

Life after Death? Writing the Alienated Self in Post-war Japan

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Abstract

This paper represents an attempt to consider how artists in general—and Japanese post-war novelists in particular—deal with traumatic experience and how this process is reflected in their subsequent literary texts. More specifically, it will consider how two Japanese immediate post-war authors, Shimao Toshio (1917–86) and Shiina Rinzō (1911–73)—neither of whom saw active experience at the front but who both emerged, by their own admission, heavily traumatized from their experiences of the period—tackled the issue of depicting in their literary texts their wartime experiences and their subsequent attempts to return to ‘normal’ life in the immediate aftermath of war. The literary process whereby they first ‘act out’ and subsequently ‘work through’ their particular traumatic experiences will be examined—and, in so doing, their oeuvres will be presented as ongoing, collaborative projects aimed at more fully ‘constituting’ certain traumatic events in cognitive, affective and ethical terms.

Keywords: Shimao Toshio, Shiina Rinzō, trauma, Asia-Pacific War

I would like to begin by offering an alternative title for this paper—which would be along the lines of: ‘Don’t mention the war: The Japanese literary response to the trauma of the Asia-Pacific War’. This variant seems appropriate inasmuch as, in this paper, I shall be focusing on two Japanese authors who, for all their own harrowing, and inevitably intensely personal, experience of the Asia-Pacific War, have left us with a corpus of literary texts in which direct allusion to this experience is often marked off, as much by its absence as by any intense focus on the traumatic past.

Needless to say, the gamut of those who can be subsumed under the rubric of Japanese ‘war authors’ is broad: whereas some authors chose to focus predominantly and directly on their experiences on the battlefield, others included these experiences—could not help but include them?—in texts that are ostensibly about unrelated topics. Still others deliberately tried to repress their wartime experiences and sought their literary material elsewhere. Nevertheless, the significant point here is that, even in these texts, the war remained as what the critic Irmela Hijiya-Kirschner has described as an “unstated presence” (1996: 247).

What we need to recall is that, for the vast majority of these writers, the war remained as a source of trauma. My focus in the paper that follows, then, will firstly be on a consideration of how artists in general—and then Japanese post-war novelists in particular—deal with traumatic experience. I shall then move on to an analysis of how two specific Japanese immediate post-war authors, Shimao Toshio (1917–86) and Shiina Rinzō (1911–73)—neither of whom saw active experience at the front but who both emerged, by their own admission, heavily traumatized from their experiences of the period—tackled the issue of depicting in their literary texts their attempts to return to ‘normal’ life in the immediate aftermath of war. So let us begin with a consideration of some of the principles involved in the literary representation of trauma in general.¹ In this context, it is surely true that the contribution of art to how traumatic historical events are constituted, integrated and comprehended has yet to be sufficiently acknowledged. As the critic Ernestine Schlant has observed, for example:

¹ Much of the following section draws on my co-authored paper (2010a).

Politicians and political scientists, economists, journalists, opinion makers, and poll takers all form their conclusions according to some 'objective' criteria, but rarely, if ever, is literature consulted. Yet literature is the seismograph of a people's dreams and nightmares, hopes and apprehensions.... [L]iterary truth often goes deeper than political or economic analysis, and it reflects the conditions and values of the society under which it was created. (Schlant & Rimer 1991: 1)

Another grouping that could arguably be added to Schlant's list of those who, all too often, fail to 'consult' literature—or film for that matter—in producing their narratives of traumatic events and experiences is that of the historian. In fact, the neglect of artistic works by historians, political scientists, economists, journalists, etc. may help explain (though only partly) why so many constitutive elements of the Asia-Pacific War (e.g., the Nanjing atrocities, the ongoing 'comfort women' issue, Hiroshima) remain controversial and insufficiently fathomed to this day.

According to the philosopher Walter Davis, traumatic events and experiences must be 'constituted' before they can be assimilated, integrated and understood (2003: 142). As such, what is required, in addition to the historical facts, is the subjective element (including emotion). And I am certainly not alone in arguing that this is precisely what the literary artist is in a unique position to provide.

Drawing upon their formidable powers of intuition and imagination to create potent, affect-charged forms and images of extreme historical violence, psychological damage and ideological contradiction, artists enable their audiences to engage virtually, to internalize, to 'know' and to respond to trauma in concrete, human terms. In this sense, art serves as the "conscience of its community" (2007: 7). Furthermore, as Davis surmises, "creating new affects" is one of the "primary businesses of great [artistic] work" (2001: 228).

So what does all this mean in practice? As already noted, some authors are directly involved, whether as perpetrators or victims/survivors; others may have been present as witnesses, while still others were not present at the time or place of traumatic occurrence at all. There is nevertheless a real sense in which significant numbers from all these cohorts can be seen as suffering the after-effects of trauma—in some cases what we would now call

PTSD—and, as artists, they are obliged, whether consciously or not, to consider their traumatic experience and the convoluted processes by which survivor-narrators struggle to represent and (re)constitute their experiences—and to reintegrate themselves—through artistic expression.

The critic Cathy Caruth reminds us that, with trauma, there is, by definition, a period of ‘latency’ during which the victim experiences frequent and unwitting repetition of the traumatic event—as s/he feels, to cite Dominick LaCapra, as if s/he “were back there reliving the event, and the distance between here and there, then and now, collapses” (LaCapra 2001: 89). At the same time, however, the period of latency allows for a degree of perspective that permits the traumatized individual to begin “the arduous process of working over and through the trauma” (*ibid*: 90); in short, the survivor is seen as living, not with memories, but with an ongoing, as-yet-unassimilated event. Equally significantly, it is important to bear in mind that the process of interpreting the event can lead to “an enlarged understanding of the self” (Freeman 1993: 29). At the same time, Caruth reminds us that, “while the images . . . remain absolutely accurate and precise, they are largely inaccessible to conscious recall and control” (1995: 151). With time, a critical distance may be achieved—but then the question may become whether the trauma is the encounter with death, or rather the ongoing experience of having survived.

Building on this hypothesis, LaCapra identifies two clearly identifiable stages to the process of representing and reintegrating the self under such circumstances, both of which are crucial for distancing the writer from the original trauma, for laying certain ghosts to rest—and for renewing interest in life and the future. He suggests:

Writing trauma ... involves processes of acting out, working over, and to some extent working through in analyzing and ‘giving voice’ to the past—processes of coming to terms with traumatic ‘experiences’, limit events, and their symptomatic effects that achieve articulation in different combinations and hybridized forms.... [It] is often seen in terms of enacting it, which may at times be equated with acting (or playing) it out in performative discourse or artistic practice. (LaCapra 2001: 186-7)

The distinction between the two stages of the process ('acting out' and 'working through' the event) is crucial. But how does each find expression and what is the relationship between them? In his consideration of these issues, LaCapra offers the following definition of the process of 'acting out' trauma:

Acting out is related to repetition, and even the repetition compulsion.... This is very clear in the case of people who undergo a trauma. They have a tendency to relive the past, to be haunted by ghosts or even to exist in the present as if one were still fully in the past, with no distance from it.... For people who have been severely traumatized, it may be impossible to fully transcend acting out the past. (*Ibid*: 142-3)

The shift from the 'acting out' stage to the situation wherein the author embarks on the process of 'working through' the trauma may be subtle, even imperceptible. But it tends to be marked off by a heightened ability to distinguish between past and present—to “recall in memory that something happened to one . . . back then—while realizing that one is living here and now with openings to the future” (*ibid*: 22). In all this, the collective challenge for us, as concerned outside observers, is to engage, unlock and (re)constitute the affect-charged, value-laden human dramas that have been imaged—and imagined—in this case in specific Japanese artistic representations of the traumatic past. And, if we trawl through the literature, there is a whole wealth of images, both visual and verbal, that spring to mind: the 'human seal' of Hiroshima; the young female survivor and skull amidst the ruins of Nagasaki; the Okinawan man who awakens one morning to find his leg swollen grotesquely, his big toe emitting water from which phantom soldiers come to drink nightly; the dying soldier in a remote cave in the Philippines with maggots squirming in his unseeing eyes as he quietly lectures about how the entire history of the universe is contained in a single stone. What we are called to do is to try and grasp their relevance to the present and future. Left unengaged, unconstituted and un-acted upon, such images—and the historical traumas that they reference—will, whether we realize it or not, continue to disturb us both personally and collectively, like recurrent but unregistered nightmares, haunting the present and threatening the future.

Let us turn then to the Japanese literary response to the trauma of the war. I start from the premise that the events, experiences and aftermath of the Asia–Pacific War were not only traumatic for the majority of Japanese people and the nation as a whole at the time, but have continued to be so to the present day. In this sense, Japanese artists affected by such trauma, whether directly or indirectly, can be understood to be engaging in ongoing, collaborative projects aimed at more fully constituting particular traumatic experiences and events in cognitive, affective and ethical terms. It is in this context that I consider the oeuvres of two authors, Shimao Toshio and Shiina Rinzō, both of whom came of age during the War, neither of whom saw active service at the front, and who had vastly differing experiences of the War—but who can nevertheless be used to offer insights into how the artist deals with trauma. More specifically, I shall be suggesting that traces of these two processes—that of ‘acting out’ followed by ‘working through’—can be seen clearly delineated in their respective texts.

Turning first to Shimao, the trauma of his wartime experience is well-documented. Encouraged to enlist in the *tokkōtai* (special attack forces, better known in the West as the *kamikaze*) as a largely unwitting ‘volunteer’, Shimao spent the last two years of the War on the island of Amami Ōshima, just north of Okinawa, as leader of a suicide squadron, with every day spent preparing himself and the approximately 200 men under his command for their fateful mission. The go-ahead for this mission was finally delivered on 13 August 1945, with Shimao and his men spending the next 36 hours in a state of ‘ready alert’. Noon of 15 August arrived with the men still in limbo, only for news of the imperial declaration of surrender to slowly filter through, leaving Shimao and his entire team to confront the prospect of a life that had been denied them until that moment. Having also missed the great earthquake that hit the Tokyo area in 1923 as a result of a day trip that had taken him out of town, in subsequent years, Shimao was to make much of his sense of having missed the two most formative moments of his life. As he remarked in ‘Tobikoenakereba!’ (‘I must overcome!’), a piece penned shortly after the cessation of hostilities:

Two incidents in my past serve to symbolise the way in which I always seem to be caught between two stools. At the time of the Great Kanto earthquake, I had left our home in Yokohama in order to recuperate and was thus unable to become a victim. Then in the recent war, I opted for service as a commissioned officer and became head of a kamikaze squadron. But we never sailed and I survived the war having never experienced life at the front. (Shimao 1980–83, vol. 13: 121)²

For those spared such a confrontation with death, we can only guess at the psychological upheaval and trauma Shimao went through, both at the time and as he sought to ‘act out’ and then ‘work through’ these events and to return to ‘normal’ life. But his works give us fascinating insights into the workings of the human mind *in extremis*; indeed, in many ways, they can be seen as offering some of the most detailed case studies of man emerging from the ashes of defeat—as some of the most haunting examinations of human nature—in the entirety of modern Japanese literature.

Shimao starts his oeuvre by asking the question of how to cope with traditional peacetime after such an experience: his early stories show a protagonist, often called Toshio, in a state of ready alert—in which, not only has he learnt to live only for death, but he has come to terms with that as his destiny. As Toshio remarks in the early short story, ‘Shutsu-kotōki’ (‘Exodus from the Island’, 1949):

The moon was high in the night sky. There was nothing to do now but wait for the command to sail. Strangely enough, I had lost all attachment to life in this world. Every moment that our departure was delayed sowed in me the seeds of impatience. It was painful to continue in this state of ready alert. This was our chance ... the perfect opportunity. I would have no qualms about sailing right then. But the order didn’t come. (*Ibid* 6: 282)

It is hardly surprising that Shimao’s protagonist is shown as possessed of an inverted vision of normality—with post-war peace here perceived as a temporary respite from the norm of war. This leads to a warped perception of life as a struggle, not with his fellow man, but with his own inner being. The more he comes to accept that the emptiness

² This and all subsequent citations from the Japanese, including titles of works, are translated by myself, unless otherwise indicated.

he experiences following release from death stems from an inability to replace his constant readiness for death with any credible role in post-war society, the more he comes to see the enemy as within his inner being. Needless to say, Shimaō is not unique in this; but I would argue that he does succeed, more than most others I can think of, in taking this to its logical conclusion: using literature as a vehicle for genuine self-scrutiny.

It is to be expected that the early Shimaō stories—written, we must remember, under the constraints of the US Occupation—focus on the confusion and fear both of the ‘ready alert’ period and of his ensuing abject circumstances in Occupation Japan. With time, however, the author becomes more balanced and objective—and it is in ‘Shuppatsu wa tsui ni otozurezu’ (‘The Moment of Departure Never Came’, 1962), covering much the same material but written some fifteen years later, that he finally appears reconciled to the inevitable: to understand that release from death will not necessarily entail return to full life. His consequent pain and indifference to life is highlighted in the following extract from the later story:

I was overcome by an intense fatigue and lay face up on my bed. There was nothing about which to feel apprehension and, in that sense, there were no grounds for fear. Yet I was engulfed in an indescribable sense of loneliness. It was as though the future, in which there was an alternative to death but which had previously been banished from our minds, had been reduced with the passage of time to something commonplace, and the sense of fulfilment in life that I had assumed would ensue automatically seemed to slip through my fingers....

In the past, I had merely reacted out of an unabated sense of abhorrence and had lived in fear of air-raids, of insubordination, and of the moment when our suicide boats would strike the enemy craft. When such possibilities disappeared, not as a result of any wish on my part but like the conclusion of some natural phenomenon, I was left with a sense of emptiness, devoid of all energy to go off to confront a new situation. (*Ibid*: 325-6)

Here finally, Shimaō seems to have acknowledged—to have ‘worked through’—the full extent of the struggle to which he had been subjected from the moment the order to sail had been revoked; he can now finally accept that, having found himself alive but living for

certain death, he had subsequently found himself staring in on life from the perspective of death—and admitting that, in many ways, that was infinitely harder to accept.

The story, ‘The Moment of Departure Never Came’, also illustrates the unseverable link between Shimao’s war stories and the three other types of story that populate his oeuvre: those dealing with home, dreams, and travel, all of which can be seen as products of his August 1945 experience. All can be seen as literary attempts to explore the inner being by placing protagonists under extreme circumstances. But in what ways do these too reflect his experience of postponed death in August 1945?

The brief answer to this question is that every Shimao protagonist has an inverted perspective on life. Just as the distinction between war and peace had been eroded, so too his non-war stories are populated by characters who have lost all sense of black and white distinctions. Most significant in this regard is the protagonist, Toshio, in *Shi no toge* (*The Sting of Death*, 1977), a novel that is all too easily dismissed as a rather turgid and realistic depiction of a marital breakdown.

What is important to note here, however, is that the work belongs to a series of ‘sick-wife stories’, a body of stories that focus on the period in the author’s life after he had moved back to mainland Japan and married the girl, Miho, he had met during his two-year stint on the island of Amami Ōshima—only for his wife to succumb to mental-health issues and for the couple to spend the next decade or so frequenting a series of psychiatric clinics. As the author is the first to acknowledge, however, the situation is exacerbated—if not directly caused—both by his ongoing awkward attempts to ‘work through’ his traumatic wartime experiences and by his marital infidelity. The sense of guilt—both towards his military comrades who had not escaped their moment of destiny and towards Miho for having occasioned her illness—is palpable in this and the other ‘sick-wife stories’. The result, however, is a body of works marked off by their emphasis on absolute faithfulness to the mundane reality that confronted Shimao following his return to ‘peacetime reality’. As with the war stories, here too the future holds no meaning: Toshio has to live for the present moment. And so he records the mundane detail of his daily life—and, in so doing, he gives

voice to the torment he was still experiencing ten years after his initial traumatic experience of near-death.

On the surface, therefore, *The Sting of Death* portrays in graphic detail one marital tiff after another, with the only saving grace being the couple's determination to stay together at all costs. And yet, as suggested by the fact that the film was to take both the FIPRESCI Prize and the Grand Prize of the Jury at the 1990 Cannes Film Festival (where it was also nominated for the Golden Palm), there is also a beauty here that enables the reader to discern a sense of optimism, a Rembrandt-like ray of light shining through the darkness.

So how does Shimao achieve this paradoxical effect? Here too the answer seems to lie in the author's experience of suspended death in 1945: he manages to elicit our sympathy for Toshio on the grounds that he never fully re-integrated back into society—and, in this regard, it is interesting to note that the film version includes many flashbacks to the war, episodes which are not overtly present in the novel.

The home Shimao portrays here is one enveloped in ambiguity. On the one hand, it appears as a very fragile institution, devoid of life and mutual understanding. At the same time, though, Toshio is attached, almost pathologically, to the home and family—as shown by the ending where he finds himself tempted to abandon all his responsibilities and to escape alone, but ends up, in spite of himself, once more drawn to return to the psychiatric clinic where his wife is confined, an act that has been seen by many as the ultimate act of atonement and self-effacement. The result may be a portrait of confusion—of one struggling to make sense of events for which he is partly responsible but is powerless to control. At the same time, however, there is a sense of hope, even of optimism, with the future, however uncertain, nevertheless offering the potential for new beginnings. And, in this sense, *The Sting of Death* can be seen as a very powerful metaphor for post-war Japan itself.

There is, however, one final aspect to Shimao's art that I see as central to an understanding of his literary depiction of traumatic events. This relates to his tendency, predictable in many ways, to transform reality into fantasy, and vice versa. It is this that

leads to the series of ‘dream stories’, another significant contributor to his posthumous reputation.

It is hardly surprising that the events of 1945 came to appear to Shimaō as part of a dream—and the reader is struck by the number of his stories that see his protagonists move from the real to the surreal world. Here, the author can be seen using dreams to explore the unconscious—and consequently to depict deeper truths than would be possible through objective realism. In short, in classic Freudian manner, he uses dreams to portray the chaos of human existence at a basic level. The best example of this trait is the short story ‘Yume no naka de no nichijō’ (‘Everyday Life in a Dream’, 1948), a work whose very title can be read as a powerful image of reality turned upside down, a perfect mirror of Shimaō’s situation in 1945.

For the protagonist of this story, everyday life has come to assume an air of unreality: just as the protagonist of the war stories is trying to make sense of his reprieve from death, so this protagonist becomes embroiled in a conscious attempt to fathom the nature and contents of his dreams. As he does so, he is shown penetrating ever further beyond an exterior façade—until he eventually confronts his inner being. This takes the form of the protagonist becoming embroiled in heated discussion with his own mood—until he eventually succeeds, quite literally, in exposing his inner self:

Hardening my resolve, I thrust my hand into my stomach. Then, still scratching my head vehemently with my left hand, I tried with my right hand to dig out the contents of my stomach. My hand alighted on something clinging tenaciously to the pit of my stomach like a hard kernel, and I tried pulling on it with all my might. The result was incredible. My flesh was pulled upwards with that hard kernel on top. I continued pulling desperately. Eventually, I felt that my whole body had been pulled inside out, like a sock. My head no longer itched and the stomach ache had dissipated.

(Ibid 2: 209)

The image symbolizes, in dramatic fashion, the two conflicting worlds the author had discerned at the end of the war when, with his unexpected reprieve, his own entire world had indeed appeared turned inside out.

In all this, one conclusion remains irrefutable: as an author driven by personal experience to consider in his literature fundamental questions about life and death, Shimao was never to waver in his attempt to come to terms with the events of 1945. In preserving this experience as the catalyst for all his subsequent literary production—by initially ‘acting them out’ and subsequently ‘working through’ them—he has left us a set of texts remarkable not only for their ability to plumb the depths of his own inner being, but also in their consistent attempt to find new ways of asking old questions, such as ‘What is man?’ and ‘What is war?’

By way of a second case study of Japanese literary engagement with traumatic material, let us now turn to another author, Shiina Rinzō, who also came to literary prominence shortly after the cessation of Pacific War hostilities. As with many other Japanese, Shiina has been described by his friend and fellow author, Saitō Suehiro, as having listened to the imperial radio broadcast of surrender ‘with little emotion’ (Saitō 1980: 254). In this, he was not alone: as John Dower suggests in *Embracing Defeat*, his extended study of the period, the Japanese of the time experienced a sense of *kyodatsu*: they were physically ‘drained’. For Shiina, however, the ongoing struggle for daily survival was nothing new: ever since his arrest in September 1931 for violation of the Peace Preservation Law (which outlawed left-wing political activity), his subsequent torture, and his eventual release from imprisonment on the back of his agreement to put his signature to a *tenkōsho* (document of political apostasy), he had been confronted with the need to make the most of whatever mundane opportunities and employment he was offered by the military police. As with so many of his peers, the decision to commit *tenkō* may have led to release from physical incarceration;³ however, it did little to assuage the feelings of guilt he consequently harboured towards his comrades who remained imprisoned; nor, given the military build-up of the time, did it lead to any immediate reintegration back into society.

Largely as a result of the vagaries of translation, Shiina’s oeuvre has not established for itself an international reputation; indeed, his works are unfamiliar to all but the most

³ Here it is important to note that all but a tiny minority of the 57,000 arrested for leftwing activities between 1928–34 succumbed to the various pressures to commit *tenkō*; cf. Steinhoff 1988: 84.

committed of literary scholars in Japan. For all this neglect, however, it is not without reason that his friend and critic, Takadō Kaname, chose to describe him as the “literary voice of the masses” (1989: 250). Shiina is arguably the representative author of the *Sengoha* (après-guerre) literary coterie, a classic example of the alienated individual in Occupation Japan. Indeed, a case can be made for describing him as the unofficial spokesman for an entire generation of alienated, ‘deracinated’ individuals.

Central to Shiina’s entire corpus is the image of an individual struggling to come to terms not only with the big national issues of the day (responsibility for defeat in the war, guilt, the position of the imperial institution, etc.), but also, far more immediately, with the need to survive—or, as Shiina would have it, to “*taeru*” (endure) in the “*haikyo*” (ruins) of post-war Tokyo. Thus, as Takadō Kaname noted:

Both physically and spiritually, it was ruins that molded 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. (*Ibid*: 8)

It is significant to note that Takadō is here referring not only to the physical ruins of Occupation Japan but also to the ruins that pervaded Shiina’s spiritual being, one devoid of a past or a future, existing merely as an empty present. 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. (Shiina 1970-79 [hereinafter *SRZ*], vol.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 early novella ‘Shin’ya no shūen’ (‘The

Midnight Banquet', 1947), with which Shiina announced his arrival on the literary scene. Sumaki's evocations of his abject circumstances are among the most poignant on record for this period. As he suggests,

I have no future and the past has been destroyed. I am merely a solitary ruin. My heart is weighed down by the realization 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. (*Ibid* 1: 98)

For all that we should be aware of the necessity to maintain a clear distinction between Shiina and his literary alter ego, Sumaki, Shiina is at constant pains to stress his self-identification with his protagonist. And there can be few more honest literary portrayals of the depths plumbed by so many in Japan in the immediate post-war period. Thus, although there may be many examples in the literature of the time of the individual devoid of anything in which to place his trust except himself, it is significant to note that, for Shiina, even such trust in the self is lacking.

There is, then, a fundamental oxymoron underlying Shiina's work—in the attempted fusion of the subjective depictions of the circumstances of ruin and his objective analysis of existence within such ruins. To the writer himself, this was an inevitable consequence of his own past. The point was taken up by Shiina's colleague in the *Sengoha*, Haniya Yutaka, who remarked:

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)

The comment echoes the 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 was to capture

the essence of this paradox—to give literary expression to this opposition. But how were they to do this?

Perhaps Shiina's response to this challenge can best be encapsulated in his oft-stated belief that there can be no depiction of hope without consideration of its inverse, absolute despair: as he suggested, “[d]espair is impossible without hope and, equally, hope is not possible without despair” (*SRZ* 20: 23-24). Similarly, the brightness which, I am 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. But such depictions, I suggest, fall short of the mark—in missing the carefully crafted dichotomy, the hope beyond the despair, the Rembrandt-like light beyond the darkness.

This trait is clearly evident in ‘Midnight Banquet’, where we see Sumaki 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 before committing *tenkō*:

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 watch thoughtfully as the tall, red brick wall gradually changed hue 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.
(*Ibid* 1: 4)

Thereafter, 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. (*Ibid*: 11)

Again echoes of the imperial broadcast to the nation are evident in the word ‘endure’. And, based on such passages, it is hardly surprising that Shiina has been categorized by critics such as Yamagata Kazumi as an “author of despair” (1988: 68); in many ways, the reputation was self-inflicted. Almost immediately, however, comes evidence of more than meets the eye, of a narrator determined to penetrate beyond the immediate pain and misery—by drawing attention to the fact that Sumaki is not simply succumbing to his despair, but seeking to work through it. 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 the various yearnings of my heart to a sense of hopeless despair. *And yet*, I am content. 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; my italics)

The stark opposition incorporated into such portrayals is clearly not designed to mitigate the extent of Sumaki’s despair: this remains as real and abject as ever. The protagonist is, however, moving on; he is ‘acting out’ past experience—and this will eventually bring him 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 through which he will ultimately be enabled 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 irrationally conflicting emotions—in short, to begin the process of ‘working through’ them.

In 1950–51, Shiina experienced another form of *tenkō* (conversion), albeit this time of a spiritual dimension, as he sought baptism into the Christian faith. At much the same time, he published *Jiyū no kanata de* (*On the Other Side of Freedom*, 1954), set up as an attempt to stress the fundamental distinction he discerned between his current self and his earlier self ‘on the far side of freedom’—with literary portrayals of his former self as, for example, ‘a corpse’, as ‘a betrayer’, and as ‘God’s clown’. Significantly, however, the past

is not dismissed as an irrelevance; it is seen as an essential prerequisite for the process of ‘working through’ certain salient events in his life journey to which his attention now turns.

It is here, I would suggest, that one can find the essential difference between Shiina’s earlier and later narratives. The former, epitomized by *Midnight Banquet*, conform closely to Shoshana Felman’s template for narratives that “bear witness to the trauma and the implications of survival” (Felman & Laub 1992: 165)—that ‘act it out’. The latter, by contrast, written at considerably greater remove from the events in question, ask instead ‘How does one survive the witnessing?’ Or to use the lexicon of this discussion, ‘How does one “work through” it?’

But what does this mean in practice as we read the more mature texts? In the first of these, *On the Other Side of Freedom*, Shiina draws in greater detail than ever before on autobiographical material—chronicling a series of events that relate closely to his own life experience, with his decision to leave home at age 15, his *tenkō* experience in the early 1930s, his consequent release from prison, and the gruelling experience of freedom he undergoes working in the match factory to which he is assigned by the Military Police. In all this, it is difficult to avoid the sense of the author, Shiina, as omnipresent, frequently casting judgment on his protagonist, here named Seisaku, from his current perspective on ‘this side of freedom’. This, in and of itself, is strong evidence of an author ‘working through’ his material, as opposed to simply ‘acting it out’, as he was earlier.

The trait is even clearer in the novel *Unga (The Canal, 1956)*, written immediately after *On the Other Side of Freedom*, and deliberately picking up where the former leaves off—with the protagonist recently arrived in Tokyo and seeking to re-establish himself in society through hard work and attempting to establish some meaningful relationships with those around him.

To this new protagonist, Senkichi, the only escape from his miserable circumstances is through searching. And during the course of the narrative, this quest leads to the discovery not merely of the world of former colleagues who had hitherto rejected him as having betrayed them but also of a greater affinity with the mundane and harsh reality of the masses.

Significantly, however, this search does not take place in a vacuum—and an integral part of this process relates to Senkichi’s ability to acknowledge and come to terms with his own traumatic past and to ‘work through’ these events as the only means of moving forwards. As such, he is consequently dogged by frequent reminders of his past, with several early incidents acting as the ‘trigger’ for flashbacks to the trauma surrounding his *tenkō*. For example, right at the outset, after crashing his bike and losing consciousness, he returns in his mind to the experience of being tortured by the Military Police:

Senkichi recalled the large *dōjō* (auditorium) on the second floor of the police station. There was a long, thin, plain wood desk in the middle behind which sat a young prosecutor and clerk. Senkichi was made to sit in front of them, with an old, slow-moving military police officer (*tokkō*) stood behind him. He was ordered to tell them the names of the local Party members who had contacted him—and of those in his cell. When Senkichi said that he knew none, the officer passed a bamboo between Senkichi’s hands, now tied behind him, and his back and then pulled it up towards his shoulders, with a shriek. He felt as though both arms were being ripped from their sockets. Every time the pole was forced up, he let out a pitiful scream and broke out into a sweat. He endured this; but the officer just carried on and on with the torture. Unable to resist the pain, Senkichi fell to the floor. But the officer made no attempt to pick him up—and just carried on forcing his arms up with the sword. (SRZ 6: 531-2)

For all the distance, the memories are still raw—and they inspire Senkichi, once more, to relive the events. But, in sharp contrast to the absence of portrayal of any of the intense interior dialogue of the earlier works, *The Canal* represents the first concerted effort by Shiina’s protagonist to analyse these events—and, more specifically, to consider the paradoxical consequences of his *tenkō*. On the one hand, he did succeed thereby in securing his release; but, at the same time, he sees the act as a betrayal of himself—and of those around him.

The overall depiction is of Senkichi confronted—and increasingly troubled—by what he describes as his own “overwhelming wretchedness” (*ibid*: 586). Significantly, however, the narrative then proceeds to an important admission: “Never before had Senkichi been confronted by the ugly contradiction inherent within his being to this extent”

(*ibid*: 587). And strangely enough, this thought was linked to a sense that he was betraying the entire world. Here, as if for the first time, we have the sense that Senkichi is finally making some headway with his attempts to reconstruct his *tenkō* experience. Having failed, to date, to integrate this as an integral element of his life history, he is now in a position to move from resistance and denial to a greater degree of acceptance; he is ready, in short, to ‘work through’ the experience—and this is marked in the text by his encounter with one of his former colleagues whom he had ‘betrayed’.

In this sense, his meeting with his former colleague, Anami Reiko, is the real cathartic moment here:

Reiko didn’t smile. She simply stared at him with an expressionless look in her eyes, and replied in the Kansai dialect, ‘Yes.’

The sweet sensation of nostalgia drained visibly from Senkichi’s being; there was a distinct tone of powerful criticism in Reiko’s voice. The past, which he had long since tried to bury, came flooding back; he was even aware of the weight on the palm of his hand of the ten fifty-*sen* coins he had received from Reiko when she had been working in the small café in Kobe to cover the ‘rent of an agitator’. There had even been a time when he had experienced feelings of love towards her.

‘When did you come to Tokyo?’ he asked out of desperation.

‘Only about a month ago,’ she replied. (*Ibid*: 605)

The earlier narratives would doubtless have left things there, with the Shiina protagonist unwilling—or unable—to delve deeper into the cause of Reiko’s evident anguish. Senkichi, however, is ready for further probing, and the ensuing narrative raises several of the issues he had been mulling over for so long:

‘You [were tortured] too?’ he eventually asked hesitantly.

‘Yes,’ she replied brusquely.

‘I suffered terribly at the hands of the military police. I was moved from one cell to another for about two years,’ Senkichi began to explain. ‘They eventually let me out on parole.’

‘Why did you run off without telling anyone?’ she eventually asked.

‘I didn’t. I told my colleagues it was dangerous and ordered them to escape.’

‘I never heard that,’ she said in a monotonous voice. ‘Everyone on the trains was mad with you.’

Even those who weren't in the union got caught up in it. Everyone's convinced that you informed on them to the police before running away.'

'That's a lie,' he found himself shouting. 'Are you crazy?'

'In which case, why didn't you come back to be with your former colleagues on leaving prison?' (*Ibid*: 606)

In its portrayal of Senkichi determined to live for the future, not simply by expunging the traumatic past from his consciousness but by seeking consciously to move on, the incident is decisive. On the one hand, he may be left bemoaning the fact that "that horrible moment under torture had destroyed any bridge back to the past" (*ibid*: 631); on the other, however, he has now reclaimed at least some semblance of control over his life and its future direction.

By way of conclusion to this discussion, therefore, I would suggest that the political perspective may not always be overtly foregrounded in either of these authors' works. However, even where the texts are not dealing directly with the traumatic experiences they had undergone, these 'omissions' cannot be totally ignored. Given the circumstances, one might well ask, should we not just read the novels for the richness of what is there, rather than for what, if anything, has been excluded? But at this point, it is surely important to remember the rejoinder offered by the critic Edward Said, who reminds us not to read texts "stripped of their affiliations with the facts of power which informed and enabled them" (1994: 195). Shiina and Shimao may not be household names in Japan. Still, I would argue, their works are an invaluable resource, not just for the literature aficionado, but also for the historian, and for the politicians and diplomats trying to move on from the issues that continue to cast long shadows on international relations in East Asia.

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