writers such as Uno Kōji and Takami Jun. *Fugen*, however, shows a marked departure from such simple language. The style of the novel is truly extravagant: contemporary Tokyo slang; formal *kango* sinicisms; so-called *gago*, elegant poetic words. The critic Kawakami Tetsutarō likened the language of *Fugen* to the exuberant style of the Ken'yūsha writers.²² The written word is self-consciously privileged over the spoken. The spoken words which *watashi* is spewing (*hakichirashite iru*) cannot escape the physiology of language: "...the quivering of the vocal chords, the rustle of the throat become dregs which clog the folds of the intellect, and make it lose the strength necessary to penetrate the unfortunate heart of the matter" (351). Contrasted to this irreducible physicality of the spoken are the words coming from the pen, "refined words detached from the odor of the flesh" (351). Writing is the transcendence of the sordid topography of the world in which *watashi* moves; he stresses that words are his Bodhisattva (383). Literature becomes synonymous with Buddhist enlightenment.

Such purified words are contrasted to that writing which retains *too much* of the writer:

If when the pen starts moving, it is caked in the grease of the hand holding it; the blue veins on the writer's face, the sweat on the tip of his nose, or the hunched shoulders—if all this stench adheres to it, how is

the flower of sincerity to bloom? If one can see the body and the figure of the writer behind the writing, then the work is a dreadful farce (340).

This passage has been read as a polemic against Japanese naturalism and its preoccupation with the sordid aspects of reality; against the *shishōsetsu* obsession with the personal and the overbearing presence of its narrator/protagonist. The naive belief in the organic unity of author and writing, which sustains autobiographical fiction, surely deserve such savage criticism. But we also find here a deep sense of revulsion at the body and its discharges and smells. The materiality of the language is good; the physicality of the body disgusts. Even the traces of the body in the voice—its physiological origins as a wave of breath touching the fleshy membranes of the vocal cords—are deeply unpleasant. This corporeality of the spoken word is experienced as suffocating, as crushing the intellect. There is an insistent will to disembodiment here. For *watashi*, good writing is premised on a total estrangement from the body and its senses, from affect itself. Andreas Huyssen's observation that the modernist work of art achieves autonomy by abstention and suppression is very apt here.²³ It is as if textual purity is achievable only through the transcendence of the body, of its uncontrollable drives and oozing excretions. In *Fugen*, the narrator's attempts to overcome the base desires of the flesh go hand in hand with his disavowal of the writer's own physiological boundedness. Much has been written about the art of realism as an ideological support of a particular version of reality and the radical meanings of the modernist revolt. In *Fugen*, the liberties of the narrator, the ways he manipulates the plot and toys with the characters, certainly diminish the realist illusion, but in a way they also enhance the myth of the omnipotent creator who rises above nature and the physical constraints of the body.

Modernist Polarities

In order to master the undisciplined senses, to control symbolically the unruly bodies of workers and women thronging the streets in a world out of joint, modernism sometimes resorts to the ur-plots of archetype and myth or seeks deeper structures that can take a markedly dualistic form. In the works of Wolfe and Joyce, as Steven Connor has written, “radical incoherence is not ‘resolved’ or ‘unified’ ...but controlled by being projected in the mode of binary conflicts (flesh and spirit, self and society). Paradox and disconnection are thus not redeemed but delimited within a recognizable aesthetic shape.” Connor points out that this is not solution, but a neurotic containment of a problem, and that it marks an imminent crisis.²⁴ Thus in *Fugen*, from the very first paragraph, we have the dichotomy between the enlightened land of the Buddha and this mundane world, which is dressed figuratively in the recurring images of flowers and dust. These are superimposed on the opposition between the ugliness of reality and the nobility of art and on the modernist conflict between the flesh and the spirit. Yukari is woman as pure ideality and Otsuna is woman as overwhelming physicality. Yukari is also associated with Joan of Arc. The pair of Joan and de Pisan are again juxtaposed as the virgin and the crone (de Pisan was an old woman when she composed her ode to Joan), the spiritual and the all too human. The divine being spoke directly to Joan; her devotion to God and country was almost inhuman. As for de Pisan, the narrator describes her as the blessed daughter of a court astrologer, whose fortunes changed after the deaths of her father and her husband. She drifted in the world, selling her literary accomplishments to feed herself and her three children. *Watashi* explains directly the meaning of this couple in his project:

The motive for bringing together in my writing the girl from Orleans and the old woman from Poissy is my desire to portray the ever-changing face of woman, marked by winds carrying both flowers and dust (332-3).

For the narrator, every woman is a picture in herself, but her image is also part of a larger composition. Joan and de Pisan become elements of a tableau designed to capture “woman” as an abstraction. There is a visual dynamic at work here that reduces women to images and fixes them into aesthetic patterns.

Shrouded in layers of myth and allusion, Yukari is also related to Fugen, the Bodhisattva of truth and practice. The narrator’s longing for Yukari is superimposed onto his esoteric spiritual quest for Fugen. Strangely, each time *watashi* conjures up the memory of Yukari (he has not seen her in ten years), a really ugly reality intrudes and carries him away, but somehow he does not hurry to return his thoughts to her after the interruption. *Watashi* is conscious that this might seem like some sort of deliberately employed artifice; he admits that he cannot tell anything about Yukari; all he has is his longing (369). Yukari is insistently described as vague and disembodied; a shadow with a face covered by mist (389), “a figure from between the pure clouds” (378), “an indistinct figure enveloped by clouds” (416). She is locked in intertextual chains, mediated by archetype; it is as if she is intentionally kept at a distance. Even her name emphasizes how ethereal she is: “Yukari” means connection, affinity. She can be outside the sexual economy of vision, not directly available (perhaps that is why she is perceived more holistically): the eyes of *watashi* get blurred at the very thought of her (406).

Yukari’s mist is in direct contrast to Otsuna’s fire (389). Her name means “rope,” the rope that binds *watashi* to this world. Otsuna is a carnal being: a lump of

flesh, pollution (*kegare*) embodied (378). Contrary to the vagueness of Yukari, Otsuna is very sharply contoured; her appearance is described in detail by a lingering, fragmenting gaze: her hair, pulled tight in a simple bun; her chic, restrained kimono with its interplay of white and pale indigo; her tasteful *obi*. “Her face, her breasts, her hips were full and shapely, like those of a courtesan in a Kaigetsudō print”(363). With Otsuna, distance cannot be sustained for long as the relationship is one of tactility: in the bar, *watashi* feels the heat generated by her as she presses herself against him; in the scene where she seduces him, she reaches across his lap and her body collapses onto his. Even the mere thought that she might be with someone else has a bodily effect on *watashi*: “...I felt my face turn red, my throat drying; I was hoisted into the air by the hand of an invisible demon who was holding my neck” (391).

What is remarkable, however, is the collapse of the initial opposition between Yukari and Otsuna and of the visual strategies of distancing and aesthetization. While *watashi* is waiting for Yukari at Shinjuku station to warn her about the police trap, he is assailed violently by a very different vision of her, horrifying and erotic at the same time. Yukari is described in the language normally used for Otsuna:

Each time I thought of Yukari, what came in front of my eyes were the contours of her face in the dim light; conveniently, her body was shrouded in vague mist. But the apparition I saw now was transformed into the shining naked body of a sorceress: her head was floating in the air, separate from the body; the gushing blood echoed with the laughter of Kangiten, the devas of pleasure²⁵; the cloying beauty of the limbs was suffocating: they slipped under my underwear, eating into my skin and scraping inside my body; the pure white arms, melting like sweets, clung around my neck... (409)

In this fantasy Yukari's ethereal presence has given way to an almost excessive materiality. Her beautiful, but suffocating limbs threaten seduction—or castration?...Distance cannot be sustained, but there is an attempt to insert this terrifying image into an older symbolic regime (“the laughter of Kangiten”). The same happens when *watashi* meets the real Yukari: her proximity is unbearable. Archetype and the grotesque are mobilized again; there are strong Buddhist overtones. *Watashi* is shocked by how time has ruined her face: the features are unchanged, but the skin is yellow and rough, with blotches that give her a callous expression. The ghastly face seems to reflect an ugly soul: Yukari's eyes are burning with greed (*kendon*, a Buddhist term), her lips are contorted into a curse (*juso*), blowing murderous ghostly light like a *yasha*, a Buddhist demon (411). There is also a daydream in which Yukari and Otsuna literally become one: “Yukari's face, shrouded in clouds, and Otsuna's nipples, burning with earthly desire, flash together...” (389).

These images recall the disfigured and dismembered women of modernist painting; the vision of Yukari's head floating above the body brings to mind the surrealist fixation on headless female bodies. What is important, however, is the undermining of visual control, of the strategies that dematerialize the body by acculturating it, by reducing it to a play of signs. From a removed, veiled image, Yukari is transformed into a sultry temptress like Otsuna; infected by horror and desire, *watashi* can no longer remain outside the constraints of the body. Distance is eroded by contact. Women's limbs “melt like sweets”; their bodies are covered in oil and sweat: the text emphasizes those viscous bodily excretions and their in-between state, neither liquid nor hard matter. Even smell is sticky: *watashi*'s landlady Kuzuhara Yasuko “has smeared her lustful smell like mud all over herself” (348). In

immediate proximity, the irreducible thickness of a woman's body is both fascinating and disgusting, site of an eroticism dangerously close to the abject.

Abjected Origins

In *Fugen*, dead female bodies or bodies close to death are abominable. The mother of Okumi, the wife of *watashi's* friend Tabe Hikosuke, is described as hideous even while alive: “a misshapen form crouching in the corner of the room”, “a grotesque figure of rarely seen ugliness” which, *watashi* remarks with typical literary pedantry, is somehow at odds with the bucolic atmosphere of the Tabe house with its frolicking dogs and chirping birds (350). The old woman makes life miserable for everybody around her; her unsightliness mirrors the ugliness of her soul. When told that she has been run over by a train, the narrator and his friends rush over to the rail crossing. The dead body of the old woman is “a lump of wet ash that has then turned solid”; the shriveled limbs resemble a dog rather than a human being (351). *Watashi* is aware of his language: it is blasphemous to compare a human being in death to a dog. He reflects on how flippantly he deals with life and death, skimming their surface only; he might get his comeuppance.

Further on in the novel, Okumi herself is on her deathbed, her morphine addiction taken the best of her. On his way to the Tabe house, *watashi* conjures up Okumi's face, “pale like stagnant sewage water”; the soul urging to escape from “the fetid putrefying flesh” (398). Later, while kneeling by her pillow, *watashi* finds himself in the uncomfortable position of having to watch somebody die. The sight of the real Okumi surpasses his imagination:

It was hard to believe that the body lying before my eyes was human.
“Only skin and bones” is a hackneyed expression, but Okumi's body
was really hollowed like a ear of wheat after the grain is taken

out; the shrunken skin was stretched over each and every crumbling bone; the sockets of her half-open withered eyes, full of black mucus, looked like netsuke; the joints, from the ribs to the fingers and the toes, were protruding stubbornly, horrifyingly scraping the crevices of a body from which the blood had dried up... (399).

But Okumi is associated with repulsive physicality not only because she is close to death; with her the erotic explicitly seeps into the abject. *Watashi* is gripped by primal horror because Okumi shows clear signs of sexual arousal:

Suddenly, as if possessed by an unknown force and shaken by an unknown instinct, the body lying on the floor sat up... the protruding ashen grey eyeballs shone with lust; she ripped the silence with the cry of an insect emerging from a cocoon for a second life, turned towards Hikosuke and spread her arms and legs... What swelled inside me was not an aesthetic judgment on the beautiful and the ugly, nor an analysis of emotions, but the dread of a primitive taboo. I was dazzled by what I should not have seen. Okumi was shaking her arms and legs and her *yukata* had slipped revealing a naked black form. Deafened by the anger of a thunder reverberating around the room, I ran into the next room, closed the *fusuma* and clung on to the wall to take my breath... (400-401).

The scene is clearly structured around the scopic; there are several references to looking. A polluted, half-dead female body brazenly exposes itself and shows sexual agency. *Watashi* experiences this conjuncture of eroticism and death as the transgression of a primitive taboo, as abjection. Okumi is horrifying because her arousal reverses the conventions of active, desiring masculinity. The screen of

fantasy that has constructed woman as a passive object to be looked at suddenly dissolves and this Medusa-like sight fills the gaze. There is again an attempt to avoid the abjected body, the terrifying real of woman *qua* nature, in Lacanian terms; to somehow contain it in the symbolic. It can be detected in the efforts of the narrator to attribute existing cultural meanings to Okumi's body, to reduce it to a representation: with typical sensitivity to language, *watashi* notes that "'only skin and bones' is a hackneyed expression." His language objectifies Okumi as "the body"; further on, she is compared to a medieval illustration of human suffering, to an image from a didactic shadow play depicting the Buddhist transformations (399). But this urge to textualize, to fill the void with cultural artifice, is not so successful: *watashi* cannot bear it; he not only averts his eyes, but goes in the other room to inhale. There is a momentary disintegration of the symbolic; the scene clearly exceeds the available economy of signification: "I don't have words to tell any more, nor am I allowed to tell," *watashi* admits (400).

This complex and disconcerting scene bears a striking similarity to Gustave Courbet's (in)famous painting *L'Origine du monde* (The Origin of the World, 1866), not only in its content, but also because both are self-conscious about the conventions governing the visual and textual representation of woman. The frame of Courbet's painting is filled by an exposed headless female torso—sexually aroused, according to some commentators—with the genitalia taking the centre.²⁶ Slavoj Žižek writes that in this painting Courbet accomplished "a gesture of radical *desublimation*"; although my interpretation of the meaning of desublimation in this essay differs from Žižek's Lacanian reading, the same phrase can perfectly describe the workings of the scene from *Fugen*.²⁷ Courbet turns on its head the whole tradition of the nude in Western art

history: images of a submissive, compliant woman, her eyes modestly averted, her body offered up for the delectation of the viewer, who himself does not need to worry that his gaze might be returned. The nude's genitals are always covered; she must not have a sexual organ. The nude, in other words, is a strategy to admire the naked female body without the threat of castration. *L'Origine* brings to the foreground that which is displaced in the Western tradition of the nude; in the words of Laurence des Cars, its "radical composition does not conceal its intention behind literary and historical artifice."²⁸ The painted woman retains her full erotic attraction, yet there is something excessive in this full exposure; as in *Fugen*, fascination is tinged with revulsion. As in *Fugen*, the body is fragmented. The history of the painting includes veiling and various devices of concealment: it hung behind a green curtain in the sitting room of Khalil Bey, the Turkish diplomat and *bon vivant* who commissioned it; when it reappeared in the Berheim-Jeune Gallery in Budapest in 1910, it was in a double locked frame; a panel depicting a castle in the snow, either by Courbet or by one of his assistants, hid it from immediate view. Lacan, its last owner before the painting became property of the French state, kept it in a gallery in his country house and showed it very rarely; it was again concealed by a screen, which depicted in abstract form the recessed work. A secret mechanism enabled the screen to slide back.²⁹ As with *Fugen*'s Yukari, shrouding and concealment are about mastery and control.

But it is the title of Courbet's painting that may hold the key to the terror which grips *watashi* at the sight of Okumi's exposed, desiring sex. There is something almost mischievous and parodic about this title and the way it recasts the patriarchal myth of Genesis. There is a tension at work between the illusion of male mastery and the realities of biological determination. The painting is ambiguous not only because

it makes the viewer an erotic voyeur and at the same time confronts him with the fear of castration; in the words of Shuli Barzilai, *L'Origine* “arouses anxiety through the recollection of total dependency, of the gift of life endowed by the mother, of a debt that might be displaced or repressed but never repaid in full, of a sacred mystery that mitigates any illusion of mastery and self-origination.”³⁰ The meanings behind *watashi*'s experience of powerlessness at the sight of Okumi's genitals are very similar: the gaze is petrified by the threat of castration; language and symbolic order are destabilized. The ideological construction of the self-originating, manly creator and his pure autotelic text is profoundly shaken.

Conclusion

Critics such as Andō Hajime and Azechi Yoshihiro have read *Fugen* as a *bildungsroman*; as the journey of the narrator from introvert self-consciousness and the desiccated world of books to the sensuousness of life and reality embodied by Otsuna.³¹ She is indeed “Otsuna of the sweet and innocent flesh” and towards the end *watashi* does resolve to make her his, whatever it takes. But while lying next to her, he still feels his body “sticky with the mush that was Otsuna's body, hair, sweat, oil, powder” (417); her powerful smell almost suffocates him (418). The novel ends abruptly with *watashi* coming back to his shabby room after his tryst with Otsuna and discovering that Bunzō has killed himself. Unlike the female bodies with their putrefying flesh, in death Bunzō is just an immaterial frame (*tatazumai*); “the stench of the world of the living” is forbidden from entering his room (428). What arrests *watashi*'s gaze and scorches his eyes is not Bunzō's body, but a purple phial of poison, figured metaphorically as a flower petal, scattered on the floor together with the lipstick Bunzō was fond of using.³² Drawn only in a few strong details, Bunzō's death is pure and profoundly aestheticized.

The friendship of *watashi* and Bunzō goes back to their university days – *watashi* remembers clearly seeing for the first time “this tall, good-looking youth,” engrossed in a tatty English book (339). They understand each other so perfectly that they invent their own secret language. Both develop a passion for clothes and walk the streets of Ginza in eccentric outfits designed by themselves. An aspiring poet, Bunzō has a weakness for drink; he soon starts coughing blood. He reappears in Tokyo after several years of drifting in Hokkaidō. The contours of his face retain the shadow of his good looks, but his face is ashen-grey, with stiff strands of dry, exhausted hair hanging around it; the cheeks are sunken and dark, but he is still in the habit of putting on lipstick (345). Donald Keene finds a striking similarity between this description and Akutagawa’s last photograph, taken days before his suicide.³³ Keene thus inserts Bunzō in the aestheticized lineage of beautiful, dissolute, TB-ridden artists who died tragically young. The journey of *watashi* does not end in Otsuna’s arms, but in Bunzō’s room, in the homosocial bond with his dead friend. (Hence perhaps the importance of Buddhism and its homosocial and homosexual tradition as the main intertext of Ishikawa Jun’s novel).

Fugen does sustain the schema of the artist as autonomous and self-contained, the sole origin of textual worlds. It participates in the modernist denigration of the natural body and its senses. Its self-conscious artifice does function as a defense against woman, the personification of nature at its ugliest, darkest, most unbearable. The importance of the voice for female agency is emphasized negatively, through its absence. Like its European predecessors, Ishikawa Jun’s text moves in a homosocial circuit; contrary to them, however, it writes into the modernist schema crucial tensions and ambiguities. Its gender politics remain equivocal, but it contains *both* the modernist strategies of distance and aesthetization, *and* their subversion. It allows the

female body to freeze the gaze in powerless fascination; it admits the contagious flows of desire.

unnumbered endnote: The author wishes to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful and elegantly written comments. The support of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, which funded initial research on this essay, is gratefully acknowledged.

¹ There is an English translation of the novel: Ishikawa Jun, *The Bodhisattva* trans. William Jefferson Tyler (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

² Miryam Sas, “Chambered Nautilus: The Fiction of Ishikawa Jun,” *JJS* 24.1 (1998): 37.

³ See especially two essays by Noguchi Takehiko 野口武彦: “‘Yatsushi’ no bigaku” and “Mitate sōseiki no sekai,” in his *Ishikawa Jun ron* (Chikuma shobō, 1969), 194-221 and 222-271 respectively; Andō Hajime 安藤始, *Ishikawa Jun ron* (Ōfūsha, 1987), 45-60.

⁴ Karatani Kōjin, “One Spirit, Two Nineteenth Centuries,” in *Postmodernism and Japan*, ed. Masao Miyoshi and H. D. Harootunian (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), 262.

⁵ See my “In the Flesh: The Historical Unconscious of Ishikawa Jun’s *Fugen*,” in *Perversion and Modern Japan: Experiments in Psychoanalysis*, ed. J. Keith Vincent and Nina Cornyetz (New York: Routledge, 2009), 203-220.

⁶ See Catherine Ryu’s article in this issue.

⁷ Noguchi Takehiko, “Junsui sanbun no tankyū,” in *Ishikawa Jun ron*, 54-98.

⁸ Chiba Sen'ichi 千葉宣一, *Modanizumu no hikakubungakuteki kenkyū* (Ōfu, 1998), 112-122.

⁹ William Tyler, "Introduction," in Ishikawa Jun, *The Legend of Gold and Other Stories* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), xvii.

¹⁰ André Gide, "Journal of *The Counterfeiters*," trans. Justin O'Brien, in *The Counterfeiters*, trans. Dorothy Bussy (New York: Random House, 1973), 432.

¹¹ Gide, *The Counterfeiters*, 185.

¹² Walter Benjamin, "The Crisis of the Novel," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 2: 1927-1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 299-300.

¹³ Quoted in Suzuki Sadami 鈴木貞美, "Ishikawa Jun 'Kajin' no seiritu," *Kokugo to kokubungaku* 61.7 (1983): 44.

¹⁴ Ishikawa Jun 石川淳, "Jiido mukashi banashi," in *Ishikawa Jun zenshū* (Chikuma shobō, 1989) 13. 155-6.

¹⁵ Terry Eagleton, "Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism," in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1988), 392.

¹⁶ Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 1. 32

¹⁷ Rosalind Krauss, "The Impulse to See," in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), 53.

¹⁸ Quoted in Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1983), 156.

¹⁹ Oscar Wilde, *The Portrait of Dorian Grey* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 72, quoted in Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 109.

²⁰ See Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, especially “The Abominable Woman” (104-115) and Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 44-62.

²¹ Figures in brackets indicate page numbers in Ishikawa Jun, “Fugen,” in *Ishikawa Jun zenshū*, 6. 323-428. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

²² See Yamaguchi Toshio 山口俊雄, “Ishikawa Jun *Fugen* ron: sono hassō keishiki ga kanō ni shita mono ni tsuite,” *Setsurin* 48 (2000), 85.

²³ Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, 55.

²⁴ Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 121-122.

²⁵ In Buddhist iconography Kangiten, the devas of pleasure, are depicted as embracing elephant-headed male and female pair. (*Digital Dictionary of Buddhism* [http://0-www.buddhismdict.net.wam.leeds.ac.uk/cgi-bin/xprddb.pl?6b.xml+id\('b6b61-559c-5929'\)](http://0-www.buddhismdict.net.wam.leeds.ac.uk/cgi-bin/xprddb.pl?6b.xml+id('b6b61-559c-5929')), accessed 25 February 2014; Oda Tokunō 織田得能, ed., *Bukkyō daijiten* (Daizō shuppansha, 1973), 340.

²⁶ Both the painting and the abstract screen covering it while it was in the possession of Lacan can be seen at <http://www.lacan.com/courbet.htm>. *The Origin of the World* appears when the mouse hovers over the screen image.

²⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute, or Why the Christian Legacy is Worth Fighting for* (London: Verso, 2008), 33.

²⁸ Laurence des Cars, *De l'impressionisme à l'art nouveau: Acquisitions du Musée d'Orsay 1990-1996* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1996), 3, quoted in

Shuli Barzilai, *Lacan and the Matter of Origins* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 10.

²⁹ Barzilai, 13-15.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

³¹ See, for example, Andō, *Ishikawa Jun ron*, 45-60; Azechi Yoshihiro 畦地芳弘, *Ishikawa Jun zenki sakuhin kaidoku* (Izumi Shoin, 1998), 123-131.

³² Wearing lipstick seems to have been not so uncommon among young artists and bohemians in the 1920s and 1930s. In Bunzō's case it does not have any connotations of cross-dressing or the transgression of gender boundaries.

³³ Donald Keene, *Dawn to the West: Japanese Literature of the Modern Era* (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1984), 1095.

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