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Fictions of Desire:
Narrative Form in the
Novels of Nagai Kafu

Review >
East Asia

When writing this book, it is clear that Stephen Snyder was very conscious of the only other book-length study of Kafu (1879-1959) in English by Edward Seidensticker, *Kafu the Scribbler*, published in 1965. Indeed, it would go too far to say that Snyder argues a counter-case to Seidensticker (the two books are fundamentally different in intent), nevertheless Snyder uses Seidensticker as a kind of departure point for a number of his speculations. In that respect, Snyder's study conforms to an older and more traditional form of scholarship than many of his contemporaries, who have an unfortunate habit of pretending that previous scholarship on Japanese literature in English does not exist.

By Leith Morton

In his introduction, Snyder propounds his thesis that Kafu's best fictional works are examples of the self-conscious kind of literature associated with early twentieth-century Modernist writing, especially French Modernism. In Snyder's words, Kafu's stories "thematize the act of narration" (p.3).

The first chapter analyses the relationship between Kafu and Mori Ogai (1862-1922), one of the great masters of early twentieth-century writing. Actually, Snyder concentrates more on Ogai than Kafu in order to justify his reading of Ogai as one of the few Meiji era authors to have a genuine understanding of Western narrative technique. This understanding, argues Snyder, was passed on to Kafu.

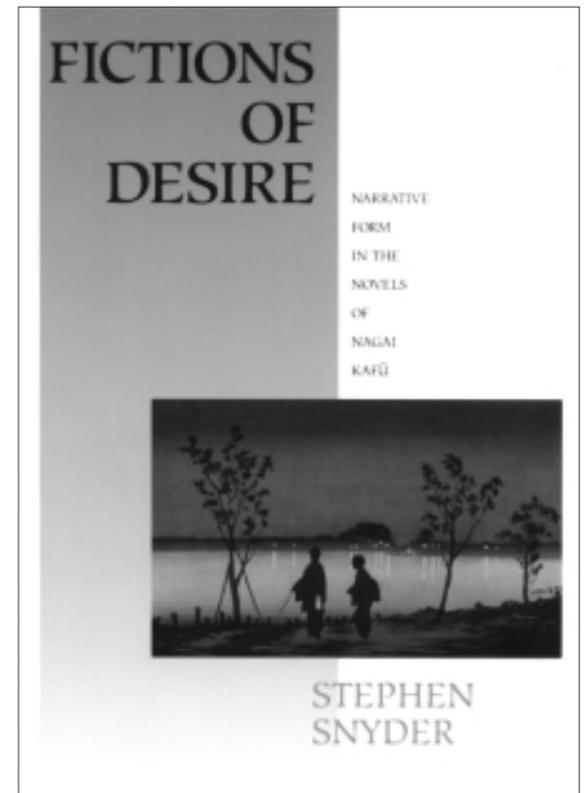
Chapter two takes up the argument that Ogai's mistrust of fiction results in a focus on rhetorical strategies, in other words, in a shift of interest from the story to the teller. Snyder's point is that this results in a "turning in of the narrative upon itself" which marks Kafu's later work, and that this is "a hallmark of ... modernist narrative invention" (p.44). The specific site of analysis is the influence of Maupassant on Kafu's *Amerika Monogatari* (*American Tales*, 1908). Snyder stresses the innovative nature of Kafu's "narrative within narrative", but he has already mentioned Ogai as using similar techniques in earlier stories, and the novelist Izumi Kyoka (1873-1939) had already demonstrated such a technique in his celebrated work *Koya Hijiri* (*The Holy Man of Koya*, 1900).

Chapter three takes up a theme introduced in the previous chapter: prostitution as a metaphor for male desire, and thus male power, and its relationship to writing, which, again, metaphorically (by taking the demi-monde as its theme) accomplishes the same end. Snyder's ruminations on these issues take the shape of a close reading of Kafu's novel *Udekurabe* (*Geisha in Rivalry*, 1917). Snyder praises the novel, both for the granting of subjectivity to its female protagonists, and also for its critique of capitalism symbolized by the licensed quarters where relationships, even erotic desire itself, are corrupted by money.

The next chapter draws the twin themes of prostitution and writing together to argue that the equation of art and sex results in "a product traded by prices, fixed by the arbitrary standards of mutual desire". Snyder's assertions are grounded in a close reading of Kafu's *Okamezasa* (*Dwarf Bamboo*, 1918). Seidensticker's views on this story create Snyder's starting point, but Snyder goes beyond his precursor to criticize a conventional view of the work as an evocation or modern rewriting of Tokugawa era literature. Snyder views the novel as providing an "intentional and systematic disappointment of reader expectations" (p.103).

The last chapter examines *Bokuto Kidan* (*A Strange Tale from East of the River*, 1937), perhaps Kafu's finest work. Here Snyder parts company from earlier American scholarship to argue a counter-case to Seidensticker's view of the novella. This is also the chapter in which Snyder asserts most forcefully that Kafu is a Modernist author on a par with his European contemporaries, especially Gide, one or two of whose stories provided a literary model for Kafu's work. This story is, for Snyder, a self-reflexive work par excellence. Some Japanese critics cited by Snyder make a similar case, but other critics, especially Snyder's American forebears, take quite a different perspective, viewing the work as seriously flawed.

Snyder's case is strong and deserves our attention, although it is not all that different from that put forward by some contemporary Japanese commentators. Snyder notes that the "narrative within the narrative" can be read as a parody of the Japanese version of naturalism — this is a crucial point. Snyder believes the work is fundamentally about writing but, while not denying this is an important element, it



could also be about the nature of desire, or about the boundaries between desire and love. It may be that the narrative "frame" is presenting a contrast to the embedded narrative, which has the thematic focus on desire. Thus, Kafu is not merely proposing a case in favour of a particular kind of writing, but demonstrating that case by contrasting one view of love with another clearly more convincing.

The fact that the reviewer feels inclined to join the conversation is ample proof of the excellence of Snyder's book. Not all readers will agree with the arguments proposed by Stephen Snyder, but surely all will find their experience of reading the always entertaining Kafu much enriched by Snyder's meditations. This is a book which truly enhances a reading of this most enjoyable and important Japanese author, and thus can be called criticism in the true sense of the word. Snyder's style is clear and concise, and his use of narratological theory and literary history is deft, avoiding jargon and always linked carefully to the text he is expounding. I can confidently recommend this book to both specialists and students alike; another excellent product of the University of Hawaii Press. ◀

- Snyder, Stephen, *Fictions of Desire: Narrative Form in the Novels of Nagai Kafu*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press (2000), 195 pp. ISBN 0-8428-2147-5 (hb), ISBN 0-8248-2236-6 (pb).

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