Value, Genre, Possibility: Contingency and Literature in Modern Japan

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In Japan, the leftist movement faced growing ideological suppression around 1930, leading to a decline in proletarian literature. Simultaneously, as the capitalist economy and consumer society matured, readers’ tastes evolved significantly. This change allowed modern Japanese literature, previously a domain of intellectual elites, to reach a wider audience through the growth of journalism. Popular novels that resonated with these readers became successful, while more ideologically or aesthetically complex works struggled to find a broad readership.

Some authors expressed concern over the increasing commercialization of literature, fearing a loss of artistic integrity. To overcome the situation, Riichi Yokomitsu, one of modern Japan’s prominent writers, penned his essay *Junsui shōsetsu-ron* (On the Pure Novel) in 1935. Known for novels like *Hae* (The Fly, 1923) and *Nichirin* (The Sun in Heaven, 1923) since his debut in 1923, Yokomitsu also contributed many critical essays, including *Junsui shōsetsu-ron*.

Following the downturn of proletarian literature, there was a belief among contemporary writers that modern Japanese literature was experiencing a revival (bungei fukkō). In his essay, Yokomitsu outlined the essentials for new literature to achieve the revival.

Upon its publication in 1935, *Junsui shōsetsu-ron* faced criticism for being convoluted and hard to grasp. Seiichirō Katsumoto, for instance, humorously lamented the challenge of translating the text’s “exceptionally puzzling passages” into an Indo-Germanic language (Katsumoto, 1935). Despite these initial reactions, the essay offers intriguing insights into a key literary concept: the role of contingency in shaping believable, imaginary worlds.

“Jun bungaku” and “tsūzoku shōsetsu”

At the outset of *Junsui shōsetsu-ron*, Yokomitsu articulated his vision of ideal literature, asserting that future literature should encompass both “tsūzoku shōsetsu” (popular literature) and “jun bungaku” (pure literature) (1935, p. 302). He
named this synthesis “junsui shōsetsu” (a pure novel), conceiving it as an exclusive and refined form (p. 303). Yokomitsu's term was reportedly inspired by Andre Gide's “roman pur.” Tsunatake Furuya, for instance, asserted that The Counterfeiters introduced “roman pur” to Japan (Furuya, 1935, p. 6). Yet, the underlying concepts of the two differ greatly. Kenzō Nakajima’s “What is a Pure Novel? An Explanatory Note” highlights that although the term “pure novel" became globally recognized largely through Gide's The Counterfeiters, Yokomitsu's essay gave the term a unique meaning in Japanese literary circles (see Nakajima, 1935, p. 4). Also, Shohei Ōoka's observed that Yokomitsu's “junsui shōsetsu" differs from Gide's “roman pur" (1935, p. 15).

The essay navigates three terms: “tsūzoku shōsetsu,” “jun bungaku,” and “junsui shōsetsu,” with their interrelationship remaining somewhat ambiguous. The Cambridge History of Japanese Literature explains “jun bungaku” and “tsūzoku shōsetsu” as follows:

The term jun bungaku, however, started to be used in the second decade of the twentieth century, when entertainment literature had proliferated and targeted a mass readership at a low level of literacy. Some writers then felt the need to impress upon the public the distinction between mass literature and their own autobiographical novels. They started to refer to their own works as jun bungaku, while they coined a somewhat derogatory term for mass entertainment literature: tsūzoku bungaku (“common" or popular literature).“ (Shirane, 2015, p. 654)

Accordingly, “jun bungaku” signified artistic and refined works, often autobiographical, while “tsūzoku shōsetsu” denoted lower-tier entertainment literature in modern Japan.

The concept of “jun bungaku" took shape with the genre of the “I-novel" (watakushi shōsetsu) at its core. [...]. For the first two decades of the twentieth century, a number of writers tried to write about their own lives and about mundane matters of everyday life. Contemporaries soon came to refer to these works as “watakushi shōsetsu” (I-novels). (p. 654)

Modern Japanese literature set out with the acceptance of realism from European literature. Although the writers struggled to make their stories credible, they did not necessarily have a strong sense of scientific positivism. While the authors of “watakushi shōsetsu” aimed to reduce overt manipulation or contrivance in their works, it's important to clarify that this primarily guided their choice of subject matter, leading them to draw heavily on their real-life experiences for the stories.

However, not all novelists seeking artistic expression embraced the “I-novel" form; Yokomitsu was among those dissatisfied with it. In Junsui shōsetsu-ron, he argued that future literature, or “junsui shōsetsu," should merge “jun bungaku” and
“tsūzoku shōsetsu.” Furthermore, he differentiated them by the role and frequency of coincidences in their narratives.

Writers who try to make “jun bungaku” exclude coincidences from their work, although they move us in daily life [...]. They believe that only describing their everyday experience is an authentic expression and genuine realism. Therefore, if they find coincidences in a literary work, they emotionally call it “tsūzoku shōsetsu” and disparage it. (Yokomitsu, 1935, p. 305)

Yokomitsu, in this segment of his essay, questioned this narrow view of realism in “jun bungaku.” He noted that writers of the “I-novel” insisted on drawing exclusively from real-life experiences, avoiding anything perceived as artificial or contrived, including plot devices or coincidences. They saw such elements as undermining realism, justifying their focus on everyday life in novels and their avoidance of chance occurrences. Yokomitsu, however, argued that life is filled with coincidences and that representing contingency was crucial for genuine realism. He contended that avoiding contingencies was more contrived than realistic.

Simultaneously, Yokomitsu criticized “tsūzoku shōsetsu” for its way of handling coincidences. Identifying chance and sentimentality as its core elements, he wrote, “When it comes to “tsūzoku shōsetsu,” [...] the most convenient events just for the plot are arranged merely to move readers' emotions without any reason.” (p. 305)

This critique might seem to align him with “I-novel” writers, as both were skeptical of using coincidental events in “tsūzoku shōsetsu.” However, Yokomitsu's focus was on the misuse of coincidences to manipulate the narrative artificially, criticizing them as tools solely for sentimental stimulation. Though coincidences could be employed, he argued, they should not serve as a “deus ex machina” in the story.

**Crime and Punishment as a “junsui shōsetsu”**

Yokomitsu criticized both “jun bungaku” and “tsūzoku shōsetsu” for their improper treatment of contingency. So, how does his proposed “junsui shōsetsu” handle coincidences? In his essay, Yokomitsu expressed regret over Japan's lack of “junsui shōsetsu” and advocated for the inclusion of contingency in novels, referring to Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* as an example:

I am currently reading *Crime and Punishment*. In this work, coincidental events, which are the essence of “tsūzoku shōsetsu,” occur frequently, starting even from the very early parts of the novel. [...]. Despite this, this is an excellent work that can be regarded as an exemplar of “junsui shōsetsu,” which is even higher than “jun bungaku.” (id.)
Here, Yokomitsu highlighted the novel's abundant coincidences, but he had also argued that improbability in a story diminishes its artistic value. How, then, could a novel filled with accidents like *Crime and Punishment* be valuable? Yokomitsu explained, “The novel has a reputation as “junsui shōsetsu” because its ideology and reality were not unnatural to intellectual readers. [...] It is the hardest thing to display the verisimilitude of coincidences.” (Yokomitsu, p. 304) Navigating this statement requires caution. Yokomitsu's wording implies a broad recognition of *Crime and Punishment* as “junsui shōsetsu,” yet this is problematic since he introduced and defined the term himself. This inconsistency may cause confusion. A nuanced reading of Yokomitsu's argument suggests that he used the novel's many coincidences to exemplify his concept of “junsui shōsetsu.” He emphasized that although portraying contingency realistically in fiction is challenging, Dostoevsky succeeded, earning the novel high praise. This aligns with the words of Christina Lupton, a contemporary scholar of literature and contingency:

> There is a fair body of work about a topic adjacent to ours: that of literature and chance. That pairing is a paradoxical one. Events that appear by chance in literature are always planted there; accidents represented in fiction are by definition premeditated. (2018, 375-379)

Lupton's observation echoes Yokomitsu's implication that in fiction, events cannot be truly contingent, as they are crafted intentionally by the writer.

### A new realism based on modern physics

Yokomitsu regarded “junsui shōsetsu” as a form of future realism. His attempt to envision new realism resonated with broader literary trends of the time. During this period debates about realism in proletarian literature, for example, took a different path from that of the “I-novel.” The introduction of socialist realism to Japan from the Soviet Union in 1933 marked a notable shift, further contributing to the waning of the already weakening proletarian literary movement. Within the Japanese leftist context, socialist realism was perceived as an ideologically neutral stance. In *Junsui shōsetsu-ron*, Yokomitsu refrained from criticizing or even mentioning socialist realism, unlike his stance against the “I-novel.” This absence might be explained by the timing of Yokomitsu's essay, as the debate on socialist realism had likely subsided by the time of its publication. Nonetheless, it's worth noting that during the literary revival period (*bungei fukkō*), various literary schools were actively exploring new forms of realism, seeking innovative pathways for the future of literature. This observation highlights a multifaceted exploration of realism within the Japanese literary landscape of the time, reflecting different ideological
undercurrents and responses to both domestic and international literary developments. Yokomitsu's silence on socialist realism in his essay adds a layer of complexity to his own position and the broader context in which he was writing.

Yokomitsu stated, “The problem of the pure novel is [...] the problem of the future realism.” (p. 308) He reached this conclusion in part by observing that real life is filled with coincidences, thus connecting new realism with contingency. Yokomitsu contemplated how novelists should portray human beings: “What does it mean for an artist to portray a human being? Pure fiction theory must find the answer to this question.” (p. 312) He believed that real people's thoughts and actions are often determined by chance:

If many coincidences influence a single person, then even more coincidences exist everywhere in the world, where more people exist and work together. [...] The closer we get to the truth of human activity this way, the more we realize that human activity is filled with something surprisingly mundane [...]. (p. 312-313)

He felt that a fictional world full of coincidences was the only way to depict human beings realistically in fiction.

Another reason he associated new realism with contingency is the drastic shift in the physical perception of the world during this period. Another writer, Yoichi Nakagawa, also addressed this subject. Nakagawa, who has authored novels and literary essays, called for a new realism of literature based on modern physics in his essay *Gūzen no kemari (A ball of chance)*:

In the field of quantum mechanics, Heisenberg, Born, Jordan, and others surprised us with their uncertainty principle. [...] They said that the closer they examine the physical world, the more they discover the world consisting of chance. [...] Contemporary realism must be based on the theory of chance and pursue the wonder of truth. (Nakagawa, 1935b, p. 9)

There are two critical points in this part of the essay. First, like Yokomitsu, Nakagawa considered the realism of “jun bungaku” to be old-fashioned and viewed representations of contingency in novels as the new realism. More importantly, he based his argument on modern physics, particularly quantum mechanics. The transition from classical physics to quantum physics marked a genuine revolution in understanding the world. Jan Hilgevoord and Jos Uffink explain the uncertainty principle, which is central to quantum physics, as follows:

Roughly speaking, the uncertainty principle (for position and momentum) states that one cannot assign exact simultaneous values to the position and momentum of a physical system. Rather, these quantities can only be determined with some characteristic “uncertainties” that cannot become arbitrarily small simultaneously. (Hilgevoord and Uffink, 2016)
The uncertainty principle in quantum mechanics inspired Nakagawa. He noted that as scientists closely examined the physical world, they found it to consist of chance, concluding that contemporary realism must be based on the theory of chance. However, Nakagawa's understanding of quantum physics was not entirely accurate, and he was criticized by scientists, including physicist Jun Ishihara, who stated,

> Although I respect him for having much interest in science, I cannot help deploring that his knowledge is inaccurate. I cannot overlook it because I know a scientific theory is rigorous. (Ishihara, 1935)

As Ishihara wrote, Nakagawa had just common knowledge of quantum mechanics. However, it is necessary to note that his inspiration from the physical theory led him to conclude that future literary realism should represent contingency.

In addition to Ishihara, many counterarguments were raised against the claims of Nakagawa and Yokomitsu. For instance, both Kei Moriyama and Jun Tosaka criticized the inadequacies in Yokomitsu and Nakagawa’s concepts of contingency and necessity (Moriyama, 1935; Tosaka, 1935). Furthermore, Shirō Ozaki and Tsunatake Furuya questioned whether the contingency in “tsūzoku shōsetsu” and the one that Yokomitsu idealized for “junsui shōsetsu” were indeed the same (Ozaki, 1935; Furuya, 1935). Thus, Nakagawa's *Gūzen no kemari* and Yokomitsu’s *Junsui shōsetsu-ron* ignited debates known as “Guzen bungaku ronsou” (the debate on literature of contingency) and “Junsui shosetsu ronsou” (the debate on pure novel).

Interestingly, few critics discussed the essential differences between Nakagawa and Yokomitsu’s claims. Nakagawa’s essay appeared approximately two months prior to Yokomitsu’s essay, and they knew each other well. Indeed, critics observed similar themes in their exploration of contingency within literary realism. For instance, Moriyama, in his critical review of Yokomitsu’s *Junsui shōsetsu-ron*, mentioned that Nakagawa discussed the same issues as Yokomitsu. Ishihara also wrote, “The theory of coincidences in a novel was mainly advocated by both Yoichi Nakagawa and Riichi Yokomitsu, and I was interested in the fact that Nakagawa even referred to the latest theories of natural science.” (Ishihara, 1935, p. 8) Yokomitsu was also likely conscious of the new understanding of the world from the viewpoint of quantum mechanics. He argued that coming literature needed contingency and believed that employing coincidences in fiction is more realistic than the “I-novel” because the actual world turned out not to be as mechanistic as previously thought. The two authors undoubtedly influenced each other’s theories and constituted the center of the debate on pure literature.

In summary, Yokomitsu's and Nakagawa's discussions on contingency and literature may have appeared similar to contemporary readers. They critiqued existing literary forms and called for a new realism that embraced the coincidental nature of life,
reflecting changes in scientific understanding. Their works sparked debate and criticism but also highlighted a significant shift in literary thought during their time.

Is it an epistemic vice or an aesthetic vice?

While many critics grouped the views of Nakagawa and Yokomitsu together, at least one critic differentiated between them, penning an essay on their essential differences. This chapter will elucidate Yokomitsu’s and Nakagawa’s claims using contemporary theories of fiction, beginning with this pivotal essay. Kenzō Honda wrote:

The theory of literary contingency seems to have been created by Yoichi Nakagawa. Although Riichi Yokomitsu also mentions this, and both use the same term, their attitudes toward the issue are fundamentally different. While Nakagawa is trying to present a theory of chance that could be called literary metaphysics, Yokomitsu seems to stay in the realm of literary methodology, that is, the way of writing novels. (Honda, 1935, p. 23)

Modern theories of fiction further illuminate Honda’s insight, connecting it to genre issues. Gregory Currie’s observations on improbability in fiction may clarify the divergence between Yokomitsu and Nakagawa:

The error is supposing that what we call improbability in fiction is an epistemic vice. I suggest instead that it is an aesthetic vice, accessible only from the external perspective. A most improbable event can take its place in a fiction without causing us unease, if the author’s act of constructing the work-improbability and all-seems elegant, principled, uncrammed; improbabilities in the epistemic sense can even be marks of a bravura performance. We call a fiction story improbable, meaning by this to express a negative judgment, when the action behind it seems to involve a clutching at narrative straws. Often, these judgments about performance are implicitly relativized to norms determined by the genre within which the author works. (Currie, 2010, p. 56)

Currie argues that improbability in fiction is not an epistemic flaw but an aesthetic vice. If handled with elegance and principle, even improbable events can enhance a story. Such judgments are often related to the norms of the genre in which the author is working. From this angle, Nakagawa might have seen the removal of coincidences in “jun bungaku” as an epistemic vice, rooted in a mechanistic view of the world, failing to appreciate its coincidental nature.

Yokomitsu shared Nakagawa’s belief that “jun bungaku” writers were epistemically misguided but also recognized the close relationship between probability in fiction and its aesthetic value. Consider this reference to Dostoevsky:
Writers who try to make “jun bungaku” exclude coincidences from their work, although they move us in daily life [...]. They believe that only describing their everyday experience is an authentic expression and genuine realism. Therefore, if they find coincidences in a literary work, they emotionally call it “tsūzoku shōsetsu” and disparage it. (Yokomitsu, p. 305)

Yokomitsu’s words reveal his consideration of contingency in literature from both an aesthetic and epistemic standpoint. He censured “jun bungaku” for its mechanistic worldview and “tsūzoku shōsetsu” for its aesthetic shortcomings, as Currie would describe, for “clutching at narrative straws.”

**Probability determined by the genres**

As outlined above, Yokomitsu examined the connection between the handling of coincidences in a fictional world and the categorization of a work into the genres of “tsūzoku shōsetsu,” “jun bungaku,” or “junsui shōsetsu.” He believed that the manner in which coincidences were utilized within a story was vital to its classification. Specifically, if coincidences were deployed merely to stimulate emotional plot twists, the work would fall into “tsūzoku shōsetsu.” Conversely, if they were integrated to enhance realism and mirror the role of chance in reality, it would qualify as “junsui shōsetsu.”

Contrastingly, contemporary narrative theory may interpret the relationship between chance in a novel and its genre in reverse. The perceived probability of coincidence is pragmatically rather than semantically defined, varying with genre or period. David Lodge observes:

Coincidence, which surprises us in real life with symmetries we don't expect to find there, is all too obviously a structural device in fiction, and an excessive reliance on it can jeopardize the verisimilitude of a narrative. [...] Its acceptability varies, of course, from one period to another. [...] The frequency of coincidence in fictional plots varies with genre as well as period, and is related to how much the writer feels he can “get away with” in this respect. (Lodge, 1992, p. 150-151)

Coincidence, while unexpected in real life, can be a structural device in fiction. The acceptability and frequency of coincidence in fiction differ by period and genre.

Currie further elaborates on standard and contra-standard properties in novels:

Ghosts and the like are standard for tales of the supernatural, and we do not fault the author merely for introducing them, just as we do not fault bust-maker whose work is uni-coloured and provides for nothing below the shoulders. Nor are improbabilities a mark of failure in works like Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, where coincidence is drawn on repeatedly. But, improbability can be
grounds for complaint where it shows a failure to keep to a naturalistic framework to which the author seems otherwise committed and within which massive coincidence is contra-standard. (p. 56-57)

*Junsui shōsetsu-ron* faced criticism for its perceived illogicality, possibly stemming from its attempt to define genre internally by examining the author's use of coincidence. As Currie highlights, an external perspective may be necessary to determine the acceptable use of coincidence in a novel.

While Yokomitsu's nuanced understanding of coincidence and genre in *Junsui shōsetsu-ron* might not be as comprehensive as modern Western narrative theory, it is significant to recognize that there was a Japanese novelist in the 1930s who considered contingency in fiction epistemically and aesthetically. In an era when commercial publishing was growing in Japan and “tsūzoku shōsetsu” was favored over “jun bungaku,” artistic novelists like Yokomitsu were prompted to ponder the future of serious literature. Yokomitsu's attempt to rejuvenate it by infusing features of “tsūzoku shōsetsu” into his concept of pure, sophisticated literature provides an interesting lens into literary evolution.
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**PLAN**

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