

Title	Forms of autobiographical literature : The problem of artistic intent in DAZAI OSAMU
Sub Title	
Author	Lyons, Phyllis
Publisher	慶應義塾大学藝文学会
Publication year	1971
Jtitle	藝文研究 (The geibun-kenkyu : journal of arts and letters). Vol.30, (1971. 3) ,p.133(32)- 146(19)
JaLC DOI	
Abstract	
Notes	
Genre	Journal Article
URL	https://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=AN00072643-00300001-0146

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Forms of Autobiographical Literature : The Problem of Artistic Intent in DAZAI OSAMU

Phyllis Lyons

But I have a theory of my own about what this art of the novel is, and how it came into being. To begin with, it does not simply consist in the author's telling a story about the adventures of some other person. On the contrary, it happens because the storyteller's own experience of men and things, whether for good or ill—not only what he has passed through himself, but even events which he has only witnessed or been told of—has moved him to an emotion so passionate that he can no longer keep it shut up in his heart. Again and again, something in his own life or in that around him, will seem to the writer so important that he cannot bear to let it pass into oblivion. There must never come a time, he feels, when men do not know about it. That is my view of how this art arose.

—The Tale of Genji¹⁾

This statement of the theory of literary art, made nearly a thousand years ago, is valid now as it was then. Literary historians through the centuries have agreed on the function of the author's experience in his literary creations. Novels, history, poetry, philosophy—all are as much a product of the writer's experience as of his imagination. Lady Murasaki further suggests that any human passion, be it love or spiritual agony or urge for exploration or desire for glory is potentially as "true" as a fact of history and should be considered as seriously. Indeed, fiction shares with history a common goal, the discovery of truth, and shares a common responsibility, the presenta-

tion of that truth as plausibly as possible.

However, we do distinguish between history and fiction. On the most simplistic level, we may say that history is about things that happened, and fiction about things that might have happened. We criticize fiction as fiction, and history as history. Autobiography is generally included in the category of history, although, as in history, the problem of objectivity versus subjectivity introduces an element of fiction. A novel is clearly fiction. But, as Norman Mailer clearly underlines in his *Armies of the Night*, where one part is labeled "History as a Novel" and the other part "The Novel as History", distinctions are blurred and the problems for the critic are multiplied when the two are fused. This is the case in the autobiographical novel, the 私小説.

The complications arise because there is a tendency, particularly in Japan where this form has been so highly developed, for the critic to forget the novel and emphasize only the autobiography. Thereupon, criticism becomes biography, a search for models, what has been called in recent Soviet history "the cult of the personality".

To the extent that a writer writes from his own experience, his work is autobiographical. But to treat a work of fiction only in its relation to the author's life is to denature it, to make it irrelevant as a piece of literature. The critic's function should be to deal not only with the question of how the author took the raw material of his human experience and fashioned it into an artistic product, but with the problem of what constitutes the literary significance of his writing.

Dazai Osamu perhaps of all writers most thoroughly explored the possibilities of the autobiographical novel. That he wrote mainly of and from his own life is not to be denied. But although the facts

of his life in relation to his writing have been extensively researched and studied in the more than twenty years since his death, the works themselves have been only lightly handled. It is through the internal logic of his writing that I have intended to approach the artistic intent of Dazai's work.

This most autobiographical of writers was not writing an extended diary. True, his iconography was personal, limited and obvious. Certain key facts in his life—people, places, experiences—appeared over and over again. But they are not to be taken as explanations of anything. They will not explain why he did certain things. They will not explain the origins of the themes he explored. They will not even tell us what he was doing at any particular time in his life²⁹). In this writer, above all others, the biographical critical approach would seem to offer great promise, for he wrote only about himself; but it is perhaps least meaningful.

Dazai himself warned his audience against relying too deeply on what he said, in a short story called "Shame"³⁰). (This word itself is one of the central ones in his vocabulary.) It is a wickedly humorous tale of the dangers involved in compiling a composite portrait of the artist simply from evidence he himself supplies. The writer is a man, and he has his own pride; beware of pitting your pride against his.

The factor that makes his autobiography so unreliable is the quality of his memories.

Memory is often likened to a long corridor lined its whole length with closed doors. This presumes that an earnest seeker need only to walk down this hall and, regardless of cost, pry open the doors to find answers. As Dazai is characterized as a man who was caught up in his past and whose writings reflect only his own life, presuma-

bly his life journey would have been a long stroll down the corridor of memory. But his work reveals something different: the number of doors to his past was limited, and what he found when he opened them was perhaps not what had been there to start with. In a sense, he created his past. Clustered around a few themes—family social position, relatives, childhood, his own intellectual birth—are a series of attitudes—shame, perverse pride, need for reassurance, conscious play-acting—and the interaction of these elements created his past. It is an attitude of ultimate egoism: Were I not to exist to interpret it, my past would not exist. But such a construction requires constant attention; if not constantly shored up, the walls tend to crumble. And so Dazai spent the years of his literary life a slave to the past he himself had created. One cannot even distinguish between personal and literary life: without the literary manifestation to give it form, the personal life would dissolve into chaos; and without the emotions of the personal element, there would be no fuel for the necessary literary effort. It was a position of unstable equilibrium: the greater the edifice of created attitudes, the greater the danger of disastrous collapse. Dazai could never be comfortable with either his life or his work⁴; extinction faced him whether he continued or stopped. No wonder that extinction came to have such attraction for him.

To change the metaphor slightly, if the burden of self-created past did indeed exist, then as it became heavier he would have had to run faster and faster over the foam to keep from sinking into the sea. Whether or not he was ready for death at the actual moment he was drawn into the final successful suicide attempt, the time was coming when he would be too tired to keep moving. I believe that the impulse that led him to multiple suicide attempts lies not in

some unchanging despair that overshadowed his life from an early age, but rather in the attitudes he built up around certain aesthetic constructs, not what he was, but the way he wanted to see himself. Hence the judgment revealed in "Autumn Diary"⁵, an often repeated theme, that to be middle class was one of the saddest and most evil of the states of human existence, and the admission that despite attempts at decadence or intellectuality or aestheticism, he was irrevocably middle class. All the literary posturing in the world could not remove the inevitable reality that he was simply a rich landowner's son. While he was introspective, he never learned anything, for a first step toward understanding would have been the effort to come to terms with the disparity between his real and created lives, an effort he never made. He continued to investigate the same themes with no apparent desire to understand them. Even his constant repetitions of the desire to die have the comfortable smugness of a well-loved litany.

It is this repetition of themes, of a past created from real events and a literature created from that past, that makes the task of the critic difficult. Since the fiction is autobiographical, one must deal with the life. But the life is at least partly fiction, dependent on attitudes toward the facts, and so dealing with the life is in a sense meaningless.

It is meaningless because the problem to be investigated by the literary critic in the case of Dazai is not the relation between fact and fiction (naturally, truth lies between the two), but the question of artistic intent. Why did Dazai write? And what is the significance of what he did write? This will be the subject of my dissertation.

* * *

Two Forms of Autobiographical Literature

Two pieces of Dazai's I chose to translate and here deal with represent two different aspects of his autobiographical literature. The first, "September October November"⁶), is an essay, a lightly reflective non-fiction piece published in the Kokumin Shimbun 国民新聞 for three consecutive days in December, 1938. It describes a sort of mental climate, that attended the writing of a collection of short stories, the "long work" he refers to. The second, "Autumn Diary". is a piece of fiction, one of that collection of short stories, which was published in 1939. But that both pieces, be they fiction or non-fiction, are equally products of literary imagination and yet equally rely on actual facts and occurrences is not to be doubted.

A rigorous process of selection of facts went into the writing of "September October November". For his artistic purposes, Dazai chose to ignore a major occurrence during that period. His introduction to the woman he was soon to marry, the engagement and marriage, arranged by his mentor, Ibuse Masuji, took place in those months. Though these events no doubt influenced Dazai in defining a discrete period of time, none of them appear in the essay. They were irrelevant to the main theme, which is the painful job writing was to him. Obviously, he had problems other than artistic, which were reflected in his difficulties in writing. No doubt his impending marriage was one of them. But he did not obscure the clean line of the essay by cluttering it with details.

Dazai was not one to keep all his worries to himself, though, and those related to his art are often the subject of his literary attention. The quotation that begins "Autumn Diary", the opening paragraph of the same story, the constant query of the landlady in "Septem-

ber” and his answer (“How’s your work coming along? . . . It’s not.”)”, all reveal his agony as an artist—the problem of choosing one theme out of the multitude that surrounded him, and theme once chosen, the labor of writing. By extension, this also reveals his major life preoccupation—the choosing of a pose by which he could live. Just as stories did not write themselves, so his life did not live itself; he felt the constant pressure to construct it, the way he constructed his stories.

“Autumn Diary” is a story of condensed emotional responses, the trying on and discarding of poses in bewildering rapid succession. As a shorthand note is not to be read for relaxation (while a skillful secretary can no doubt read shorthand as rapidly as she can read ordinary English script, the effort of concentration must surely be far greater in the case of the former), so this story seems not to be read for simple diversion. It is not really a story; it is a fictionalized essay. It is so tightly constructed that the reader, if he simply reads the flow of the words, misses much of their significance.

The game between the “hero”, K, and the geisha can serve as illustration of this point. A complex relationship exists between K and the narrator, with the narrator deeply dependent on K, the woman who forgives anything, the ultimate source of the strength the narrator himself lacks. But K here reveals herself as a creature of needs, too, and the unstable balance set up between their various needs and desires is in this scene nearly destroyed.

The impending disaster is introduced innocently. K mockseriously warns the geisha they have called to entertain them, to guard them from the danger of suicide. The geisha, catching only the jesting and missing the seriousness that underlies it, joins in the joke and adds her willingness to join them in suicide, should that be neces-

sary. They begin a game. "One person lights a twisted paper string which is passed around from person to person until it goes out, while each person has to name an item in the designated category. Absolutely useless things."⁸⁾ Then follows a series of seemingly randomly selected items, as each person in turn names some absolutely useless thing. Not until near the end is any speech identified as belonging to any particular person, and then, in terms of artistic intention, even the preceding series takes on significance. It is Dazai the author that has chosen the order, and it is worth our going back to see what is happening. K starts. "A pair of *geta* with one broken." Prosaic, but interestingly enough, she is soon to be broken herself, first spiritually, then physically. Both situations are only temporary, but both are integrally connected with the narrator, the other of the pair. The narrator goes next, then the geisha, then all three again. Then K hesitates. The geisha, for it must be her, simply excited by the game and unconscious of the emotional currents, urges her on. With careful reading, at this point we can see the scene and feel the tension. K glances sharply at the geisha in strong distaste, of which the other woman is unconscious, and then she looks straight at the narrator. All right, I'll play your game. Absolutely useless things. "Truth". A central theme in Dazai's (writer or narrator) iconography. She is challenging him. He takes up the challenge. "Patience." The middle-class virtue, of which K seemed to have an endless store, but suddenly he is not sure. In defiance, and in self-pity, he tells her patience is useless when it comes to him. The geisha still does not know what is happening. "Hard work", she says. K offers him no useless comfort. "Ambition." All your stupid effort is useless. He throws his own banner away. "Decadence." After all, it is a pose like any

other, finally useless. The geisha, oblivious and irrelevant: "Day before yesterday's weather." And now it is just a duel between the two. K baldly confesses her own need. "Me." And he, the spoiled child unwilling to let others have a bigger piece of the cake (of self-pity), "Me." (We remember K's earlier irritated, "You really think you're great, don't you!")⁹) And the geisha, simply playing a game, "Me." She loses the game, but the other two have lost much more, at least temporarily, a fragile world of trust and confidence.

The narrator is deeply upset. If K has lost her confidence, what will he do? He reaches for reassurance. And K repulses his advances. His *words* seem intended to comfort her, but she knows better—instead of embracing her, they slip away into an egotistical self-deprecatory, self-congratulatory harangue. K will not buy the the argument. Patience is useless, with this man. *She* needs help.

He is perceptive enough to see one of the precipitating factors—the geisha's beauty. After all, an attractive woman (a rival to K, no matter what the relationship between K and the narrator) has treated their situation as a joke. K could satirize it (hence her previous instructions to the geisha), but let that other person fall too deeply into the jesting mood, and K's position is undermined. She can joke, because she is serious. The outsider, by joking, does not understand and cheapens the situation. And, from K's point of view, cheapens K.

He seizes on that conflict as the only possible excuse. But he is not willing to recognize the other—his own egotistical demands. Dazai the author sees this, but not the narrator. The narrator runs off in a temper tantrum. He knows he is wrong, but cannot admit it even to himself. In self-protection, he turns guilt into self-pity. Dazai the author recognizes the guilt of his character, the narrator,

but, is himself too involved in the self-pity they both share to come to a final conclusion on the “wrongness” of the narrator.

K comes after him. She is, after all, the stronger one. She has regrouped her own temporarily shattered forces, and now she can handle him again. With a feeling of massive relief, he surrenders, and tears of relief burst from his overburdened heart. Even here, he can define his relief only in egotistical terms, as later, in a fumbling gesture of thanks to reaffirm her worth to him as a human being he tells K, “I won’t die, as long as you’re still alive.”¹⁰

Or take the previously-mentioned admission of his own bourgeois origins and basic character. How, if (as I have argued) he is so concerned with maintenance of a self-created image, can Dazai make such a revelation? He can do it because, just as K indulges the narrator, so Dazai the author can indulge himself within bounds. The first admission profoundly dispirits them both, for it introduces a frightening note of reality into their private world. Later, in a mood of surrealistic calmness, a moment past exhaustion, a moment of quiet bought with the coin of the hysteria of the past couple of days, they can toy with the idea again. How nice it would be to be ordinary. (Oh, but we’re not really ordinary, are we? Are we?) And the quiet of these few minutes is dangerous. It leads to the possibility of further damaging admissions, that in turn might lead to a frightening self-knowledge. So just at the moment when the narrator (and the author) and K seem about to make a breakthrough from posing to naked reality, Dazai the author produces an accident. This *deus ex machina* is unnecessary and incomprehensible, except in the context of the author’s private needs.

As is common with private communication (for the fiction, even more than the non-fiction, is Dazai talking to Dazai), there is much

that is cryptic and, so far as I am concerned, impossible of interpretation. But as seen above, as the weight of communication builds up, some things become clear. K's comment at the beginning of "Autumn Diary", "Maybe you can't cope with the cold,"¹¹⁾ receives further illumination from Dazai's recognition in "September" that he uses the cold as an excuse for his own failures. This man from the North country, prey to the seemingly endemic sense of inferiority that still plagues so many of the natives of Tohoku, knows he is begging the question when he accuses his antecedents.

Or, for example, his enigmatic comment to K, when he realizes that his babbling on the train has drawn the attention of other passengers, "This too is my fate."¹²⁾ There is a reflection of this in "September", where he reveals a sense of grievance that he is doomed to be more harshly judged than others. K suggests later in "Autumn Diary" that this is perhaps more a creature of his own imagination than actual fact: "You do worry about what other people think of you, don't you.... And you think that your own existence depends on that alone, right?"¹⁴⁾ Additional illumination comes in *Tsugaru*, written several years later. The hospitality and friendship (or love) of natives of his home region of Tsugaru seems rough and unmannered to the sophisticated city dweller, but Dazai recognizes its depth. Observing the violent exertions of his host, Dazai comments, "I felt somehow that, through S, I had learned something about myself,"¹⁴⁾ about the violence of his own emotional responses, as a fellow countryman of S. The words might more literally be translated, "I was made aware of my own fate," the fate of making a fool of himself through the very violence of his own sincerity.

None of these statements can be proved, nor can Dazai's fragmen-

tary comments be fully explained; but the weight of evidence, the bits and fragments repeated in slightly different form, gradually build their own kind of logic. For this reason, I chose these two pieces as representative of Dazai's methods and the problems he presents to the critic.

[注]

- 1) Arthur Waley, translator. *The Tale of Gehji*. Modern Library Giant. Random House. New York, 1960. p. 501. The original follows. Note differences in the force of the words, occasioned by differences in Waley's and Lady Murasaki's respective societies:

その人のうへとて、有りのままに言ひ出づることこそなけれ、よきもあしきも、世に経る人の有様の、見るにもあかず、聞くにもあまることを、後の世にもいひ伝へまほしきふしぶしを、心にこめがたくて、言ひおきはじめたるなり。よき様に言ふとては、よきことの限りえり出でて、人に従はむとては、又あしきさまの、めづらしき事を取りあつめたる、みな、かたがたにつけたる、この世のほかのことならずかし。

(「源氏物語」螢の巻の物語論 岩波版古典大系本による。)

- 2) Soma Shoichi points out that the majority of biographical chronologies 年譜 drawn on Dazai rely on the evidence of Dazai's own words, and thus differ considerably, both from each other and from the facts as revealed in external documentation. 相馬正一・『太宰治』・弘前図書館・郷土の先人を語る (2)・弘前、昭和43年。
- 3) 『恥』・「太宰治全集」・v. 4・筑摩書房・昭和42年。
- 4) For example, in *Tsugaru*: "I was uneasy with myself as a city sophisticate, and sought to grasp my significance in the country, in my place of birth": 『津軽』・全集・v. 7・p. 37・「都会人としての私に不安を感じて、津軽人としての私をつかまうとする念願である。」
- 5) 『秋風記』・全集・v. 2・p. 247。
- 6) 『九月十月十一月』・全集・v. 10・p. 106。
- 7) 「お仕事できますか? ...できません。」 p. 108。
- 8) 『秋風記』・p. 254-256, 原文は下の通り、
親世経くわんせいきよに火を點じて、その火の消えないうちに、命じられたものの名を言つて隣の人に手渡す、あの遊戯をはじめた。ちつとも役に立たないもの。はい。
「片方割れた下駄。」

「歩かない馬。」

「破れた三味線。」

「写らない写真機。」

「つかない電球。」

「飛ばない飛行機。」

「それから、——」

「早く、早く。」

「真実。」

「え？」

「真実。」

「野暮だなあ。ちゃあ、忍耐。」

「むづかしいのねえ、私は、苦勞。」

「向上心。」

「デカダン。」

「をととひのお天気。」

「私。」K である。

「僕。」

「ちゃあ、私も、——私。」火が消えた。芸者のまけである。

「だって、むづかしいんだもの。」芸者は、素直にくつろいでゐた。

「K、冗談だらうね。真実も、向上心も、K ご自身も、役に立たないなん
で、冗談だらうね。僕みたいな男だっても、生きて居る限りは、なんとかし
て、立派に生きてゐたいとあがいてゐるのだ。K は、ばかだ。」

「おかへり。」K も、きつとなった。「あなたのまじめさを、あなたのまじ
めな苦しさを、そんなに皆に見せびらかしたいの？」

芸者の美しさが、よくなかった。

「かへる。東京へかへる。お金くれ。かへる。」私は立ちあがって、どてら
を脱いだ。

K は、私の顔を見上げたまま、泣いてゐる。かすかに笑顔を残したまま、
泣いてゐる。

私は、かへりたくなかった。誰も、とめてはくれないのだ。えい、死な
ら、死なう。私は、着物に着換へて足袋をはいた。

宿を出た。走った。

橋のうへで立ちどまって、下の白い谷川の流れを見つめた。自分を、ばか
だと思った。ばかだ、ばかだ、と思った。

「ごめんなさい。」ひっそり K は、うしろに立ってゐる。

「ひとを、ひとをいたはるのも、ほどほどにするがいい。」私は泣き出した。

- 9) 「意気地がないのね」・p. 252。

- 10) 「K が生きてあるうち、僕は死なない、ね」・ p. 257。
- 11) 「寒さが、こたへるのかしら。」・ p. 249。
- 12) 「ここにも、僕の宿命がある。」・ p. 251。
- 13) 「ひとの噂だけを気にしてゐて……そこに自分の肉體が在ると思つてゐるのね。」・ p. 257。
- 14) 「私は S さんに依つて私自身の宿命を知らされたやうな気がして……」・ V. 7, p. 44。

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