

1. Modernist Beginnings

*Akutagawa Ryūnosuke
and Kobayashi Hideo*

There was no past, no future; merely the moment in its ring of light,
and our bodies; and the inevitable climax, the ecstasy.

—VIRGINIA WOOLE, *The Waves*

In *The Sense of an Ending* the British literary critic Frank Kermode notes a “pattern of anxiety” in the modernist belief that the present is fast approaching an apocalypse. The approach is infinite, however, and turns the present into a time of perpetual crisis. Kermode suggests that this modernist belief lends itself to dramatic, dangerous solutions. “Modernist radicalism in art,” he argues, involves the creation of traditions that “may be dangerous in the dispositions they breed towards the world.” When William Butler Yeats tests his fictions against the real world in his praise of Italian or Irish fascism, when Wyndham Lewis finds an appealing “aristocracy of the intellect” in Nazism, or when Ezra Pound’s aesthetics of concrete, embodied language come to fuel his public sloganeering for a politics of blood and soil, poetic fictions become myths inspiring action in the world. In so doing, these fictions clear the ground for a dangerous politics whose “ideological expression,” says Kermode, “is fascism,” and whose practical consequence “is the Final Solution.”¹

Kermode’s conclusion is dramatic. After all, poets may have egregious politics without being responsible for genocidal programs. More to the point, literature (poetry in particular) retains an interpretive opacity that renders it resistant to easy political use. Kermode’s larger point is a useful one—namely, he reminds us that poetic ideas can shift into political ideals. George Orwell, too, made a point of fascism’s appeal to modernist writers: “By and large, the best writers of our time have been reactionary in tendency, and though Fascism does not offer any real return to the past, those who yearn for the past will accept Fascism sooner than its probable alternatives.”²

In making these pronouncements, both Kermode and Orwell had the beautiful poetry of Yeats in mind. In 1943 Orwell, to whom style was the crux of a politics of language, wrote that “there must be some kind of

connection" between the poetry of Yeats, with "its wayward, even tortured style of writing," and what he calls "his rather sinister vision of life" (ibid., 271). Orwell's bold conclusion was that "Yeats's tendency is Fascist. Throughout most of his life, and long before Fascism was ever heard of, he had had the outlook of those who reach Fascism by the aristocratic route" (273). The overheated quality of Yeats's language was inseparable from its political content.

Like Kermode, Orwell perhaps makes too strong a claim. Yeats wore many political and poetic hats and was too self-conscious about the complexity of poetic form, its resistance to being instrumentalized, to comfortably believe (or hope that) poetry could be mobilized for political ends. Orwell's example of Yeats reminds us, however, that within its cultural moment, even a "wayward" or "tortured" aesthetics could proffer solace to those suffering from cultural despair, regardless of how sinister in retrospect that solace might have been. Moreover, Orwell's interpretive determination of Yeats's fascist tendency *avant la lettre* begins to suggest that an aesthetics of fascism neither begins nor ends with the intentions of the writer but rather derives, in part, from the historically situated reader's engagement with the writer in question.

The example of Yeats reminds us also that modernist language can lead to fascist aesthetics in surprising places. As a literature and a philosophy, modernism and fascism (with their roots in Romanticism) were the intellectual and artistic lingua franca of Japanese and European intellectuals and writers in the 1930s. The close connection between modernism and fascism in the Japanese case should come as no surprise: intellectuals and writers maturing in Japan in the 1920s were as likely to know European texts as Japanese ones. By the 1920s their learning included modern European literature and philosophy as much as, and often more than, Japanese intellectual traditions.³

TOWARD A NEW POETIC LANGUAGE

"We must continuously create new forms," wrote the cultural critic Kobayashi Hideo in 1929. In the 1930s writers across the political and literary spectrum struggled to create those new forms—to forge a musical prose that could provide solutions to the anxiety of the age and that might loosen the straitjacket of the direct, positivistic prose dominating Japanese writing at the time. Writers like Kobayashi and Yasuda Yojūrō attempted to create a new genre that melded criticism and literature into a style

replete with paradox and irony, meant to dislodge objectivity and logic, two principles fundamental to modernity. They played with language to disorient their readers, leading them to a state of what Tosaka Jun called “vertigo” (*memai*).⁴

This new style, which contributed to an aesthetics of fascism, was, ironically, a response to the increasingly suffocating atmosphere filled with state slogans and media images proclaiming the purity of the Japanese race and its link to an idealized past, an incessant litany that finally elevated war and suffering to the level of being the purifiers of “one hundred million people of one spirit” (*ichioku isshin*), who would need to be prepared to die beautifully like “crushed jewels” (*gyokusai*).⁵ It is an even greater irony that writers who worked against such clichés (writers such as Kobayashi and Yasuda) would come to employ.

But the writing of loss and longing during the 1920s and 1930s was neither new nor unique to the time. A similar resistance to clichéd or calcified language had marked the first period of grand literary reinvention in modern Japan, at the very birth of the writing of modern Japanese literature in the 1880s. As in the 1930s, the crisis in literary form during this earlier time reflected a crisis in modes of feeling and being and living. Modern Japan arose in the last quarter of the nineteenth century with the bright promise of industrial nation-building and cultural renovation. It, too, was born in a moment of loss—the loss of modes of living and thinking and of artistic and literary forms polished over many years. This first period of modernization, the Meiji era, meant the loss of a Japan as yet largely untouched by the outside world. As that period drew to a close, this loss was evoked by the iconic novelist of modernity Natsume Sōseki (1862–1922). In his 1912 novel *Kokoro*, the protagonist hears of the end of his era in the news of the ritual suicide of a general, loyally following the Emperor Meiji in death: “On the night of the Imperial funeral I sat in my study and listened to the booming of the cannon. To me, it sounded like the last lament for the passing of an age.”⁶

The spiritual crisis captured here by Sōseki had by his time already been reflected in a crisis of aesthetic form for many years. In the 1880s a modern literary language—a language of realism—was being formed with the goal of becoming a transparent medium through which to reveal the alienated modern self. But the prosaic quality of realism elicited dismay. The Romantic writer Kitamura Tōkoku (1868–94), for example, noted that words had been calcified by the language of politics and argued for a language that went beyond what the eye could see, beyond the reach of modern thought.⁷ In seeking to resist the alienation of instrumentalist thought that reduced the self to an abstracting, thinking mind, Tōkoku wrote of a love that

bypassed the intellect in its capacity to apprehend the world. Literature, he argued, is not a “practical enterprise” (*jigyō*). Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and the nineteenth-century Japanese novelist Takizawa Bakin were to him “great warriors” who were not fighting directly in a “battlefield with limits” but had their sights on “the limitless mysteries of heaven.” Their work was “a striking at the clouds and a reaching to the stars.”⁸ We will see that such an aesthetic position—soothing the thinking mind with the feeling heart—could also fuel a dangerous politics of beauty.⁹

One critical means through which antirealist novelists such as Kōda Rohan (1867–1947) and Mori Ōgai (1862–1922) attempted to counter what they saw as the grayness of prosaic, utilitarian language shorn of aesthetic flair was rhythm. That is, Rohan and Ōgai strove to approximate the styles and rhythms of premodern literary modes that they saw as threatened with extinction by the advent of standardized Japanese beginning in the Meiji era. They had also lived with the prose rhythms of the Chinese-inflected style (*kanbuntai*) and earlier performative oral narratives. Inheritors of an aesthetically rich tradition, yet dedicated to forging a modern literature, they devoted themselves to the project of instilling rhythm into prose that was threatened with the bland language of realism. They debated the question of how to instill modern language with aesthetic richness and experimented with various kinds of rhythm in their work.¹⁰ Rohan argued against the very premise of modern linguistics, which promised that eliminating style could turn language into a transparent medium. If language, for Ferdinand de Saussure and his Japanese protégé Hashimoto Shinkichi, was only a vehicle for meaning, its sounds arbitrarily connected to its content, then for Rohan the sound of a word was inseparable from its meaning, which grew from its sound.¹¹

Such a language of sounds—a musical language—would indeed come to play a central role in the development of a new performative language in the 1920s and 1930s. The prose of Yasuda Yojūrō and Kobayashi Hideo, for example, remarkable for their eschewing of the communicative function of language in favor of the musicality of prose, sacrificed clarity in favor of an abundance of style. In the 1920s and 1930s writers followed in the footsteps of predecessors such as Rohan in their desire to resist the demeaning implementation of literary language as a blunt instrument of explication; they attempted to work against the commonly held belief that language was a transparent medium by countering it with the aesthetic force of rhythm. Their work developed into a “lineage of anti-modernism,” in Miyoshi Yukio’s phrase, appearing precisely with the start of the lineage of modern writing, in the 1880s.¹²

Writers in the first decades of literary modernization, around the beginning of the twentieth century, had an ambiguous relationship to their mother tongue. Because their language was in flux, they seem to have felt freer to experiment with it. Many writers in the 1920s and 1930s, further removed from premodern styles uninflected by the massive influx of thought and translation, felt this distance from their language even more acutely. But recovery is always preceded by loss. Their recovery was to be perhaps more daring than that of their predecessors: they would not merely recover the beauty of language through its rhythms; they would also allow rhythm to overwhelm meaning, dispensing with the communicative function of language and replacing it with the musicality (in addition to the visuality and plasticity) of prose. They struggled simultaneously against the enshrined would-be “transparency” of modern literature and the clichéd forms of journalistic language and state propaganda. They undertook this literary struggle against the dominant idiom in reaction to a perceived political and cultural crisis; indeed, theirs was an imaginative rendering of that crisis, executed in language that strove to tap the surface resources of language by making words approach the flatness of the plastic arts and the rhythm of music.¹³ The aesthetic of flat surfaces and musical rhythms had a political dimension, as I will suggest throughout this study, helping to create a shared political sentiment among its participants.¹⁴

An aesthetic of flatness led to the eschewal of semantic value and could, when attached to the rhythms of music, result in a language of provocative paradox. Making sound out of words means suspending their semantic function and rendering it into rhythm. Rhythm transfigures and transforms, arousing the body and heightening the emotions, creating a shared sentiment among its participants and listeners so that they can be communally aroused and brought simultaneously to the same height of emotion.¹⁵ Paul Valéry, in this regard very much Kobayashi Hideo’s model, wrote that suspending the semantics of language by emphasizing its sounds reduces the intellectual activity of induction and turns poetry into incantation.¹⁶ Poetry, or fragments of lyric prose, among the literary arts, may be best suited for this transformation, as the sound of a word or the rhythm of a phrase may have a meaning apart from mere signification (though even poetry is inevitably tied to reference and never free to function as pure musical sound).¹⁷ For many writers of the fascist aesthetic, transforming language into incantation was a way of tapping its materiality, and this was a way to evoke a realm untouched by will and undisturbed by time. Theirs was a language with no practical ends, free from mediation, grounded in the material in order to connect directly with the transcendent. Its feeling of material per-

manence—concrete yet transcendent—was an imaginative shield against the tyrannical fracturing of the senses and of the movement of time.

The desire to make language concrete, to name its objects directly, was part and parcel of the modernist (and fascist) literary project outside Japan as well. In his 1913 “Imagist Manifesto” Ezra Pound called for the “direct treatment of the thing,” and around the same time Gertrude Stein called for a “radical form of attention” to name things whose meanings had been lost in old, calcified language.¹⁸ For these writers, and for many in this study, language could rediscover its originary power by dissolving conventional structures standing between the perceiver and the world. The linear movement of language would be broken down into spatial moments that allowed for contradictions because they did not require progress in thought or narrative. If language moves through time, Stein would have it stop in space. Her written “portraits in mass” in *Three Lives* were created under the direct influence of Cézanne, whose flat surfaces made all things appear to exist on an equal plane. In the “landscaping of time,” movement is bound to a specific unit of time-space compression; it does not move forward but vibrates with those objects within it. In proposing this new way of writing, Stein could have been describing a formal attribute visible in the work of a number of writers in this book—including Yasuda, Kobayashi, Kawabata, Shiga, and Yanagi—not because they read Stein (they probably didn’t) but because they shared her modernist sensibilities.¹⁹

AKUTAGAWA AS PROGENITOR OF FASCIST MODERNISM

In the creation of the new spatial, concrete, and musical language of what George Steiner has called “marvelous spontaneities,” no writer was more influential in Japanese letters than the modernist Akutagawa Ryūnosuke. Akutagawa’s work embodied forms of redemption for what he and many of his contemporaries considered a moribund Japanese literature. One of these forms was the fascist aesthetic. I do not mean to say that Akutagawa’s writings in the 1920s were responsible for the development of fascist aesthetics, only that his melancholy modernism of fragmented, musical moments provided glimpses of things to come and set into motion the beginnings of the fascist aesthetic in its literary form. Indeed it was, ironically, his apolitical, poetic work that held the promise of revitalizing Japanese society from its spiritually exhausted state.

It was not only Akutagawa’s writing that seemed capable of reviving the broken spirit of Japanese prose. His life, too—or the way it was scripted

by his contemporaries—marked the end of one era's set of possibilities while offering those of another. Akutagawa's suicide in 1927 marked, for many Japanese writers, artists, and intellectuals, the end of their hopes for modernity and the beginning of an age in which they could only search in vain for solutions to the social and cultural crises they faced. In 1929 the Marxist critic Miyamoto Kenji noted that Akutagawa's suicide signaled the demise of the stubbornly bourgeois lifestyle of those who had failed to learn Marx's politically transformative lessons. Akutagawa's was a "literature of defeat"; his suicide, which Akutagawa himself attributed to a "vague anxiety," was the "desperate flapping of wings." Yet, even in the eyes of this Marxist critic, impatient with the pettiness of bourgeois ideology, Akutagawa displayed the "frantic battle of one bound by grief," the "shadow of a completely exhausted self" in an "age of excess" (*kado jidai*).²⁰ For Miyamoto "grief" signaled the objective existence of insuperable loss, and Akutagawa sang the swan song at what appeared to be the collapse of modernity.

Six years after Akutagawa's suicide, Kobayashi Hideo bore witness to this same despair and loss, if less polemically. Kobayashi drew from Akutagawa the notion that the Japanese language no longer provided an adequate home in which to harbor its cultural memory. Miyamoto's language of prosaic, political response is precisely what Akutagawa, and the writers of the fascist aesthetic such as Kobayashi, were working against. Given that Akutagawa is widely regarded as the suffering modernist of Japanese letters par excellence, my claim may come as a surprise to the casual reader: Akutagawa's modernism displays the origins of a distinctly Japanese fascist aesthetic. Though Akutagawa died before Japan's entry into war and totalitarianism and never married those aesthetics to a politics of violence or death, we might wonder still whether his aesthetics would have led to such a politics. I will argue later that Kobayashi Hideo's modernism, so richly informed by Akutagawa's, made that very turn.

Akutagawa's nascent modernism-turned-fascism begins in his aesthetics of loss. His late fictional works reflect a breakdown of narrators in broken-down prose, which would later be cited as evidence of his well-known psychic demise. His poetic 1927 essay "Literary, All Too Literary" was written in the same fragmented style, suggesting by its form the poetic principle it espoused and reminding us that Akutagawa's "illness," the illness of literature, is the necessary means of recovery. As the Nietzschean echo of his title suggests, the essay is less an act of construction than of resistance to prevailing forms. Its poetic resistance to the positivistic language of logical polemic is performed in the essay's meanderings away from any focus, its

lack of tendentiousness, and its creation of a “novel” without a narrative arc. It was this style of ironic resistance, building language from a space of loss that must have appealed to Kobayashi.²¹

Written the same year as his suicide, “Literary, All Too Literary” pieces together a fragmented but definitive lineage of prose writers (and painters and philosophers) to form the foundation of a new body of literature. Not only is the essay an act of performative resistance to prevailing forms, but it also posits a canon of literature in which the very category of the “literary” effectively supersedes that of the “human.”

In this seminal essay Akutagawa complains that language has lost its poetry. With the commodification of the literary arts, language has become “confused,” and words are being “misused” (85). The poetry of literature has given way to mere journalism or superficial stabs at originality; artists now “produced” (*seisan*) rather than created. Language has become corrupted by the forces of production in the present—forces that affected a break in the transmission of poetic resources from the past. The desire to dispense with the communicative function of language, a desire that would become so central to the writers in this study, was understood by Akutagawa as a stand against formulaic writing that had become indistinguishable from journalism.²²

From where Akutagawa stood, it seemed as though the development of modern Japanese letters had exhausted its potential. Now facing exhaustion, it could only be revived by fanning the slight flicker that remained. Akutagawa could see that Japanese prose was constructed, not given: “Our prose, like Rome, was not built in one day.” Akutagawa is like other writers in this study whose movement back to the native tradition is, in fact, an act of modernist creativity built on a cosmopolitan literary sensibility. He was rekindling a universal poetic spirit for the sake of the native voice: “This is a spirit belonging to our ancestors—not only to Japan’s, but to all ancestors—it is the burning of a flame invented by geniuses and passed on to geniuses, a flame not yet extinguished, neither in prose nor in criticism” (26–27).²³

In “Literary, All Too Literary” Akutagawa called on the genius of the ancestors to revive the transmission of a tradition he believed to be at its end. His answer to the disruption of traditional poetics was to suggest a new literature in which poetry inhabits prose. The new literature was to give rise to a canon of lyric fragments too short to become mired in discursive meaning. The touchstone would be the poetic novel, which Akutagawa claimed was not necessarily the best form but only the purest and least common. That his best example of such a form was not the work of another writer but

of Cézanne (later written about by Kobayashi) signifies that, for him, literature itself had run dry. To Akutagawa, Cézanne's paintings lived more in their color than in their design.²⁴ That is, color was understood as approximating a lyric moment of beauty devoid of the slightest trace of narrative construction—not even by the outlines that design provides. In painting Akutagawa found a retreat from commodified, mass-cultural novels of plot in the timeless space of the visual image—in something like the lyric moment. Aesthetic models for such novels were rare, but Akutagawa found hope in the example of Shiga Naoya, a writer who evoked a “carnal beauty” (*nikutaiteki kiryō*) (8).²⁵

Akutagawa (like Kobayashi) imagined such a Shiga-esque stylistic transformation, in which a language of surfaces and “carnal beauty” triumphed over the revelation of meanings and depths. This was to be a musical language, whose “inherent melody” (*hitsuzen no inritsu*) already lay dormant in Japanese classical forms, just waiting to be awakened, and whose rhythm lived still in older writers like Mori Ōgai (1862–1922), who, decades before, knew the “echoes of the Japanese language.” Akutagawa called for a revival of the rhythmic, musical spirit of words and hoped for the arrival of a great poet to bring to life “that thing echoing—that green something moving in the poems of Japan's past” (44). And that musical spirit of words, inhabiting lyric poetry, calls out its desire and asks that the desire be met: it is the “voice of the male calling the female” (44). At the very heart of the fascist aesthetic, we will see, lies a lyrical incantation that, like a hailing, summons the return of its feminine love object.

KOBAYASHI READS AKUTAGAWA

In his 1927 “The Muse and Fate of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke,” Kobayashi did not merely write about that author but also drew his formal lessons from him. Kobayashi's response to Akutagawa's death was performative and ironic, indicating that Akutagawa's legacy concerned less the content of his message than the nature of his literary form. Akutagawa's fractured prose was a model of experimentation built on an ill, indeed doomed, body.

Kobayashi viewed Akutagawa's prose as well matched to the intoxications of modern thought and taste, particularly modernity's “tasteless and simple” language, which permeated Japanese literature and “tyrannized all.” Kobayashi saw Akutagawa as the sacrificial victim of this ideology of writing, which began in the 1880s and culminated in the 1920s. To Kobayashi, concerned with aesthetic matters above all else, Akutagawa's

demise was not an existential but an artistic process, leading not to the death of Akutagawa the man but of Akutagawa the performer—not to suicide but to a “theory of suicide.”²⁶

Kobayashi saw himself in Akutagawa; or perhaps one should say that Kobayashi found his own aesthetic in Akutagawa’s art, an aesthetic in which there exists no “self” at all but only the “nerves” of the author, a kind of creative switching station, not depths but only surfaces, not abstractions but only concrete embodiments. Performing a “perpetual subtraction from life,” Akutagawa’s method of “reduction” always “leaves a surplus remaining.” Though it was not his purpose, Kobayashi’s isolation of literary form from biographical “surplus” shares an affinity with the fascist aesthetic of valuing pure surface over content. For Kobayashi artistic vision is reducible neither to life nor to human psychology. Rather, art is nothing more than ideology (*kannengaku*), insofar as what the artist struggles to grasp from life is the strength of abstract thought (*shisō*). That is, art is an abstraction made concrete by the paint applied to its surface—just as Akutagawa’s art is scenery painting-as-literature. To Kobayashi, even Akutagawa the “man” is a surface: he is a person with an inside who became a person who is all outside; he “ceased acquiring character (*jinkaku*) and became a phenomenon.”²⁷

Through his analysis of Akutagawa, then, Kobayashi critiqued modern Japanese literature but, at the same time, also inadvertently manifested his own affinity with the contours of the Japanese fascist aesthetic. Once again, I make this claim cautiously because Kobayashi is not regularly considered in a fascist context, and to call him a fascist writer would be to oversimplify a body of complex and nuanced work. But his—or any writer’s—conscious participation in fascism or the fascist aesthetic is beside the point.

Kobayashi could not have found a more complicated case with which to make his argument against reading the man in the work, for after his death Akutagawa was quickly transformed by his readers into a cultural icon for the collapse of the individual in a dying age. Kobayashi rejected the posthumous catapulting of Akutagawa to this iconic status, even as his own work suggests that Akutagawa’s literature was seminal in the development of a new literary style that would feed into a fascist aesthetic. Kobayashi argued that Akutagawa’s writing killed off the semantic content of literary language and left his readers (those who could read him well, that is) the flat space of a painterly surface. In saying this, Kobayashi transformed the central figure—one said to have lived the crisis of modernity in his mental and physical breakdown—from a historical icon into a literary phenomenon.

To Kobayashi, Akutagawa's fragmented prose was a "paradoxical measuring rod" by which to measure and build a literature of impenetrable surfaces and paradoxes. Poised at the cusp of the emergence of a fascist aesthetic, Kobayashi naturally chose Akutagawa's despair over other modernists' love for the changing times. Arguing vehemently against literature's persistent worship of "meaning," for example, in 1927 the novelist Yokomitsu Riichi (1898–1947) similarly called for a "new sensibility" of surfaces: "I love the light on the surface. . . . Form is nothing more than the arrangement of words whose meaning comes through rhythm. Without the form of this arrangement of words, can there possibly be content? That one might discern the content of what has been written through looking at the form is the illusion of readers; the form itself is the content."²⁸ Yet for all his attraction to an aesthetics of despair, Kobayashi discerned in Akutagawa's late works the possibility of a cultural, or at least a literary, renewal. It was to be a renewal of the lyricism of literary language.

Kobayashi famously declared: "Where there is no memory, there is no home. Without powerful memories, culled from the layers of firm impressions that a firm environment induces, one will not know the invigorating emotion with which the word *home* overflows. Wherever I look within or about myself, I can find no such place."²⁹ The loss of a home certainly meant the loss of a home for literature, which Akutagawa was helping to construct.

TOWARD A LANGUAGE OF IMPROVISATORY IMITATION

Transforming language into incantation was a means of tapping into the sensuality of language, healing the fracture that separates language from things. Fragments of prose unencumbered by rational discourse came to occupy a central place in this period because such moments refused temporal contextualization and were thus powerfully far-ranging. Such deracinated fragments were portable—they could be used to remember or reconstruct a pastiche-like cultural memory through a collage-like performance of the past within the present. The irony here is that the meaningfulness of these fragments derived from their having been torn from their historical places and deposited in a kind of echo chamber, whose effect was one of critical distance from fascism's aesthetic allure.

Such fragments, torn from history, fit into a cultural pattern of rhythmic repetition drawn from the poetic tradition. The fragment, in other words, is never permitted to be recognized as such but is "bound" within a

cultural rhythm that has the trancelike force of incantation. The binding power of such lyrical, musical prose was both aesthetic and political. To the Japanese futurist Hirato Renkichi (1893–1922), translator of Italian fascist F. T. Marinetti's 1909 "Futurist Manifesto" (translated the same year into Japanese by Mori Ōgai), nothing else could heal the "confusion of everyday life, the futility and blindness of cultural life": "The musical condition of Futurism develops into an absolute symphony of the spirit and the skies, a freedom that allows all things to flow into one another, a magnificent orchestra that binds all things together in an organic relationship. By perfecting this movement of supreme musicalization we live within ourselves, we build our own environment; we can become immersed in the flow of constant life."³⁰

Hirato writes metaphorically, but his suggestion, and mine throughout this book, is that the sheer musicality of Japanese fascist aesthetics in the 1930s possessed a sensual power to bind "all things in an organic relationship." Like the aesthetics of beauty or the kitsch cliché, musical language offered the possibility of an instantaneous connection between subject and object, or reader and text, through unreflective acquiescence. Like a joke, a metaphor, or a declaration of taste, the lyrical moment performed the work not only of binding or bridging but also of creating intimacy in an era when the possibilities of intimacy were ending.

We will see in the course of this study that Yanagi Sōetsu, in his writings about folk-craft objects, called for such unconscious acquiescence to language when he spoke of the intuition of immediate beauty embodied in crafts; Shiga Naoya demanded it when he led his readers through a limited and hermetic vocabulary to epiphanic moments; and Yasuda Yojūrō and Kobayashi Hideo both eschewed causal connections and required that readers either accept or simply reject moments of beauty, based solely on their own intuitive conviction. It was this same intuitive conviction that the state demanded from its readers through propaganda tracts like *The Essence of the National Polity* (*Kokutai no hongī*) and that the creators of popular movies like *Mother under the Eyelids* (*Mabuta no haha*) required from their viewers.

Incantation was the form that musical lyricism took as it mesmerized its readers to take them to a place beyond time. But the aesthetics of fascism went further and entailed performative disavowal of its own politics as a way of securing its ideological sway. Even as readers were called on to transcend their material circumstances, Japanese fascist aesthetics required them to remain anchored in a concrete tradition, bound to a specific time and place and to concrete things.

The artistic form that anchored them was improvisation, a riffing on past forms. What grounded this musical language was the reintroduction of the historical past and its cultural remnants, gesturing toward imagined traditions that would then form the foundation of a collective imagination. By the 1930s, it had for some time been keenly felt across the intellectual spectrum that excessive imitation of foreign, specifically European, cultural forms had diminished the authenticity of Japanese cultural expression. Akutagawa is as intimate with Rodin, Gauguin, Dante, and Ambrose Bierce as he is with the prose (*The Tale of Genji*) or poetry (*Man'yōshū*) of his own tradition; indeed, he seems even more intimate with his fellow European modernists than with his reclaimed literary forebears, whom he discovered through modern eyes.

The burden of this influence was great—perhaps too great. Akutagawa was aware that Japanese writers and artists could, with some justification, be dismissed as mere imitators and as “underdeveloped” (*mikaijin*). But his belief that this cultural crisis was irreversible catalyzed his attempt to recover—or construct anew—an increasingly idealized past. Kobayashi Hideo’s own vehement disavowal of this perceived crisis registers a mood of defiance, even as it strikes a note of futility, against the unshakeable truth: “Japanese history [and here Kobayashi means modern history] does not begin as an imitation of foreign civilization; it begins from the point of questioning imitation [*mohō*], and providing an answer to that question.”³¹

Kobayashi’s comment expresses the resentment of artists who perceived their imaginative worlds as having been colonized and who could therefore only reclaim their territory through the imagination. Indeed, they were so fully immersed in the themes and forms of various traditions that distinguishing among European, Chinese, and Japanese influences was moot.³² By the 1920s, Japanese writers and intellectuals viewed their heterogeneous intellectual baggage as their own heritage. Added to this was the inescapable irony that the very idea of originality itself, of creating anew, came to be felt as the burden of an imported European notion of creativity at odds with the time-honored tradition of allusive variation of past forms.

By the 1920s it was widely acknowledged that imitation—or, at best, improvisation—provided the only means of authentic creation. It was as if the anxiety sparked by imitating forms from without had led to the unreflective embracing of the process of imitation itself, setting in motion an “authentic” return to the imitation of something from within: the traditional Japanese process of imitation. To Akutagawa this was to be a new kind of imitation (*mohō*), understood as a process of “assimilation” (*shōka*). More physiological absorption than intellectual practice, this style of imita-

tion would move slowly forward by tracing the past, its practitioners understanding that even though there is no such thing as progress in the arts, one must nevertheless proceed in the illusion of progress. The imitation of Japanese classics would channel the “rage for priority”—that is, for creation without reference to a predecessor—into an art of imitation grounded in a modern imagining of native tradition.³³ This style of imitation, thought to be in keeping with native tradition, was a methodological alternative to the imitation of European forms that had left so many writers feeling culturally depleted. What Akutagawa and others proposed was a contestation of the distinctively European terms of modernity by revitalizing the time-honored tradition of imitating the classics of the Japanese past.

Imitation, in life as in art, never perfectly reproduces the source it emulates. Each poetic act builds on a precedent made up of all the notes that have been played before.³⁴ Imitation-as-improvisation allowed for the possibility of swerving from the fascist moment, of resisting complete imitative immersion in that moment by tropically sidestepping it. (Of course this was a possibility arguably more recoverable in retrospect than in the moment of its initial emergence.) Imitation in this sense is a creative act that also bespeaks the new.

Imitation, although self-consciously articulated as an aesthetic principle, would also become a model of sociality and politics. It facilitated not only the exchange of foreign forms for Japanese traditional ones but also of modern forms of democratic government for the native authority of the fascist moment. In Kobayashi Hideo’s case the new aesthetics of imitation led to a valorizing of imitation in action, culminating, shockingly to us now, in his paean to the person of Adolf Hitler, who embodied for him the artist capable of performing and inspiring the art of imitation. By evoking the sublime, fascist moment, writers like Kobayashi were trading the mimesis of foreign forms for the mimesis of a great power that gave them the authority of a much-sought-after clean slate.³⁵

Japanese fascism, even as it decried the imitation of the West, crucially depended on it. By repeating the forms and thoughts emanating from their government and their culture, the Japanese public of the 1930s partook of ideological imitation—an imitation with very little improvisatory freedom—and, in so doing, divested themselves of oppositional political potency. The figures examined in this book, artists who could and did improvise, oiled the gears of fascism by extolling imitation as the golden road back to a restored body politic. They did so by engaging in acts of poetic mimesis and by enacting ideology through the very process of imitation. They saw the mimetic faculty as the lost art of the ancients—what Akutagawa called

the “ultimate arts” written by masters bearing a “silent smile,” quiet and calm. Thus the mimetic faculty was reborn in modernity, enacted using new technologies and a language that reclaimed its lost sensuousness. The imperative among writers to perform rather than to represent, to narrow the gap between writing and acting, grew out of their attraction to such tactility.³⁶

Insofar as the art of imitation collapsed the abstract distance between modernity and the past, language and object, and self and other, it held forth the hope of fusion with a formerly alienated object of desire. The art of merging with the object of imitation, of blending into the other, was the art that fascism introduced as an ecstatic possibility into the realm of daily life—an art that, in the 1930s in France, Roger Caillois understood as lying at the heart of Nazism.³⁷ Striving yet failing to recapture through the imagination what was felt to be real—the actual past, the thing itself, the authentic emotion—also represented a modernist pathos, a yearning for the past, even while recognizing its irretrievable pastness. This modernist pathos awaited the salve soon to be offered by aesthetic fascism.