

POETIC SPIRIT AND INTERNAL NECESSITY:
AN INTERPRETATION OF THE LITERATURE AND ARTISTIC PHILOSOPHY
OF AKUTAGAWA RYŪNOSUKE, AS UNDERSTOOD THROUGH
THE WRITINGS OF WASSILY KANDINSKY

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the first section of “Bungeiteki na, amari ni bungeiteki na” (“Literary, all too Literary,” 1927), Akutagawa Ryūnosuke briefly discusses two of the most influential painters of the early twentieth century, Paul Cézanne and Wassily Kandinsky. He uses these two artists as examples to help describe the concept of the *‘hanashi’ rashii hanashi no nai shōsetsu* (“novel with no story-like story”), which he argues is the purest type of novel.¹ Cézanne’s paintings, he writes, rely more heavily on color than on *dessin*, or structure, and yet are full of life. Kandinsky goes a step further, as the only artist who manages to do away completely with the need for *dessin*, as seen in his *Improvisations*.

Though the passage concerning Cézanne and Kandinsky is often cited in critical works that address “Bungeiteki” and the famous *ronsō* (“literary debate”) with Tanizaki Jun’ichirō, of which it forms one side, the significance of this short section concerning *dessin*, and specifically the mention of Kandinsky, remains largely overlooked. By citing the works of the Post-Impressionist Cézanne and the Expressionist Kandinsky, Akutagawa indicates an extremely important path of influence that has yet to be fully explored in the critical literature surrounding his writing. Consideration of Akutagawa’s lifelong engagement with the visual arts is essential to a complete understanding of his career.

Accounting only for the literary influences on Akutagawa’s writing has resulted in misperceptions about his work that have persisted from when he was still alive up to the present day. Attempts to conceptualize Akutagawa’s works in terms of preset categories like historical fiction or autobiographical fiction, or to split them into “early” and “late” periods, have spawned a number of unnecessary and ultimately false divisions that, when applied to his *oeuvre*, obscure rather than illuminate his development as an artist and

¹ It must be mentioned that the Japanese *shōsetsu* is not identical to the English “novel.” See Sharalyn Orbaugh, “Extending the Limits of Possibility: Style and Structure in Modern Japanese Fiction,” in *The Distant Isle: Studies and Translations of Japanese Literature in Honor of Robert H. Brower*, ed. Thomas Hare, et. al. (Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Japanese Studies, The University of Michigan, 1996), 337-338.

individual. These divisions are not borne out by his texts, and can be largely discounted upon consideration of his non-fiction essays.

Examining Akutagawa's involvement with the visual arts reveals continuity across his career. From the earliest, his essays and letters show that he maintained a strong interest in both consuming and producing visual art.² Painting and other visual arts form such a powerful, persistent thread in Akutagawa's writing that "if you tried to pull out all of the painters' names from the Akutagawa *zenshū*, you would not have time to count them all. In truth we do not know how many [art] exhibitions he attended, but he wrote many works and critical pieces that deal with painting and the arts."³ It is in those critical pieces, some of which date back to his student days, that the connection with Kandinsky first appears.

Kandinsky's impact became more evident as Akutagawa matured, fully developing his personal theory of art, so that, even though Kandinsky's name appears in only one section of "Bungeiteki," his influence can be seen throughout the work. In a section entitled "Shiteki seishin" ("Poetic Spirit"), Akutagawa writes that "any kind of idea, above and beyond being served up in a literary work of art, must have the sacred fire of poetic spirit running through it. What I'm talking about is how you can get that flame to blaze up... the height of the flame of that sacred fire directly determines the height of the value of a given work."⁴ Similarly, Kandinsky insists that "I expect of the artist to bear within at least the 'sacred spark' (if not 'flame')."⁵ Both Akutagawa's "flame" and Kandinsky's "spark" denote a power that comes from within the artist, unrelated to his or her technical skill in a given medium; it is an inborn, essential quality.

Why Kandinsky? Aside from issues of access – Kandinsky was not only a prolific writer, but was extensively translated into English and Japanese during Akutagawa's lifetime – the central focus of Kandinsky's works, both visual and textual, resonated with Akutagawa's artistic concerns in a way that the contemporary literature of Japan failed to

² Though Akutagawa produced drawings and paintings his whole life, these are not usually considered part of his body of work.

³ Andō Masami, "Kaiga: Ishitsu naru mono no in'yō – Gohho no taiyō · nanban byōbu · Kandinsukii –," *Nihon bungaku kaishaku to kanshō* 72, no. 9 (2009): 86.

⁴ Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, "Bungeiteki na, amari ni bungeiteki na," in *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshū*, volume 6 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1928), 726.

⁵ Wassily Kandinsky, "Letters to Arthur Jerome Eddy," in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art, Volume One (1901-1921)*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall & Co., 1982), 404.

do. The *Prinzip der inneren Notwendigkeit* (“principle of internal necessity”), which is the driving force behind all creative acts in Kandinsky’s theory, allows the artist total freedom from schools and requirements to make works that fit a specific aesthetic. Through this central tenet of Kandinsky’s art theory, it is possible to better understand the concept of poetic spirit, which forms a pillar of Akutagawa’s argument in “Bungeiteki” and is an important part of his philosophy of art.

For Akutagawa, poetic spirit is the most important factor in determining the quality of a work of art, and can be more clearly perceived when purely external, formal attributes are given less significance. When he argues against the value of observing formal divisions between poetry and prose,⁶ for instance, or questions the need to identify oneself with a single group or school,⁷ Akutagawa supports the artist who heeds his or her own poetic spirit, whether or not the resulting works are unified in form and genre.

In contrast, the *bundan* (“literary world”) in Japan during the late Meiji, Taishō, and early Shōwa periods thrived on classifying authors and works by school, group, style, and movement. The proliferation of “-ists” and “-isms” in early twentieth-century Japan reflects similar trends in the western world at the time, but none of the names that have been given to Akutagawa – aestheticist, new classicist, new intellectual – are entirely appropriate or fully descriptive. Kandinsky’s writings on art and the artist provide a way to understand Akutagawa’s artistic philosophy without applying unnecessary labels to his works.

This thesis will examine the key points of Kandinsky’s art theory, as understood from his first book, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (*Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, 1911), in terms of how they relate to critical and fictional works by Akutagawa. Concepts such as internal necessity, poetic spirit, and the pursuit of cross-cultural, multi-media synthesis inform the entirety of Akutagawa’s *oeuvre*, uniting even the most dissimilar writings into a contiguous body of work that reveals deliberate, thoughtful artistic development influenced by western Expressionism.

⁶ Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, “Watakushi shōsetsuron shiken,” in *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshū*, volume 5 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1928), 101-107.

⁷ Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, “Izumu to iu go no imi shidai,” in *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshū*, volume 6 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1928), 407-408.

Chapter Two addresses the tendency toward placing divisions in Akutagawa's body of work, and some of the problems inherent to that critical approach. A look at Taishō-period and contemporary writing about Akutagawa shows that many of those who have read and studied Akutagawa have long separated his more clearly fictional works from those that appear to be autobiographical, ignoring or overlooking the fact that the same poetic spirit was behind them all. Akutagawa's own comments on his creative process, including his thoughts on source materials and autobiographical fiction, show that such divisions, along with the privileged status of autobiographical writing in the Taisho *bundan*, were not ideas that he embraced. Furthermore, letters to friends and classmates provide evidence that Akutagawa's strong interest in the visual arts was an important source of inspiration.

Chapter Three outlines the reception of western avant-garde art theory (and, to a smaller extent, images) in Taishō Japan. The focus is on Kandinsky's texts and the groups and individuals who imported, translated, and interpreted them for a Japanese readership. The work of key figures, such as Kinoshita Mokutarō, Ishii Hakutei, and Takamura Kōtarō, developed the discourse on modernity and modern art, and contributed to the Japanese understanding of Post-Impressionism, Expressionism, and other movements. Literary and arts magazines including *Shirakaba*, *Bijutsu shinpō*, and *Gendai no yōga*, among others, where articles by such men appeared alongside translations of important texts by European artists, also helped create the context in which Akutagawa was exposed to Kandinsky. Many of Kandinsky's major texts, including *Über das Geistige*, the most important explanation of his theories available at the time, became available in Japan as Akutagawa began his professional writing career.

Chapter Four draws connections between Kandinsky and Akutagawa through their theoretical writing and their literature. The discussion is divided into three sections, each addressing a key point of intersection between the artists, and supports the idea that Akutagawa encountered and learned from Kandinsky's critical writing. While the influence of Western literature on Japanese writers, beginning in the late Meiji period, is well-documented, the impact of the other arts has not been so closely examined. For Akutagawa, this critical oversight has resulted in a rather flat picture of a multi-faceted

figure. Consideration of his ties to Post-Impressionism and Expressionism, and to Kandinsky in particular, adds further dimension to Akutagawa's image.

CHAPTER 2

CONTINUITIES IN AKUTAGAWA'S WORK AND IDEAS

Biographers and critics writing on Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1892-1927) typically divide his fiction into a number of categories, according to either publication date or story type. Divisions of both sorts are meant to make Akutagawa's large and diverse body of work easier to understand by sorting it into smaller groups. Early works like "Rashōmon" ("Rashō gate," 1915) and "Hana" ("The Nose," 1916) may seem, at first, to be impossibly different from later pieces like "Shinkirō" ("Mirage," 1927) and "Haguruma" ("Cogwheels," 1927), but by classifying them by date and group – as early historical fiction and later autobiographical fiction, respectively – they can be understood as part of the same author's *oeuvre*. However, despite the apparent appeal of such straightforward classification, this approach results in a flawed picture of Akutagawa as an artist.

While sectioning off Akutagawa's work into a handful of categories may appear to offer simplification, it is ultimately problematic because it requires breaking up the continuum of his career in very selective and inaccurate ways. Placing artificial divisions in an artist's body of work can obscure both complexity and continuity of development.⁸ In Akutagawa's case, such division hides the fact that the concerns of his later works are present in his early writing, as evidenced by his essays, letters, and criticism. Similarly, the apparent differences in the genres of Akutagawa's fiction, when given too much emphasis, can conceal a constancy of purpose in the development of his artistic philosophy.

Typically, the early period of Akutagawa's writing is placed between 1914, when he first began publishing stories and translations in *Shinshichō* (*New Tides of Thought*),⁹

⁸ Peg Weiss, *Kandinsky and Old Russia: The Artist as Ethnographer and Shaman* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), xiv.

⁹ This was the student literary magazine for Tokyo Imperial University, revived for the fourth time in 1914 by Akutagawa, Kume Masao, Kikuchi Kan, and others.

and 1921, when he left on a four-month¹⁰ trip to China as a correspondent for the *Ōsaka mainichi shinbun*. The stories belonging to this period are usually characterized as fully fictional tales derived from previously-existing literature, which are, though exceptionally clever and entertaining, somewhat superficial. The technical skill of the early stories is always remarked upon, but often followed immediately by the qualification that such skill was only able to be showcased on the back of the works of others – in other words, that Akutagawa’s writing lacked originality from the outset.¹¹

However, stories that fit such characterization appear well past this “early period.” Even looking only at the best-known of Akutagawa’s works, pieces like “Ryū” (“The Dragon,” 1919) and “Saru-kani gassen” (“The Monkey-Crab War,” 1923), for example, are similar in both execution and effect. Both are based on older sources¹² upon which Akutagawa elaborates to create satirical social commentary. The satire in “Ryū” is directed at a gullible crowd of temple worshippers and an overconfident-turned-selfdoubting priest, while in “Saru-kani gassen” the modern justice system and various other social institutions are the target. Similar treatment of characters and conventions can be seen in Akutagawa’s stories as late as *Kappa* (1927), in which he pokes fun at everything from politicians and artists to the institutions of marriage and religion. Clearly, neither the use of older materials nor fictionality can be said to be the exclusive domain of Akutagawa’s earlier works.

Akutagawa's later writings are typically grouped together in a category comprised of partially fictionalized accounts of the author's own life, as well as works in the manner

¹⁰ March-June 1921

¹¹ Keene’s assessment is representative of this critical approach: “Akutagawa’s mastery of the short story won him an exceptionally large following for so young a writer, but he was most often admired for his faults: the overingenuity that [Natsume] Sōseki criticized, his seeming inability to resist adding a surprise ending where none was needed. Another, more crucial weakness was Akutagawa’s lack of originality. He was likened, even by admiring critics, to a mosaicist, piecing together fresh masterpieces out of the materials gleaned from so many books. Sometimes the list of ‘sources’ for a single story, as uncovered by diligent scholars, is so extensive that one can only marvel that any author could fuse together so many disparate elements. . . .there is no question that Akutagawa relied more on books than on his imagination or his personal experiences when writing the short stories of this period. Later in his career a seeming inability to invent materials forced him to draw on even the most trivial incidents of his life. One critic [Ōshima Maki] went so far as to suggest that despair over his lack of imaginative resources may have been an important cause of Akutagawa’s suicide.” Donald Keene, *Dawn to the West: Japanese Literature in the Modern Era: Fiction* (New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984), 565.

¹² “Ryū” has as a source one of the stories from *Uji shūi monogatari*, a collection of stories written around the beginning of the 13th century. “Saru-kani gassen” is based on a folk tale with the same title.

of *shishōsetsu* (“I-novels”). According to conventional thinking, sometime around 1922 a significant change happened in Akutagawa that caused him to abandon his previous modes of writing and follow, with varying degrees of success, in the footsteps of Shiga Naoya and other I-novelists. Akutagawa’s admiration for Shiga is widely known, but there is little evidence that such feelings led to attempts at imitation or emulation. Though the autobiographical elements in Akutagawa’s writing become more prominent toward the end of his career, he did not suddenly cease production of the stories that initially won him fame, nor did he entirely replace his fiction with autobiographical formats. Placing a dividing line at 1922, or at any specific date for that matter, is incorrect.¹³

Within each supposed period, one type of story is said to dominate, but these ‘types’ do not correlate with the given periods, no matter when the dividing dates are placed. A look outside of the most popular and well-known stories further reveals how impractical such rigidly defined stylistic periods really are. Akutagawa wrote in a great variety of genres throughout his career, including several for which he is not well known, producing an enormous volume of texts. In addition to short fiction, he continually worked on poetry, essays, and modern *zuihitsu*-like pieces, not to mention penning hundreds of letters, as well as many critical reviews and other non-artistic writings. He also produced creative works that were not pieces of writing: drawings and paintings decorate the margins of his personal documents, and he even made paintings after artists such as Gauguin.¹⁴

Some critics try to correct the problem of over-specifying artistic periods by identifying a middle period or a period of transition that can include both broad types of story; however, to do so one must still ignore the large portions of Akutagawa’s *oeuvre*

¹³ Other critical transition dates have also been suggested. Hibbett posits that a change occurred after the 1923 Kantō earthquake, despite accounts that Akutagawa was one of the least affected among his colleagues, with no family members or assets lost to the natural disaster. “After 1923, Akutagawa drew more and more directly on his own experience, without seeking to express his feelings through the world of history and fantasy for which he was famous... all of his serious fiction in 1924 was closely autobiographical.” Howard S. Hibbett, “Akutagawa Ryūnosuke and the Negative Ideal,” in *Personality in Japanese History*, ed. Albert M. Craig and Donald H. Shively (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970), 442. Noriko Lippit pushes the date of the transition even further ahead, claiming that after a personal and artistic crisis in 1924, “his writing turned drastically from artificial, well-constructed works to realistic and often autobiographical ones.” Noriko Mizuta Lippit, *Reality and Fiction in Modern Japanese Literature* (White Plains, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1980), 62.

¹⁴ See illustration 2 in Andō, “Kaiga: Ishitsu naru mono no in’yō,” 89. The Akutagawa painting entitled *Rakuen* appears to reference both van Gogh and Gauguin.

that defy such definitions. Moreover, in order to accurately reflect all of Akutagawa's writing, this proposed transition period would have to extend all the way to the beginning and end of his career, again rendering the separate periods meaningless. Whether the "transition" is said to be "his middle period, in which we see a degree of stagnation and confusion" followed by "a period of trial and error"¹⁵ or whether it was a time in which "he would not relent in his professional activities" and "there were few areas or genres left untried."¹⁶ – that is, whether Akutagawa was exhausted¹⁷ or energized after his return from China – inserting a middle period seems at first to resolve the issue by allowing a few years for the transition between historical fiction and autobiographical pieces. However, the apparent continuity revealed by examining all of Akutagawa's works together renders such a transitional period unnecessary.

Contemporary criticism surrounding Akutagawa may perpetuate certain misperceptions, but the approach of the members of the Taishō *bundan* was even more problematic. While they did not usually divide Akutagawa's work up chronologically, they tended to evaluate his literature in relation to naturalist and I-novel fiction; as a result, much of his writing was regarded as low-value work. This "divide" is similar to one based on chronology, because it is placed between those works that appear to be fully fictional and those that seem to contain an autobiographical element, with the latter being more desirable to the critics of the time.

The dominant *bundan* culture during the 1910s and 1920s established confessional-style, personal stories as the literature of value, but this was not a standpoint from which Akutagawa's works could be appropriately evaluated.¹⁸ Akutagawa, who

¹⁵ Murakami Haruki, "Introduction: Akutagawa Ryūnosuke: Downfall of the Chosen," in *Rashōmon and Seventeen Other Stories*, trans. and ed. Jay Rubin (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2006), xxiv-xxvi.

¹⁶ "At the request of publishers he edited two anthologies of English and contemporary Japanese literature. He also brought out two collections of his own critical writings. On top of it all he produced four volumes of short stories. Although some of these warranted his fear of repetition, many suggested how furiously he was revolting against his earlier work and how determinedly he was striking out in new directions."

Beongcheon Yu, *Akutagawa: An Introduction*. (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1972), 51.

¹⁷ "Akutagawa seems to have been too exhausted to attempt to work with more imaginative materials, and writing about himself may have been the one way out of what was otherwise a hopeless impasse." Keene, *Dawn to the West*, 573-574.

¹⁸ For a discussion of the relative values of literary styles during the Taishō period, see Matthew C. Strecher, "Purely Mass or Massively Pure? The Division Between 'Pure' and 'Mass' Literature," *Monumenta Nipponica* 51, no. 3 (Autumn 1996): 357-374.

refused to utilize the device of author/narrator/hero conflation¹⁹ that is characteristic of the I-novel format, was therefore often appraised as being skillful in form, but lacking in content. One who defended Akutagawa from these kinds of criticisms was Eguchi Kan, who had befriended Akutagawa at Natsume Sōseki's (1867-1916) *Mokuyōkai* ("Thursday Club") meetings.

The criticism that 'Akutagawa's works have form but no content' is in serious error. In the history of artists, you will find two types – those who work inward from form to content, and those who work outward from content to form. Akutagawa is of course the former. Therefore, for Akutagawa, the perfection of form is, in the end, the perfection of content. Anyone who doesn't recognize this and just looks at form without looking at content is going to have a very serious misunderstanding.²⁰

By "form," Eguchi seems to mean "style" or "technical skill" in the same way that others used the term, but what is remarkable about this passage is his recognition of how tightly intertwined "form" and "content" are in Akutagawa's work.

"Content," to Akutagawa's contemporaries generally meant autobiographical or confessional elements, which Akutagawa was extremely reluctant to include in his writing to the same extent as many of his peers.

They often tell me 'to write more about your life and make a bolder confession.' I too make confessions; my stories are confessions of my own experiences to a degree. What they want is for me to make myself the hero of a novel, write of actual events concerning me without reservation, and furthermore attach to the book an identification chart of the names of the characters and the real persons. Let it be clear that I have no intention of writing such a work. Firstly, it disagrees with me to no end that I exhibit my private life to those curiosity-seekers. Secondly it gives me no pleasure to turn such a confession into profit and fame. Let us suppose that I wrote my sexual experiences like Kobayashi Issa²¹ and published it in the New Year issue of, say, *Chūō kōron*. My readers would be thrilled; my critics would shower me with praise: Akutagawa's great leap forward etc., and

¹⁹ See Edward Fowler, *The Rhetoric of Confession: Shishōsetsu in Early Twentieth-Century Japanese Fiction* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 3-27.

²⁰ Eguchi Kan, "Shingeiijutsu to shinjin – Akutagawa Ryūnosuke ron," in *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke annai*, ed. Nakamura Shinichirō (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1955), 57-58. Originally published 28 June, 1917. Translations of Japanese texts are my own unless otherwise noted.

²¹ 1763-1827. Issa is considered one of the four most famous haiku poets of Japan, and is grouped with Bashō in terms of impact and legacy. He is famous for his poems on everyday topics, including sex, bodily functions, animals, bugs, and the dirty side of life.

my friends would be happy, saying ‘Akutagawa is now naked and truthful,’ etc. Just thinking of it gives me bone-chilling shivers.²²

Eguchi continues in his essay to claim that the *bundan* would prefer to simply push Akutagawa out and be done with him because, essentially, he does not fit the dominant literary style of the times,²³ which was tightly connected with *bundan* social culture.²⁴ Even close friends and colleagues were critical of the fact that he would not write more revealing, personal fiction, advocating the *shishōsetsu* in their theoretical writings. Kume Masao wrote that even the best fictions were still nothing more than popular novels,²⁵ and Kikuchi Kan wrote that an author’s writing necessarily reflected his life: “The worst possible thing is to imitate another’s style and write about what one has never seen or felt.”²⁶

Akutagawa addressed this very criticism in another essay series, in which he wrote that “No one can reveal oneself completely. Yet writing becomes impossible if one discloses nothing of oneself. Rousseau was enamored of self-exposé; yet he does not reveal himself fully even in his *Confessions*. Mérimée despised confession; yet does not *Columba* reveal something very profound about him? The line between ‘confessional’ and ‘non-confessional’ literature is a hard one indeed to draw.”²⁷ Through their fictional works, Akutagawa says, authors write their own autobiographies bit by bit, with no need to write a straightforward confessional that would inevitably become a sort of vulgar entertainment piece, strictly for the enjoyment of those who know all of the players.

If Akutagawa’s ‘historical’ works reveal the author to some degree, and the ‘personal’ works are still inventions, then his writing clearly defies such classifications. Nevertheless, the *bundan* writers who were, at the time, developing the critical concept of

²² Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, “Chōkōdō zakki,” in *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshū*, volume 4 (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1971) Section 16, “Kokuhaku.” Published in installments 1918-1924. Translation from Tsuruta Kin’ya, “Akutagawa Ryūnosuke and I-novelists,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 25, no. 1/2 (1970): 23-24.

²³ Shiga and Satomi Ton are being marginalized in the same way, according to Eguchi.

²⁴ Akutagawa was “frequently criticized by the *bundan* for his forays into ‘nonpure’ fiction” and continued to be “a victim throughout his career of critical attacks against his tendency to ‘invent’ stories rather than tell the ‘truth’ about his own life.” Fowler, *Rhetoric of Confession*, 50, 137.

²⁵ Kume Masao, “‘Watakushi’ shōsetsu to ‘shinkyō’ shōsestu” (1925), 52-53, quoted in Fowler, *Rhetoric of Confession*, 46-47.

²⁶ Kikuchi Kan, “Bun wa hito nari,” quoted in Fowler, *Rhetoric of Confession*, 48.

²⁷ Akutagawa, “Shuju no kotoba,” in *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshū*, volume 13 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1996), 27-102. Section 17 “Kokuhaku.” Originally published in installments 1923-1927. Translation from Fowler, *Rhetoric of Confession*, 290. See also Akutagawa, “Shōsetsu sakuhō jussoku,” sections 3 and 4, in *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshū*, volume 6 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1928), 839.

the I-novel, judged Akutagawa's use of existing stories and conventional narrative styles as stale in comparison to the intensely personal confessional mode which they valorized. The writers and critics of the Taishō *bundan*, who had started to achieve some success at creating a mode of literature that allowed them to be both modern (often equated with being "Western") and true to their Japanese selves and heritage at the same time,²⁸ could be indifferent, negative, or even hostile toward other modes and the writers using them.²⁹

Speaking specifically about the issue of adapting materials from earlier sources, Akutagawa wrote in a 1917 essay that he never read anything with the strict intention of seeking out material to recycle in his work.

There are those who think I'm the kind of person who goes around looking for only strange things, to play around with them like old curios, but that's not so. Thanks to the old-fashioned education I received as a child, since long ago I've been reading books that have no connection to the present day. Even now, I read them. Since I find my materials from among those books, I don't read anything just to find materials. (Though of course, even if someone does read just to find materials, I don't think that's a bad thing.) ... There are cases when, having my materials in hand, I can write a story right away, and again there are cases when the story comes about after I've completely forgotten I had those materials. When I'm eating, or when I'm reading, even when I'm in the restroom, it makes no difference. At that time, I get the feeling that the way ahead has suddenly brightened."³⁰

Akutagawa was sensitive to the criticism that he was always looking for materials in the works of others, rather than in the events of his own life like his I-novelist colleagues. In

²⁸ "[Meiji & Taishō writers] seem to have been groping for the means to remain true to their own intellectual and emotional needs, and still be men of the modern world. ... For many, although certainly not all, the solution lay in adopting those elements of the "I novel," European realism, and naturalism which blended most attractively with the native Japanese aesthetic. ... They saw that respected European authors found the material for their fiction in self-examination; they realized that the recounting of events centering on the self had validity in Western fiction and they seized upon this solution with an unprecedented eagerness. Now at last Japanese writers had the mechanism to write a "modern" fiction, a fiction for and about their contemporary world which did not suffer the blight of fantasy, which had to be sincere in their own definition." Marleigh Ryan, "Modern Japanese Fiction: Accommodated Truth," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 2, no. 2 (Summer 1976): 263.

²⁹ Ryan reminds readers that Japanese writers in the early 20th century had a wide array of literary genres upon which to draw, but that most writers rejected most available forms like folk tales, character sketches, ghost stories, romances, etc. and adopted elements of realism and naturalism which led to the creation of the personal fiction that characterizes the Taishō period. Ryan, "Modern Japanese Fiction," 264-265.

³⁰ Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, "Watashi to sōsaku," in *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshū*, volume 6 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1928), 371. See also Akutagawa, "The Mirage," trans. Yu, *Chicago Review*, vol. 18, no. 2 (1965): 58. "Whatever we see even once may make a lasting impression somewhere in our brains."

a later section of the long-running serial essay “Chōkōdō zakki” (“Miscellaneous notes from Chōkōdō,” 1918-1924), he elaborated on his defense of the use of materials from older texts, explaining that setting stories in the past or in distant locales serves the purpose of making fantastic events plausible and supporting the theme of a story by keeping readers immersed.³¹

The critical interest in tracing Akutagawa’s sources has never faded, despite his explanations, and has been encouraged by efforts such as biographer Yoshida Seiichi’s essay “Akutagawa Ryūnosuke no shōgai to geijutsu” (“Akutagawa Ryūnosuke’s life and art”).³² Yoshida lists sources for sixty two of Akutagawa’s works, noting the criticisms of other writers regarding Akutagawa’s use of such sources. “Uno Kōji said that Akutagawa never wrote a novel without seed materials, and further, Hori Tatsuo says that ‘in the end, he had no masterpiece of his own – in every one of his masterpieces, there fall the shadows of masterpieces from previous centuries.’”³³ Whether or not Yoshida agrees with that assessment, he states that investigating source materials has more significance in Akutagawa’s case than it would for other authors,³⁴ an idea that carried over into English-language literary criticism.

If categorizations by date or by topic no longer serve a valuable purpose for understanding Akutagawa’s writing, then new frameworks for examining his body of work are necessary. One new way lies in an exploration of Akutagawa’s involvement with the visual arts, and reveals continuity instead of division. A number of Akutagawa’s essays suggest that he took inspiration from the visual arts, specifically avant-garde movements like Post-Impressionism and Expressionism. In discussing Akutagawa, who was always a poet and a painter as well as a writer of prose, this information is invaluable. Further, such essays indicate that what artistic changes *did* occur over the course of Akutagawa’s career were the result of a growing dissatisfaction with his earlier

³¹ Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, “Chōkōdō zakki.” Section 31, “Mukashi.” This passage is also discussed in Keene, *Dawn to the West*, 559-560.

³² “Akutagawa Ryūnosuke’s life and art” was originally published 1942 in Yoshida’s book *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke* (Tōkyō : Sanseidō) and is included in *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke annai* (1955) and *Kindai bungaku kanshō kōza* (1958). In *Kindai bungaku*, it appears under the title “Akutagawa bungaku no shutten.”

³³ Yoshida Seiichi, “Akutagawa bungaku no shutten,” in *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke: Kindai bungaku kanshō kōza 11* (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1958), 331.

³⁴ Yoshida Seiichi, “Akutagawa Ryūnosuke no shōgai to geijutsu,” in *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke annai* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1955), 12. and Yoshida, “Akutagawa bungaku no shutten,” 331.

methods of writing and the search for a new literary style to meet his artistic and expressive needs. They go on to suggest that he found direction due in part to encountering the written and visual works of Russian painter and theorist Wassily Kandinsky.

To date, in English-language scholarship, Akutagawa's engagement with the visual arts has been largely downplayed. In the same way that he took in material from old and new Japanese and European literary sources, so too did he absorb inspiration from the realms of painting, drawing, print-making, and sculpture. Even before Akutagawa began publishing written works, he was actively engaged with the visual arts. A letter to Hara Zen'ichirō, (1892-1937)³⁵ written in autumn of 1913,³⁶ gives an interesting look at Akutagawa during his student days and clearly illustrates his keen interest in visual arts. The letter focuses on Akutagawa's opinion of the offerings at the exhibition of the *Mombushō Bijutsu Tenrankai* (abbreviated as *Bunten*) that year. Though he was less than impressed by most of the exhibition, a few works in the Dai Nika, or second section, of the Nihonga division did capture his attention.³⁷

One of those paintings was *Ama* (*Abalone Divers*, 1913), by Tsuchida Bakusen (1887-1936). Akutagawa writes that, while he does not like Tsuchida as a painter, and hated his *Shima no Onna* (*Island Women*) from the previous year, he recognizes an excellence in this depiction of *ama*. Akutagawa expresses disappointment that no one else has praised this work, and that others even speak badly about it despite his attraction to it.

Particularly interesting to note about Akutagawa's reaction to this Bakusen piece is that he mentions in his letter his interest in *ama* divers can probably be attributed to his having recently re-read Paul Gauguin's *Noa Noa*, an 1891 travelogue documenting the painter's life in Tahiti. *Noa Noa* was published in translation in sections in *Shirakaba* through 1913 and 1914.³⁸ At age twenty one, Akutagawa had not only read Gauguin's text at least twice – the first time could not have been in Japanese – but was also making

³⁵ Hara later became a patron of the arts and literature.

³⁶ Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshū*, vol. 10 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1928), 36-38 (letter #28, November 1, 1913).

³⁷ The Nihonga section of the *Bunten* was divided into Dai Ikka (first section) and Dai Nika (second section) in 1912, with Dai Nika being the more progressive of the two. For more information on *Bunten* politics and Bakusen's *Ama*, see John D. Szostak, *Painting Circles: Tsuchida Bakusen and Nihonga Collectives in Early Twentieth Century Japan*. (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2013), 57-72.

³⁸ *Noa Noa* was translated by Koizumi Magane, the same member who translated Kandinsky's *Klänge*.

connections between the influential travelogue and newly arising styles of painting in Japan. His experience of visual works was filtered through what he read, and vice-versa, from the beginning.

Akutagawa describes with excitement the sand dunes with an ultramarine ocean in the background, yellow sea grass on the dunes, and the “rhythmical” body lines of the figures who populate Bakusen’s large image, painted on two sets of six folding screen panels.³⁹ This reaction to Bakusen’s painting shares something with Akutagawa’s description of his reaction to Gauguin’s paintings in section thirty of “Bungeiteki.”

Akutagawa writes that he found Gauguin’s bold, bright colors and lines unpleasant at first, but eventually grew to like them. Akutagawa recounts his repulsion on first seeing “the orange woman standing massively in front of a decorative background, visually giving off the scent of barbarian skin” in what may have been *Tahitian Women Bathing* (1892) or a similar painting.⁴⁰ The impact of the colors was especially strong, to the point that he found the disharmony between the background scenery and the foreground figure difficult to view. Though “Bungeiteki” was written at the end of his life, the vivid recollection of seeing Gauguin’s work is still powerful. These two experiences with paintings, bookending his writing career, provide evidence for his continuing engagement with visual art.

In the Bakusen painting, Akutagawa sees value where seemingly no one else does, which invites questions about the reception and perception of artworks. In 1919, he penned a story that tackles this very issue, and seems in a way to reflect the experience described in his letter. “Numachi” (“The Marsh”) is a very short piece that focuses on a narrator who attends an art exhibition where he has an encounter with an unusual painting and another patron. The narrator’s account opens this way:

It happened on a certain rainy afternoon. I discovered a small oil painting in a room of a certain exhibition hall. “Discovered” – perhaps this is an exaggeration, but I think that it’s justified, as this painting alone was hanging in a particularly poorly-lit corner, inside a frightfully poor frame, as though it had been forgotten. As I recall the painting was called *The*

³⁹ For reproductions of Tsuchida’s paintings *Shima no Onna* and *Ama*, see Andō et. al, eds., *Mō hitori no Akutagawa Ryūnosuke: shōgai hyakunen kinenten*, 97. and Szostak, *Painting Circles*, 64-65; 72-75.

⁴⁰ Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, “Bungeiteki na, amari ni bungeiteki na,” in *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshū*, volume 6 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1928), 756.

Marsh or something like that, and the artist was nobody well-known. The picture itself showed nothing but brackish water, swampy ground, and rank, overgrowing vegetation. It probably got literally no notice from the usual viewers.⁴¹

The narrator's first impression is that the painting has very little value; it seems that both the management at the gallery and the other patrons see it as a worthless piece. However, the narrator himself is strangely captivated by this image in which everything that should be green – reeds, poplar trees, and all other plant life – is painted a sickly yellow color. Drawn in by this strange scene, the narrator finds himself staring at the painting: “As I looked at it, I came to realize that a frightening power lurked within that painting. ... I got the same sense of spellbinding tragedy from the plants in this yellow marsh as I get from all great works of art. In fact, among all of the various paintings of various sizes hung in the exhibition hall, I couldn't find a single picture that had the strength to rival this one.”⁴²

Immediately after making this assessment of the painting, the narrator is accosted by a man who works as a fine arts reporter for a newspaper. The reporter clearly has a low opinion of the painting, and laughs loudly when the narrator calls it “a masterpiece.” Over the course of their conversation, it comes to light that the painter was insane at the time he painted it – a fact that the reporter says should be obvious from his choice of colors, the very thing that had drawn the narrator's attention in the first place.

Turning to consider the painting again, the narrator says, “it seems like he went mad because the painting could not show all he wanted. On that point alone, I'll buy it if it can be bought.”⁴³ Faced once more with the reporter's ridicule, the narrator defiantly asserts again that the work is a masterpiece, denying the reporter's superiority of judgment and insisting on the validity of both his own viewpoint and the painter's efforts. “Numachi,” while only four pages long, is a surprisingly dense and intense work, much like the painting that gives the story its title.

The narrator in “Numachi” sees something in the painting that conveys to him great emotion and depth of expression, regardless of the outward ugliness of the picture.

⁴¹ Akutagawa, “Numachi,” in *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshū*, volume 2 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1928), 225.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 226.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 228.

The “spellbinding tragedy” and “monstrous vitality” of the painting speak to the inner value of the artist and his work, regardless of the external, surface quality.

In a 1914 letter to art critic and curator A.J. Eddy, Kandinsky expresses sentiments that resonate strongly with Akutagawa’s short story.

I value *only* those artists who really are artists; that is, who consciously or unconsciously, in an *entirely original form*, or in a style bearing their *personal imprint*, embody the expression of their *inner self*; who, consciously or unconsciously, work *only* for *this end* and cannot work *otherwise*. The number of such artists is very few. If I were a collector I would buy the works of such even if there were weaknesses in what they did; *such* weaknesses grow less in time and finally disappear entirely; and though they may be apparent in the earlier works of the artist, still they do not deprive even these earlier and less perfect works of value. But the *other* weaknesses, that of *lack of soul*, never decreases with time, but is sure to grow worse and become more and more apparent, and so render absolutely valueless works that *technically* may be very correct. The entire history of art is proof of this. The *union* of *both* kinds of strength – that of intellect or spirituality with that of form, or technical perfection – is most rare, as is also demonstrated by the history of art.⁴⁴

The painter in “Numachi” seems to be an artist whose work would have pleased Kandinsky; what Akutagawa’s narrator perceives in the painting is the expression of a strong inner self – so strong, in fact, that the inability to express it fully may have brought the painter to madness.

To return to Akutagawa’s letters, another name that stands out in the November 1913 letter to Hara, in connection to western painting, is Ishii Hakutei (1882-1958). Ishii was a printmaker and painter who was instrumental in bringing European avant-garde art to Japan, starting from around 1908.⁴⁵ Ishii wrote articles on exhibits he saw while living overseas, including work by Fauves, Futurists, and Cubists. Many of his articles were published in the *Yomiuri shinbun*. He also wrote extensively on Kandinsky and the Blaue Reiter group starting around 1912, and, while abroad, sent much of Kandinsky’s writing to Japan to be translated.⁴⁶ Ishii’s paintings stood out to Akutagawa, reminding him in a

⁴⁴ Kandinsky, “Letters to Arthur Jerome Eddy,” in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, 404.

⁴⁵ Ishii (born Ishii Mankichi) is known for his work as an painter in oils and watercolors, nihonga, and woodblock prints, as well as being a poet, editor, critic, writer, and later an instructor in the fine arts.

⁴⁶ Ijiri Raku, “Kandinsukii juyō saishōki no kōsatsu – 1912/Taishō gannen goro no uchi to soto.” (*Kyoto Sangyo University Essays, Social Sciences and Humanities Series* 36, 2007), 72-73. Though Akutagawa

way of Mori Ōgai's short stories: "His spirit is, like a keen mirror, clear in the cold water. The shadows of trees and rocks that fall on that spirit are reproduced on the canvas or on Whatman paper, with hands that have had little training but make not even the smallest mistake. When I look at this person's paintings, I recall Mori Ōgai sensei's short stories every time."⁴⁷ Here, as before, Akutagawa forges connections across media boundaries and privileges "spirit" over technique.

The letter to Hara was not unique among Akutagawa's correspondences. Another long letter to close friend, classmate, and roommate Tsunetō Kyō⁴⁸ (1888-1967) in 1914 discusses similar subject matter. In it, Akutagawa writes about going to the art exhibitions, since it is again the season for them, and praises the works at the *Bijutsuin* and *Nikakai* exhibitions, but criticizes the *Bunten*. He remarks, "At the *Bunten*, people are making a fuss about Mitsutani [Kunishirō (1874-1936)] turning to Post-Impressionism afresh, but he's not the only one who went Post-Impressionistic. I can recognize the influences on all the western-style paintings at the *Bunten*."⁴⁹ Again, this letter is significant because it clearly shows that Akutagawa was well-acquainted with current art movements like Post-Impressionism, as well as with older western artists like Botticelli and Segantini, and that he regularly visited exhibitions in Tokyo.

Besides the *Bunten*, *Bijutsuin* and *Nikakai* exhibitions, Akutagawa also regularly attended exhibitions put on by the Shirakaba group.⁵⁰ The Shirakaba exhibitions had begun in 1910, just a few months after the founding of the magazine, and from the outset focused on works by both western artists and Japanese artists using western styles. By the start of the Taishō period, the exhibitions featured works by members of a variety of artistic movements, from Symbolism and Impressionism through Post-Impressionism and Expressionism. Artists that Akutagawa mentions in his letters, essays, and fictional works – Gauguin, van Gogh, Picasso, and Cézanne, 'the father of them all'⁵¹ – appeared in

does not mention seeing any Kandinskys during this exhibition season, there is evidence from *Yomiuri shinbun* articles that his work was being shown in Japan by 1913.

⁴⁷ Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshū*, vol. 10 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1928), 36-38 (letter #28, November 1, 1913).

⁴⁸ Tsunetō later became a lawyer and law philosopher.

⁴⁹ Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshū*, vol. 10 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1928), 60 (letter #40, November 30, 1914).

⁵⁰ Aeba Takao, "Akutagawa Ryūnosuke to Yōroppa geijutsu," in Andō et. al, eds., *Mō hitori no Akutagawa Ryūnosuke*, 66-67.

⁵¹ This quotation is attributed to both Picasso and Matisse: "Cézanne is the father of us all."

multiple exhibitions between 1912 and 1921, although works on display were sometimes reproductions, due to the difficulty of obtaining originals.⁵²

Examining the entirety of his writings, including his essays, letters, and other nonfiction works, clearly shows that not only was Akutagawa regularly exposed to western visual art, which was readily available through photographic reproductions, and sometimes as actual works, at such exhibitions, he actively sought out, engaged with, and analyzed his reactions to a variety of artwork. As a result, those visual arts had as much of an impact on his writing, both fiction and non-fiction, as the more familiar literary influences. Around this time, in addition to visual works, there was also a great deal of writing about art circulating in the form of essays and books about new movements and important painters. After 1910, writing appeared in Japan both about and written by Kandinsky, who was quickly becoming one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century.

⁵² See “Shirakaba shusai tenrankai mokuroku,” in *Shirakaba to kindai bijutsu*.

CHAPTER 3

RECEPTION OF KANDINSKY'S ART AND WRITING IN JAPAN

Most of Akutagawa's literary career took place in the context of the Taishō period, an intellectually and artistically cosmopolitan span in Japan's history. Tokyo, where Akutagawa lived the majority of his life, was an especially eclectic and international city, host to a vibrant arts community. Many writers of the time, if they were not Tokyo natives, eventually moved to the capital to join the literary circles of their peers. By the time that Akutagawa reached high school, consuming foreign literature as rapidly as he had always read Japanese and Chinese material, the *fin de siècle* had fully blossomed in Japan.

Japanese *fin de siècle* culture developed about 15 years after Europe's, roughly between 1900 and 1920.⁵³ During this time, the importation of foreign literature and art that had begun a generation earlier rapidly expanded thanks to both the increased number of Japanese studying abroad in Europe and America and the strong interest of groups working in Japan. Many of the written works of avant-garde painters, sculptors, and writers, including Kandinsky, were available in Japan in reproduction almost as soon as they appeared in Europe. Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto* of 1909 was famously translated by Mori Ōgai for the magazine *Subaru* just a few months after its original publication, and at least three major texts by Kandinsky were translated and imported during the Taishō period.⁵⁴ The visual works of the Impressionists, Post-Impressionists, and Expressionists of Europe were made available in Japan from the 1910s in exhibitions and reproductions. Images and writing about art also appeared in magazines and other print media, from coterie magazines with small distributions, to larger publications like *Shirakaba* (*White Birch*), *Bijutsu shinpō* (*Arts Bulletin*), and *Gendai no yōga*

⁵³ Noriko Mizuta Lippit, *Reality and Fiction in Modern Japanese Literature* (White Plains, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1980), 72.

⁵⁴ *Über das Geistige* (first translated 1913 – partial), *Klänge* (first translated 1913 – partial), *Der gelbe Klang* (first translated 1914 – full); *Kandinsky 1901-1913* (first translated 1924 – full)

(*Contemporary Western Painting*),⁵⁵ to newspapers with wide general readership such as the *Yomiuri shinbun*.⁵⁶

Among those who studied in Europe, one of the most influential was Takamura Kōtarō (1883-1956), poet and sculptor, who lived in New York (1906), London (1907), and Paris (1908) before he “returned to Japan to find himself disillusioned not only with Japanese culture in general, but also with the art world in particular.”⁵⁷ Takamura’s essay “Midori iro no taiyō” (“A Green Sun,” 1910) was a landmark for the reception and development of avant-garde art in Japan. This essay, popular among Akutagawa’s peers, made a huge impact in the Japanese artistic world as one of the works that kicked off the start of Japanese modernism.⁵⁸ Takamura was one of the first and strongest voices in Japan supporting freedom of expression and the use of abstract means in painting.

Takamura’s essay declares his desire for total freedom for the artist – both from conventions that limit his or her range of expression and from “local color,” a term that subsumes literal color, materials choices (e.g., the use of ink washes or oil paints), subject matter, and composition. “Local color,” though neither entirely negative nor entirely avoidable, becomes detrimental to artists’ work when they limit their expression in order to stay in line with what is expected – those expectations based almost solely on their place of origin.

There are quite a number of people in today’s art world who think highly of the value of local color. It seems that there are even some people who think that the fate of Japan’s oil painting will somehow be determined by the way the painters compromise with the local color of Japan. There also seem to be not a few people who hesitate [before painting], thinking that nature in Japan has a certain set of inviolable colors inherent to it and that the RAISON D’ETRE for their work would suddenly disappear if that work should conflict with those colors, and try to suppress the fiery colors and dreamlike TONE in their breasts. There are also those who assign

⁵⁵ See Fowler, *Rhetoric of Confession*, 132; purely literary magazines like *Shinchō* likely had 3,000 – 5,000, publications like *Kaizō* and *Kaihō* had circulations of 30,000 – 40,000, and *Chūō kōron* had over 100,000.

⁵⁶ Ijiri, “Kandinsukii juyō saishōki no kōsatsu,” 66. and Matthew Larking, “Reorienting Painting,” in *Rethinking Japanese Modernism*, ed. Roy Starrs (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2012), 327.

⁵⁷ William J. Tyler, *Modanizumu: Modernist Fiction from Japan 1913-1938* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 22.

⁵⁸ According to Tyler, this is one of two works (the other is Tanizaki’s *The Tattoo/er* (also 1910)) that “signal the onset of an indigenous modernism. Not only did they raise the clarion call of rebellion against established art, but they also articulated a modernist message that emerged out of the context and idioms of Japanese culture.” Tyler, *Modanizumu*, 22.

absolute value to so-called local color, treating work they recognize as having a bit of a different color as entirely out of the question, and taking a strict attitude that doesn't tolerate even a giving it a simple EVALUATION. What's more, it seems that the value of this local color is recognized by the public. It's clear that the words "this color is not in Japan" are an expression of criticism. I want to disregard that 'local color'. It goes without saying that these are words I have formed from an artist's standpoint.⁵⁹

Takamura advocates what Kandinsky would espouse in multiple publications, namely that the artist should use whatever external elements (color, form, physical media, etc.) best express what is internally necessary, without caring whether those external elements are "correct" or "accepted" – without bowing to the pressure to conform to "local color." Takamura applies this concept in a Japanese context and argues that the artist must be an artist and an individual first, and a member of a given group or nationality second. In the same way that Takamura sees "local color" as restrictive, confining an artist to a limited range of expressive modes, Kandinsky maintains that the artist must not allow form – the external elements of art – to become prescriptive and limiting.

Takamura's strong stance opposed the dominant trends in the Japanese art scene, which he saw as "hopelessly in thrall to the antiquated notion of what he called local color, his term for the stereotypically orientalist ways in which Japanese artists depicted Japan."⁶⁰ However, what makes Takamura's essay so significant is that he does not suggest that artists should reject their Japanese heritage in order to become "modern" or adopt new identities, nor that they should simply start imitating European artistic movements.⁶¹

I want to let artists forget that they're Japanese. I want them to rid themselves entirely of the notion of reproducing the nature of Japan. And I

⁵⁹ Takamura, "Midori iro no taiyō," in *Takamura Kōtarō bungei dokuhon* (Tokyo: Kawade Shobō Shinsha, 1979). Words in all capital letters appear as all caps French or German in original text.

⁶⁰ Tyler, *Modanizumu*, 22.

⁶¹ "No mention is made of Matisse or Picasso. Nor is the West evoked as the Other that is to be emulated. During and after his stay in the United States and Europe, Takamura became increasingly ambivalent about the artistic hegemony of the Western pantheon. In addition his essay anticipates a growing disaffection with landscape painting, an art form that depicted reality pictorially. He calls instead for painting based on the creative powers of the imagination." Tyler, *Modanizumu*, 23.

want to let them express on canvas, freely, wildly, and selfishly, the atmosphere of nature just as they see it. Even if the finished products are in opposition to the so-called local color of Japan that we think we see, I won't want to reject them on that account. . . . I'm hoping that Japanese artists will use every POSSIBLE technique without reserve or consideration. I pray that they will follow their inner desires of the moment, without fearing that they may produce something un-Japanese.⁶²

Takamura argues that the most important thing for Japanese artists is to stop suppressing their inner passions and expressive powers, an idea that Akutagawa also incorporated into his own artistic theory. Akutagawa's concept of "poetic spirit," as explained in "Bungeiteki na, amari ni bungeiteki na," insists that the writer work in any format with total freedom.⁶³

Takamura was far from the only artist in Japan working for the introduction of European art movements and philosophies; in fact, he was involved with at least two important groups of artists, critics, writers, and aesthetes who played important roles in the cultural climate of turn-of-the-century Tokyo. In 1908, the Pan no kai ("Pan Society") was established for the promotion of exchange between the visual and literary arts, led by members of the coteries behind the magazines *Subaru* ("Pleiades") and *Hōsun* ("Heart"). This decadent group, named after the Greek nature deity, met regularly in cafés⁶⁴ and western-style restaurants to carouse and discuss literature and art; the group's meetings became a mecca for those interested in recent Western literary movements and developments in the visual arts.

Some of Natsume Sōseki's pupils were regular attendees at these meetings, which, according to Takamura's recollections about the group, ranged from fifteen to fifty people, depending on the night.⁶⁵ Co-founder Kinoshita Mokutarō (1885-1945) reminisces that the group was the result of a combination of Edo culture and exotic aspirations, as the members felt moved by *ukiyo*e while dreaming of the lives of Parisian

⁶² Takamura, "Midori iro no taiyō."

⁶³ Akutagawa, "Bungeiteki," 726.

⁶⁴ According to Kinoshita's recollections, there was no such thing as a café in Tokyo at the time the group was founded, and they made one of their goals to bring the café and café culture to Japan, in the Parisian style. Kinoshita, "Pan no kai no kaisō," in *Kinoshita Mokutarō zenshū*, vol. 4 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1950), 284-292.

⁶⁵ Takamura, "Fusain kai to Pan no kai," in *Shōwa bungaku zenshū*, vol. 4, ed. Yasushi Inoue et. al. (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 1989), 541-544.

artists and poets.⁶⁶ In terms of artistic ideals, the society was anti-Naturalist, and is associated with the Romanticism and Aestheticism of the late Meiji period.

Pan no kai dissolved after four years of activity, but some of the members, including Takamura, continued their activities as the new group Fusain kai (“Charcoal Society”),⁶⁷ founded in 1912. Like Pan no kai before it, Fusain kai was an exciting but ultimately unstable gathering of enthusiasts and visionaries. They held their first exhibition in 1912 on the top floor of the *Yomiuri shinbun* building in Ginza, featuring what were, at the time, cutting-edge works in the impressionist style; however, the group disbanded the next year after just two exhibitions. Fusain kai broke up into three sections: Fauves, Impressionists, and Post-Impressionists; but, according to Takamura, every group worshiped Gauguin and van Gogh, regardless of faction.⁶⁸

1912, the year Pan no kai disbanded and Fusain kai was formed, was also the year that Kandinsky was first mentioned in writing in Japan, in an article by Kinoshita Mokutarō.⁶⁹ Fusain kai actually had a close connection to Kandinsky, beyond the mere interest of some of its members. In fact, it was precisely the influx of Kandinsky’s writing and work that gave rise to groups like the Fusain kai, considered to be one of the first groups to practice expressionism in Japan.⁷⁰ However, there was some confusion surrounding the importation of “new” art, which happened very suddenly in Japan, so that many western painting styles and movements arrived all at once and were mixed together in the Japanese perception.⁷¹ The works of Fusain kai members showed a variety of influences, particularly Fauvism and Post-Impressionism, in addition to incipient Expressionism, and there was even some confusion about the direction of influence – for example, Kinoshita and Ishii Hakutei, despite both being key figures in the introduction

⁶⁶ Kinoshita, “Pan no kai no kaisō,” 284-292. Kinoshita, born Ōta Masao, practiced medicine under his given name, and wrote poems, plays, novels, art reviews, and theatre reviews under his more well-known pseudonym. He published literary criticism in newspapers and journals like *Subaru* (which he helped publish) and *Shirakaba* starting around 1909-1910.

⁶⁷ “Fusain” is the French word for charcoal, especially compressed charcoal sticks for sketching.

⁶⁸ Takamura, “Fusain kai to Pan no kai,” 541-544.

⁶⁹ Ijiri, “Kandinsukii juyō saishōki no kōsatsu,” 67.

⁷⁰ Sato Yukihiro, “Kandinsukii to Nihon (2) – Senzenki no juyō wo chūshin ni –,” *Kiyō: Journal of Hokkaidō Art Museum Studies* (2005): 44.

⁷¹ Suzuki Sadami, “Rewriting the Literary History of Japanese Modernism,” in *Rethinking Japanese Modernism*, ed. Roy Starrs (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2012), 50.

of Kandinsky to Japan, called Kandinsky's paintings 'Fusain-style' instead of the other way around.⁷²

The words *hyōgenshugi* ("expressionism") and *hyōgenha* ("expressionist") began to appear in print in Japan from about 1913. The Expressionists came up in Kinoshita's article "Yōga ni okeru hishizenshugiteki keikō" ("The Anti-Naturalist Trend in European-style Painting"), published in the February, March, and June issues of the magazine *Bijutsu shinpō* in 1913, and were also mentioned in the magazine *Gendai no yōga* the same year.⁷³ However, it seems that, at least at first, these terms were used with somewhat too broad of a meaning, with a number of different groups and movements lumped together under terms like "Expressionism," which, in the Japanese conception, initially included Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, and almost any other type of abstraction.⁷⁴

The confusion of different European genres of painting was hardly unique to Japan, but there it was more dramatic due to the distance and the filtering involved in importation.⁷⁵ During the late Meiji and early Taishō periods, it was often the case that only a small number of a given artist's works were available, via poor-quality reproductions, a situation that caused a certain amount of distortion in the perception and reception of the European avant-garde art.⁷⁶ The Japanese view of various European art movements began to crystallize as more material became available. In the April 1914

⁷² Sakai Osamu, *Doitsu hyōgenshugi to Nihon: Taishō-ki no dōkō wo chūshin ni* (Tokyo: Waseda University Press, 2003), 282-283. and Ijiri, "Kandinsukii juyō saishōki no kōsatsu," 78-79.

⁷³ Sakai, *Doitsu hyōgenshugi to Nihon*, 281-282.

⁷⁴ "By 'Expressionist painting' I refer to the lumping together of Post-impressionist painters such as Paul Cezanne, Vincent Van Gogh and Henri Matisse (initially understood as a Post-impressionist painter in Japan) and the Fauvism that was introduced to Japan at the end of the Meiji period, and encompassing Cubism and the painting of Kandinsky introduced at the beginning of the Taishō period. This is a broad and even confusing jumbling together of different painters, styles and conceptual concerns, but most of the Japanese painters mentioned herein dabbled in and out of various of these, and they came [to] be collected under the catholic Japanese term 'Hyōgen-shugi' – Expressionism. This cobbling together of various movements under the term Hyōgen-shugi was due in large part to the near simultaneous or close succession with which these movements were introduced to Japan." Larking, "Reorienting Painting," 325.

⁷⁵ Sato, "Kandinsukii to Nihon," 44. Many of those in Japan did not necessarily understand the whole history of European art with which modern art was contrasting, or understand the significance of certain types of work, vs. specific personalities.

⁷⁶ Sato, "Kandinsukii to Nihon," 44. See also Larking, "Reorienting Painting," 323. "The Japanese of the [Taishō] period did not have a great deal of access to the oeuvres of artists such as Van Gogh, except for the most part in black and white and through the biases of reproductions such as those in the well-known journals *Shirakaba* or *Gendai no yōga*. This in turn led in part to the idealizing of the personality of the painter, the admiration for which was accentuated by lack of accessibility to the original oeuvre."

issue of *Bijutsu shinpō*, Saitō Kazō published his essay “Hyōgenha to Rippōha to Miraiha” (“Expressionists, Cubists, and Futurists”), in which he gives the following definition: “Expressionists, as that word suggests, are people who squeeze out what gushes forth from the interior of their souls – and present it, resulting in a pure subjectivity that is entirely removed from reality; this is the name by which one of the factions of modern-day painting is called.” Afterward, he writes about various artists associated with the expressionist movement and Kandinsky, including Campendonk, Bloe, Marc, Munters, Klee, Deran, Kubin, Braque, Jawlensky; he also discusses Kandinsky’s personal history.⁷⁷

Alongside magazines and journals, the *Yomiuri shinbun* and other daily newspapers also played a surprisingly large role in fostering art appreciation during the period. In addition to sponsoring exhibitions by groups like Fusain kai, the *Yomiuri* was a source for art news, advertisements, and reviews, as well as printed literary works and translations. As a major newspaper, the *Yomiuri* did a great deal to spread awareness of the art world to a wide audience. Editorials on Kandinsky appeared in the newspaper as early as 1913,⁷⁸ and *Yomiuri* continued to feature articles about him, the expressionist movement, and other avant-gardes such as Cézanne and van Gogh, throughout Akutagawa’s lifetime. A couple of lengthy articles about German Expressionism also appeared in the newspaper,⁷⁹ and a number of Kandinsky poems, all translated by Murayama Tomoyoshi, showed up several years later,⁸⁰ as well as a profile on the artist.⁸¹ The *Yomiuri* would have given not only Akutagawa but many other young art enthusiasts access to materials on and information about new western art movements.

As the importation of Post-Impressionist and Expressionist works into Japan gained momentum during the late 1910s and 1920s, there were a number of groups and

⁷⁷ Sakai, *Doitsu hyōgenshugi to Nihon*, 284.

⁷⁸ Saito Kazo, “Aki no tenrankai to gekijō (ue),” *Yomiuri shinbun*, Oct. 23, 1913. This is part of a longer article on the autumn exhibitions of that year; The section on Kandinsky interestingly begins with “I don’t understand Kandinsky’s pictures,” before going on to describe the appeal of the pictures.

⁷⁹ Saito Kazo, “Hyōgenha no mirai,” *Yomiuri shinbun*, May 19, 1917.; Tōgō Seiji, “Shin Doitsu no hyōgenha to sono undō ni tsuite,” April 6 & 7, 1922.

⁸⁰ Wassily Kandinsky, “Hyōgenha gakka Kandinsukii no shi,” trans. Murayama Tomoyoshi, *Yomiuri shinbun*, March 5, 1923.; Wassily Kandinsky, “Hyōgenha no shi: Tsukue,” trans. Murayama Tomoyoshi, *Yomiuri shinbun*, March 7, 1923.; Wassily Kandinsky, “Mizu (Hyōgenha no shi),” trans. Murayama Tomoyoshi, *Yomiuri shinbun*, April 3, 1923.

⁸¹ Murayama Tomoyoshi, “Kandinsukii,” *Yomiuri shinbun*, July 1, 1925.

individuals in Japan who took a specific interest in Kandinsky, and worked to import his works and produce commentary on his art and theory. Importation of Kandinsky materials began in earnest with the partial translation of *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* in 1912, about a year after its original publication, and continued on with increased effort during the 1920s. At the same time, the number of books addressing European modern art, including Expressionism, increased rapidly.⁸² In such publications it was often held that the development of Post-Impressionist modern European art was headed on a direct path from objectivity to subjectivity, and eventually to Expressionism; Kandinsky's art was seen as particularly representative of this sequence of development.⁸³ These books frequently shared common sources, including Hermann Bahr, *Expressionismus* (*Expressionism*, 1916); Eckart von Sydow, *Die deutsche expressionistische Kultur und Malerei* (*German Expressionist Culture and Painting*, 1920), and other imported key texts on Post-Impressionism and Expressionism.⁸⁴ The proliferation of articles and texts, in conjunction with a number of exhibitions of reproductions and actual works taking place, meant that information on avant-garde art, both theory and works, was readily available as Akutagawa entered Tokyo University in 1913.

Groups like Pan no kai facilitated exchange across arts and also became an important site for interaction between individuals like the aforementioned Kinoshita Mokutarō and Ishii Hakutei. These two men were the first to introduce Kandinsky to Tokyo, and were highly influential figures in the importation of materials regarding not just Kandinsky, but all avant-garde artists and movements throughout the Taishō period.⁸⁵ Both were key importers of Kandinsky's materials, and used his art theory as a lens through which to interpret western-influenced Japanese art.⁸⁶

Kandinsky's early reception started in Tokyo, which was "enthusiastically receiving Post-Impressionism,"⁸⁷ thanks largely to Japanese who went abroad and sent back information on his work, some of whom studied at the Bauhaus under Kandinsky

⁸² See list in Sato, "Kandinsukii to Nihon," 29.

⁸³ Sakai, *Doitsu hyōgenshugi to Nihon*, 283.

⁸⁴ Sato, "Kandinsukii to Nihon," 29-30.

⁸⁵ Ijiri, "Kandinsukii juyō saishōki no kōsatsu," 67.

⁸⁶ Ijiri, "Kandinsukii juyō saishōki no kōsatsu," 64, 91. Kinoshita considered Kandinsky to be the most up-to-date critic and used his theories as a standard for looking at various forms of art, not just painting – there was no pushback against Kandinsky's visual works at first.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 64.

himself.⁸⁸ Writing by these students, such as Sawaki Kozue (1886-1930),⁸⁹ whose “Kandinsukii no inshō” (“Impressions of Kandinsky”) was published in *Shinchō* magazine in March 1917,⁹⁰ gave Japanese artists a more complete picture of Kandinsky that included biographical and personal elements in addition to commentary on his body of work.

Japanese artists, including Ishii, Kinoshita, and Murayama Tomoyoshi (1901-1977),⁹¹ saw Kandinsky as a central figure of contemporary western art. Ishii’s article “Fauvism and Anti-Naturalism” (1912),⁹² for example, was an early source on Fauvism and Cubism for a Japanese readership, and linked the energy of the growing anti-Naturalist movements in Europe – which included Fauvism, Cubism, Pointillism, and more – to the activities of Kandinsky and his colleagues.⁹³ These disparate styles and movements were understood as new modes of expression, in response to the inevitability of anti-naturalism and anti-materialism. Kinoshita’s articles, including “Gensoteki-gainenteki” (“Elemental-Conceptual”),⁹⁴ “Ushiro no sekai” (“The World in Back”),⁹⁵ and “Yōga in okeru hishizenteki keikō” (“The Anti-Naturalist Trend in Western Painting”)⁹⁶ also situated Kandinsky and his work in the context of other contemporary events and movements.⁹⁷

During the first phase of Kandinsky importation, which included the articles noted above, critics focused mostly on introduction – writing overviews, reviews, reactions, and other activities that did not require specialized knowledge. Toward the latter half of the

⁸⁸ Sato, “Kandinsukii to Nihon,” 34.

⁸⁹ Born Sawaki Yomokichi, he studied abroad in Europe, then became a teacher of western art history and aesthetics after returning, as well as editor-in-chief of *Mita bungaku*.

⁹⁰ Sakai, *Doitsu hyōgenshugi to Nihon*, 292-294. Sawaki was in Germany at the time and wrote articles on artists by visiting their houses and looking at their works. He usually did not meet them in person because he thought he could tell more about a person by their work than face to face. However, he made a connection through a Munich art dealer and visited the Kandinsky house at the end of the year, meeting the artist, whom he did not actually care for.

⁹¹ Murayama studied abroad in Germany and took influence from Kandinsky. Later he became an artist in many genres and a key member of the MAVO group in Japan.

⁹² Written during the summer of 1911 in Paris, after Ishii had witnessed the Societe des Artistes Independants, the Salon d’Automne, and the Berlin Seccessionists, this article was published in October 1912 after his return to Japan, then published again in December 1912 in the 85th issue of *Waseda bungaku*.

⁹³ Ijiri, “Kandinsukii juyō saishōki no kōsatsu,” 72.

⁹⁴ Kinoshita Mokutarō, “Gensoteki-gainenteki,” *Yomiuri Shinbun*, June 30 1912.

⁹⁵ Kinoshita Mokutarō, “Ushiro no sekai,” *Bijutsu shinpō* vol. 12, November 1912.

⁹⁶ Kinoshita Mokutarō, “Yōga in okeru hishizenteki keikō,” *Bijutsu shinpō*, Feb. – June 1913.

⁹⁷ Ijiri, “Kandinsukii juyō saishōki no kōsatsu,” 66. and Sakai, *Doitsu hyōgenshugi to Nihon*, 282-283.

1910s, however, the reception changed to include more detailed examination and analysis. A group of scholars in Kyoto worked to closely analyze Kandinsky's theories, but largely discounted his visual works.⁹⁸ The exception was Ueda Jūzō, author of "Kaiga ni okeru shizensei no kachi – 1910 nen igo no Kandinsukii" ("The Value of Naturalness in Painting – Kandinsky since 1910"), published in the June and July 1916 issues of *Tetsugaku kenkyū*. This was one of the first articles in Japan to focus on analysis of Kandinsky's visual works rather than just his written theory.⁹⁹ Ironically, the article includes no reproductions of the works under discussion, though it does include lengthy quotations from *Über das Geistige*. Ueda's article introduces concepts like "inner sound" and relates them to Kandinsky's images, in which he identifies qualities such as "yūgen," "mystery," and "deep sound." This kind of analysis brought Kandinsky's paintings closer to the Japanese audience by approaching them through familiar concepts.¹⁰⁰

In spite of these efforts to introduce Kandinsky to Japan, the Japanese art world remained ambivalent toward him; his theory was "on the whole accepted positively, in spite of the visceral rejection of his art works."¹⁰¹ Japanese critics generally found the abstraction of Kandinsky's post-1910 art entirely inaccessible. Even artists and critics like Ishii and Kinoshita, who were key to the early reception of Kandinsky, focused almost solely on his theory, while simultaneously maintaining indifference or even distaste towards his paintings and woodcuts.¹⁰² Nevertheless, Kandinsky's role as a founder of Expressionism and Constructivism won him great acclaim. He was praised not for his colors and lines, but for his theory of ridding art of the object.¹⁰³ Even as his paintings met with a lukewarm reception, Kandinsky's critical writing was accepted with enthusiasm and incorporated as part of developing critical and interpretive standards.

This very mixed reception led to the strange phenomenon whereby Kandinsky's visual art and writing rarely appeared together in Japanese publications. The September 1912 issue of *Shirakaba*, for example, included a partial translation of Kandinsky's *Klänge (Sounds)*, translated as "Hibiki" ("Reverberations" or "Echoes") by Koizumi

⁹⁸ See Ijiri Raku, "Kyoto ni okeru Kandinsukii juyō." (*Kyoto Sangyo University Essays, Social Sciences and Humanities Series* 34, March 2006), 40-73.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 45-46.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

¹⁰¹ Ijiri, "Kandinsukii juyō saishōki no kōsatsu," 65.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁰³ Sato, "Kandinsukii to Nihon," 32-33.

Magane, the same group member who had translated Gauguin's *Noa Noa* a year earlier. Unfortunately, *Klänge*, which was intended to unite images and words in a single work of art, was printed in a severely abridged form, including only nine of the original thirty eight poems, and none of the accompanying woodcuts. What was one of the earliest major publications of expressionist poetry in Japan was so heavily abridged that the impact of the original work was almost entirely lost.¹⁰⁴

Koizumi writes in his introduction to the translation that he attempted to include only the poems from *Klänge* that are comparatively easy to understand; having heard from viewers of Kandinsky's woodcuts that they are inaccessible, he assumes that the same will be true for his poetry:

Concerning his pictures – nearly all of them are woodcuts – from many people who have opened up about them, the response I hear is *I don't get it*. And I still think that this reply is a very natural one. Their feelings are probably the same not just for his pictures but also about his poems. They are not at all easy things to understand. The ones that I have translated here are those from among the collection that are comparatively easy to grasp.¹⁰⁵

Like others, Koizumi expresses an appreciation for Kandinsky's theory, but shows uncertainty about how to approach his art.

His woodcuts, especially the color woodcuts, have something extremely interesting about them. Among them, there are some that seem like they match his theory exactly. His poems are by no means fluent, elaborate things, but you can sense them being sung out energetically in a good mood. I always have a good feeling toward his pictures and his poems. It's like the feeling of meeting a close friend. I want to love Kandinsky like a close friend.¹⁰⁶

Though his decision to select only the poems that he deemed comprehensible for translation belies a certain misunderstanding of Kandinsky's intentions, Koizumi's emotional reaction to the work seems genuine and appropriate.

¹⁰⁴ Sakai, *Doitsu hyōgenshugi to Nihon*, 283-284.

¹⁰⁵ Koizumi Magane, "Hibiki," *Shirakaba*, September, 1913, 75-76.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

Klänge appeared later in partial and full translations in other magazines, first in March 1918 in *Bijutsu shinpō* with full and partial translations of 17 of the poems by Sono Raizō (1891-1973).¹⁰⁷ In this case, the translator recognized and wrote that *Klänge* was supposed to be an integrated work of art with poetry and images, but chose not to publish it that way. Later that same year the poems were published again in *Chūō kōron*, with translation and commentary by Murayama Tomoyoshi. However, *Klänge* was never published in a format that kept the text fully intact or preserved Kandinsky's attempts at synthesis by including all of the woodcuts.¹⁰⁸

This piecemeal approach to Kandinsky's work – splitting visual art from theory and even separating the parts of a single work – was facilitated by the fact that Kandinsky's art was not initially introduced for its own merits, but rather as the most extreme example of the new art movements taking place in Europe at the time, and as an example of the “non-Naturalism” that arose after Impressionism.¹⁰⁹ It is possible Kandinsky's visual works would have had even less of a presence in Japan if it were not for the efforts of groups like *Shirakaba* preparing the way by familiarizing at least a small part of the Japanese public with the art that preceded and was contemporary with Kandinsky's.¹¹⁰

The significance of *Shirakaba*, which published Gauguin's *Noa Noa* and Kandinsky's *Klänge*, as a pathway for exposure to western art and literature for Akutagawa and his contemporaries cannot be overestimated. Like most artists of his generation, Akutagawa regularly read *Shirakaba* and his conception of European art was presumably shaped in large part by the contents of the magazine. *Shirakaba* published essays on and by many of the artists that were included in its exhibitions, in addition to reproductions of visual works. In publication for a significant portion of Akutagawa's lifetime and career (April 1910–September 1923), *Shirakaba* may have been one of the first ways by which Akutagawa encountered Kandinsky.

By attending *Shirakaba* exhibitions, Akutagawa was exposed to a wide variety of art, including Romantic, Naturalist, Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, and Expressionist

¹⁰⁷ Sono was an aestheticist, who wrote about Kandinsky's activities with groups including NKVM and Blaue Reiter; he described Blaue Reiter for probably the first time in Japan, wrote commentary on “On Stage Composition” and translated *Der gelbe Klang* in full for the magazine *Kamen* – in short, he produced a huge volume of writing on Kandinsky. See Sakai, *Doitsu hyōgenshugi to Nihon*, 290-292.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 284.

¹⁰⁹ Ijiri, “Kandinsukii juyō saishōki no kōsatsu,” 91.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

works.¹¹¹ This impressive range speaks to the fact that a number of the founding members of the Shirakaba group had a strong interest in the visual arts, including Mushanokōji Saneatsu, who was enamored with Cézanne, van Gogh, Gauguin, and Matisse.¹¹² Images by and articles on Cézanne and Gauguin were published in *Shirakaba* from almost the first issue (issues 1-2 [May 1910] and 1-3 [June 1910]), though most of the reproductions from the first year belonged to artists working in Naturalist or Symbolist modes, most notably Rodin, who got his own whole issue and a dedicated exhibition. 1911 saw the inclusion of van Gogh (issues 2-2 [February 1911], 2-6 [June 1911], 2-9 [Sept. 1911], 2-10 [Oct. 1911]), Renoir (issue 2-3 [March 1911]), and Manet (issue 2-4 [April 1911]).

In 1912, the same year that the Fusain kai held its first exhibition, *Shirakaba* included a number of essays by and about European painters and visual artists, including the aforementioned *Noa Noa* by Paul Gauguin (issues 3-1, 3-2, 3-4, 3-7, 3-8); an article on the Stein collection (issue 3-1); one by Mushanokōji on Post-Impressionism (issue 3-1); a few articles on Rodin, following the dedicated issue on Rodin of the previous year (issues 3-2, 3-7, 3-8); and an entire issue devoted to van Gogh (issue 3-11). Throughout the year, quite a few reproductions from Gauguin, Cézanne, van Gogh, Matisse, Rodin, and Munch were featured. 1913 would see these same artists featured in the 6th *Shirakaba* exhibition, the roster of which was entirely European. It featured works by Symbolists, Impressionists, Post-Impressionists, Cubists, Expressionists, and Fauves.¹¹³

Though Kandinsky's pictures did not appear in *Shirakaba*, as those of his contemporaries did on many occasions, many of the writers and artists connected to the magazine in various ways – often through groups like Fusain kai – frequently published elsewhere translations of Kandinsky's writing, as well as critical essays addressing his art and theory. Magazines like *Bijutsu shinpō*, *Geijutsu shinpō*, *Shinchō*, *Kamen*, and *Waseda*

¹¹¹ Aeba Takao, "Akutagawa Ryūnosuke to Yōroppa geijutsu," in Andō et. al, eds., *Mō hitori no Akutagawa Ryūnosuke*, 66.

¹¹² "I saw paintings by Cézanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh and Matisse at Y's yesterday ... and was excited. I thought an artist ought to come to this stage. I thought I was lingering halfway." Mushanokōji Saneatsu, "Tegami kara," *Shirakaba*, December, 1911. Translation from Nakamura Mitsuo, *Modern Japanese Fiction 1868-1926* (Tokyo: Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai, 1968), p. 32.

¹¹³ Koike Masahiro, Tasaka Hiroshi, and Maekawa Masahide, eds., *Shirakaba to kindai bijutsu* (Chiba: Chiba Prefectural Art Museum, 1989). This publication has no page numbers, but the information above is found in the sections "Shirakaba shusai tenrankai mokuroku" and "Shirakaba kankei ryaku nenpu oyobi zasshi *Shirakaba* bijutsu kiji/sashie".

bungaku may not have achieved the circulation of *Shirakaba* or general-interest magazines, but were nevertheless popular among artists like Akutagawa. Any serious student of the arts could easily find a wealth of material written about – and by – Kandinsky.

The first of Kandinsky's major texts to appear in Japanese was *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (*Concerning the Spiritual in Art*). The book was originally published in German in December 1911, then soon after in Russian. Ishii, who was in Europe at the time, sent a copy of the German edition to Kinoshita in Japan in 1913, and Kinoshita published an abridged translation, entitled *Chūshō geijutsu ron* (*Abstract Art Theory*), that same year.¹¹⁴ A combination of translated segments and Kinoshita's own summaries, this version outlines the key points of Kandinsky's argument, including the terms "internal necessity" (*naishin yōkyū no genri*) and "inner sound" (*naibu no koe*), as well as Kandinsky's view on art expressing the spirit of an age in transition from materialism to spiritualism.¹¹⁵

Sono Raizō's aforementioned partial translation of *Über das Geistige* appeared two years later in the December issue of *Geijutsu shinpō*, but a full translation of the book would not appear in Japanese until the Chikuma Shōbō edition, with the more accurate title *Geijutsu ni okeru seishinteki na mono*, in 1924. However, the first full translation of the book into English, entitled "The Art of Spiritual Harmony," was done in 1914 by Kandinsky's friend Michael T. H. Sadler, and could have been read by Akutagawa well before a full Japanese translation became available.

Each text that became available, from *Über das Geistige* to *Klänge* and *Der gelbe Klang*,¹¹⁶ and later *Kandinsky 1901-1913*¹¹⁷ offered an additional facet of Kandinsky's personality and art theory to the Japanese public. The Kandinsky to whom Akutagawa would have been exposed through these texts must have formed a stark contrast to the rhetoric that dominated the writing scene in Japan at the time. The relative claustrophobia and confessionals of the I-novels are nowhere to be found in Kandinsky's writings, which, despite the very different nature of each of the four texts mentioned above, share a

¹¹⁴ Ijiri, "Kandinskii juyō saishōki no kōsatsu," 67-68. Kinoshita's was the only early translation to be done directly from the original German.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 76.

¹¹⁶ Full translation published in *Kamen* magazine, March 1914.

¹¹⁷ Full translation published by Chikuma Shōbō in 1924, along with *Über das Geistige*.

common sense of openness – to the world, to artistic media, to influence and sensations from all sources. This kind of openness is linked to the pursuit of the *gesamtkunstwerk*, or monumental work of art, which was a key part of Kandinsky's individual activities as well as his work with other artists and groups.

CHAPTER 4

COMPARISON OF THE ART THEORIES OF AKUTAGAWA AND KANDINSKY

(4.1) Introduction to critical texts

Texts such as *Über das Geistige (Concerning the Spiritual in Art)*, *Klänge (Sounds)*, *Der gelbe Klang (The Yellow Sound)*, and *Kandinsky 1901-1913* (which includes “Reminiscences”), all of which were imported to Japan and translated during Akutagawa’s lifetime, are essential to understanding Kandinsky’s most important theoretical concepts. With *Shirakaba* and the art culture in Tokyo of the 1910s and 1920s acting as a catalyst, it is more than likely that Akutagawa not only had access to these texts, but also had the inclination to seek them out. His personal letters and non-fiction essays illustrate a general interest in art, and show the resonance of Akutagawa’s art theory with Kandinsky’s. The connection is suggested by Akutagawa himself in the well-known essay series “Bungeiteki na, amari ni bungeiteki na” (“Literary, all too Literary,” 1927).¹¹⁸

In addition to Kandinsky’s critical texts, sources such as the *Yomiuri shinbun* show that, although critical attention tended to focus on his writing, at least some of the artist’s visual works were available in Japan during the Taishō period. Given Akutagawa’s involvement with art and regular attendance of exhibitions such as the Buntens and Nikatens, he may have been able to see some of Kandinsky’s works in person at other exhibitions like those of the Shirakaba group, where western works were shown. Reproductions, such as those that accompanied the translations of *Der gelbe Klang*, *Über das Geistige*, and “Study for Composition 4” in *Kamen* magazine in March 1914,¹¹⁹ were also available from fairly early on, though low-quality at first.

Akutagawa had enough familiarity with Kandinsky’s visual works to include a reference to the *Improvisations* in “Bungeiteki,” but Kandinsky’s writing would have

¹¹⁸ Kandinsky is not the only artist that Akutagawa includes in his writing – notably, Cézanne, van Gogh, Gauguin, Renoir, and other visual artists appear alongside the expected names from literature, such as Anatole France and Prosper Mérimée.

¹¹⁹ These translations were accompanied by the images *Lyricaly* (by Kandinsky) and *Horses* (by Franz Marc).

been not only more easily available, but likely more relevant to Akutagawa's concerns. Of the texts that Kandinsky produced over his long career (active 1896-1944), two of the most influential were *Über das Geistige*, first published December 1, 1911 (dated 1912), and *Der Blaue Reiter* [Almanac], following half a year later in May 1912. Produced during one of the busiest periods of Kandinsky's career, during which he made his breakthrough into abstraction on canvas and began to clearly articulate his theory of art in writing,¹²⁰ each of these two texts corresponds to a major tenet in that theory: *Über das Geistige* to "internal necessity" – this book being his best explanation of the idea to that point – and *Der Blaue Reiter*, which includes *Der gelbe Klang*, to the ideal of "synthesis," a concept which drives the artist to work across art forms, genres, and time periods.

Among Kandinsky's writings, *Über das Geistige*, considered one of the major texts of modernism in art, has likely had the greatest impact. Kandinsky writes in "Reminiscences" that this book was the result of at least ten or twelve years of notes,¹²¹ and that "it was not so much a question of my writing this book as of its writing itself. I jotted down individual experiences that, as I later observed, stood in an organic relationship to one another."¹²² The result is an extremely rich text, full of convoluted and partially-developed arguments, that is often very difficult to follow. Divided into two large chapters containing four sections apiece, *Über das Geistige* is an admirable attempt at organizing a theory so complex that even Kandinsky himself seems to lose track of his argument at times.¹²³

¹²⁰ See William R. Everdell, *The First Moderns: Profiles in the Origins of Twentieth-Century Thought* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 303. and Peter Selz, "The Aesthetic Theories of Wassily Kandinsky and their Relationship to the Origin of Non-Objective Painting," *The Art Bulletin* 39, no. 2 (June 1957): 130.

¹²¹ "Kandinsky formulated his ideas of non-objective painting over an extended period of time. Notes for his essay, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, date back to 1901 while the book was completed in 1910. His thoughts were continued in his essay "Über die Formfrage" for the famous almanac *Der blaue Reiter*. Both essays were first published in 1912. These essays are to a considerable extent based on previous aesthetic theory and were very much in keeping with the avant-garde thinking of the prewar years. They also constitute almost a programmatic manifesto for the expressionist generation." Selz, "The Aesthetic Theories of Wassily Kandinsky," 127.

¹²² Wassily Kandinsky, "Reminiscences," in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art, Volume One (1901-1921)*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall & Co., 1982), 373.

¹²³ See Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo, introduction to *On the Spiritual in Art*, in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, 114-118.

Kandinsky wrote often and he wrote well, publishing constantly in one format or another over the whole course of his career.¹²⁴ His essays run the gamut, from relatively concise explanations of concepts addressed elsewhere at length,¹²⁵ to reactions against criticism,¹²⁶ to extended metaphors and illustrations.¹²⁷ For the most part, the shorter essays address just one or only a very few topics at a time and remain fairly focused. These peripheral texts help clarify the main points raised in *Über das Geistige*. While primarily a visual artist, Kandinsky “recognized the value of verbal reasoning for an artist and encouraged it to roam freely except during the act of creation,” and felt that “only when the brush had completed its odyssey should the mind examine the findings with words.”¹²⁸

Although Kandinsky writes in *Über das Geistige* that theory is never in advance of works,¹²⁹ sometimes the links between theory and practice are not readily apparent. The reason that Kandinsky supplemented his visual works with essays and books, and worked also in poetry, in addition to exploring various plastic media including woodcuts and glass paintings, is that each one of those media has a different expressive capability, allowing access to a particular part of the artist’s creativity.¹³⁰ This is true as well for Akutagawa, who wrote poetry and non-fiction essays, and also produced paintings and drawings throughout his life.

Of Akutagawa’s non-fiction essays, the “Bungeiteki” series is almost certainly the most famous, and like *Über das Geistige* represents the culmination of many years of work, though it is not a fully-developed theoretical text in the same manner as

¹²⁴ “Kandinsky wrote well enough and often enough to make his intentions clear even to some who could not make head or tail of his new work.” Everdell, *The First Moderns*, 307.

¹²⁵ “Content & Form”; “Whither the New Art?”; “Schoenberg’s Pictures”; “On the Question of Form” & “On Stage Composition” [included in the *Blaue Reiter Almanac*]; “Painting as Pure Art”

¹²⁶ “The Battle for Art”; “On Understanding Art”; Postscript to *Kandinsky: Kollektiv-Ausstellung, 1902-1912*

¹²⁷ “Art Without Subject”; “Little Articles on Big Questions”

¹²⁸ Lindsay and Vergo, Introduction to *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, 11.

¹²⁹ “Theory is never in advance of practice in art, never drags practice in its train, but vice versa.” Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, 176.

¹³⁰ “Kandinsky observes that in a period of spiritual rebirth the arts move closer to each other, by their common disposition to abstraction, their common concern for the fundamentals, and their common pursuit of inner nature. Like Klee, he believed that music is the most comprehensive art, and thanks to a theory elaborated over the centuries can serve as a model for other arts. Nevertheless, the boundaries of each art must be respected. ‘One art can learn from another how to use its common principle and how to apply it to the fundamentals of its own medium,’ and ‘Every art has its own strength, which cannot be replaced by another.’” Will Grohmann, *Wassily Kandinsky: Life and Work* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 1959), 87.

Kandinsky's book. It is in the first section of "Bungeiteki," in which Akutagawa considers the idea of a *'hanashi' rashii hanashi no nai shōsetsu*, or "novel with no 'story'-like story," that he suggests Kandinsky's works as examples of paintings that have no *dessin* – a quality that he would like to see replicated in works of literature.

I don't think that novels that have no 'story'-like story are the best. Accordingly, I won't say "write only novels with no 'story'-like story." First of all, my novels too, for the most part, have 'stories'. A painting with no *dessin* cannot exist. In exactly the same way, a novel is something that stands upon its 'story.' (What I mean by 'story' [*hanashi*] is not simply what we call 'tales' [*monogatari*].) Strictly speaking, it's likely that no sort of novel can exist where there is absolutely no 'story'. Therefore, I naturally show respect as well for novels with 'stories'. Beyond the fact that since the tale of *Daphnis and Chloe*, every novel and epic poem has been built on 'story', can anyone deny respect to novels with 'stories'? *Madame Bovary* has a 'story', *War and Peace* has a 'story', *The Red and the Black* has a 'story'...

Still, what determines the value of a novel is decidedly not the strengths and weaknesses of its 'story'. Needless to say, the question of whether it has or does not have a fantastic, original story should be out of bounds when it comes to assessing a novel's value. (As everyone knows, Tanizaki Jun'ichirō is the author of many novels that stand upon fantastic 'stories'. Some of those same novels, built on fantastic 'stories', are likely to remain with us for a very long time. However, their long life is not entrusted by any means to the question of whether or not they have fantastic 'stories'.) If we go ahead and consider it again, even the presence or absence of a 'story'-like story is unrelated to this problem [of assessing value]. As I said before, the novel with no 'story' – or rather, the novel with no 'story'-like story – I don't think that it's the best thing. However, I do think that this kind of novel can also exist.

Of course, a novel with no 'story'-like story is not merely a novel where you've written down your own various affairs. It is, among all novels, the one closest to poetry. And yet, rather than calling them prose poems, by far these are closer to novels. If I'm to repeat myself a third time, I don't think that this novel with no 'story' is the best kind. But, if we look at it from the point of what is 'pure' – from the point of having no vulgar interest, these are the most pure novels. To take an example from painting again, a painting without *dessin* cannot exist. (The several Kandinsky paintings entitled *Improvisations* and so forth being the exception.) However, there exist paintings that entrust their lives more to color than to *dessin*. The number of Cézanne paintings that have

fortunately come over to Japan should clearly prove this fact. I have an interest in novels that are like these paintings.¹³¹

As he begins his cross-media discussion of the relevance of structure to the value of a work of art, Akutagawa cites Kandinsky and Cézanne as key examples of artists whose works have successfully moved away from reliance on conventional structure.¹³² By referring to these artists, and by metaphorically linking literature and painting, he also introduces the key words *hanashi* and *dessin*, which tie together several of the most important sections of “Bungeiteki” into a loose discussion of his general theory of art.

In a manner typical of Akutagawa’s critical and theoretical writings, “Bungeiteki” is highly fractured, split into fifty short segments (forty in the original run, plus ten more in a supplement), addressing a variety of different topics. There is a certain amount of continuity between the sections that form the famous ‘debate’ with Tanizaki Jun’ichirō, whose participation pressed Akutagawa to clarify his thoughts on art and literature. However, even with a push from another writer, the result is spectacularly unfocused; Akutagawa never brings any particular argument to development, but rather presents a number of key ideas, concepts, and terms to his readers for consideration over the course of the essay series. “Bungeiteki,” despite its piecemeal character, remains an important critical text because it touches on a number of issues that were part of the wider discourse on fiction in Japan at the time, as well as those that affected Akutagawa’s writing specifically.

Some of Akutagawa’s other critical texts address a single topic in an extended fashion,¹³³ but more often he follows the approach of “Bungeiteki,” with essays composed of small, mostly autonomous sections that may be linked loosely by an overall theme in

¹³¹ Akutagawa, “Bungeiteki,” 707-708.

¹³² Kandinsky also admired Cézanne for similar reasons: “Cézanne, the seeker after new laws of form, ... knows how to create a living being out of a teacup – or rather, how to recognize such a being within the cup. He can raise ‘still-life’ to a level where externally ‘dead’ objects come internally alive. He treats these objects just as he does people, for he had the gift of seeing inner life everywhere. He expresses them in terms of color, thus creating an inner, painterly note, and molds them into a form that can be raised to the level of abstract-sounding, harmonious, often mathematical formulas. It is not a man, nor an apple, nor a tree that is represented; they are all used by Cézanne to create an object with an internal, painterly quality: a picture.” Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, 151.

¹³³ “Watashi to sōsaku” (1917); “Izumu to iu go no imi shidai” (1918); “Bungei ippanron” (1925); “Watakushi’ shōsetsuron shiken” (1925)

the manner of *zuihitsu*, but rarely develop a single argument.¹³⁴ This fragmentary approach seems to have suited Akutagawa, for it carried over into his fiction as well, as seen in texts like “Aru ahō no isshō” (“A Fool’s Life,” 1927). Still, even if these shorter texts are just as fractured as “Bungeiteki,” reading them can help give another perspective or approach to some of what is in “Bungeiteki” and contribute to understanding Akutagawa’s art theory.

Both Akutagawa’s and Kandinsky’s critical writings can be difficult to parse, due to the esoteric subject matter and to the indefinite terms they use to describe it. While Akutagawa seems content to leave the burden of understanding to the reader, Kandinsky spends a considerable amount of writing getting closer by degrees to a clear explanation of his artistic philosophy. Pictorial invention in the twentieth century, however, has always outpaced nomenclature, a phenomenon hardly restricted to painting. Kandinsky seems to understand this limitation, writing in a 1913 postscript to a catalogue of his works (*Kandinsky: Kollektiv-Ausstellung 1902-1912*) that “in general, it is the fate of the artist to be misunderstood.”¹³⁵ Despite his resignation to this fact, Kandinsky persists in his attempts at clarification, and he writes a few paragraphs later that “My aim is: to create by pictorial means, which I love above all other artistic means, pictures that as purely pictorial objects have their own independent, intense life.”¹³⁶

Even such a seemingly definitive statement had a limited effect on Kandinsky’s readership. In “Reminiscences,” Kandinsky writes about the reception of *Über das Geistige* and *Der Blaue Reiter* [*Almanac*].

Both books were, and are, often misunderstood. They are thought of as “manifestoes,” and their authors branded as artists who have “come adrift” as a result of theorizing, who have wandered by mistake into the realms of cerebral activity. Nothing, however, was further from my mind than to appeal to the understanding, to reason. This task would still be premature today and will present itself to artists as the next, vital, and inevitable aim (=step) in the further development of art. No longer can anything endanger the firmly established spirit that has taken powerful root, not even calculation in art, which is so widely distrusted.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ “Geijutsu sono ta” (1919); “Chōkōdō zakki” (1918-1924); “Shibai mandan” (1926)

¹³⁵ Kandinsky, “Postscript,” in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, 344.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 345.

¹³⁷ Kandinsky, “Reminiscences,” in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, 381.

In developing his comprehensive theory of art, Kandinsky built upon the work of the Impressionists, Symbolists, and Cubists before him, and went further than any of them.¹³⁸ Kandinsky did not embark on his art career until the age of thirty – turning down an appointment to the law faculty at the University of Dorpat and moving suddenly from Moscow to Munich – though he had drawn and painted since childhood.¹³⁹ By the time he enrolled at Anton Azbe’s atelier and rented an apartment in Schwabing,¹⁴⁰ the modern movement was well underway. By the time he started painting professionally, Kandinsky’s wide range of prior experience, not only in law but also economics and ethnography,¹⁴¹ plus his extensive travels, had prepared him for the task of pushing modern art beyond what his predecessors and many contemporaries were doing.¹⁴²

Akutagawa was also an artist with an international and multi-media mindset. His upbringing, which included studies of multiple languages and the literatures and arts of Japan, China, Europe, and America, put him in a position to receive and learn from developments in the European visual arts. Encountering this variety, and adopting an international perspective from a fairly early age, Akutagawa was perhaps uniquely able to interpret and integrate Kandinsky’s theories into his own philosophy of art. A close look at Akutagawa’s theoretical essays side by side with Kandinsky’s supports the hypothesis that Kandinsky was a source of influence for Akutagawa. The overlap between the concepts of internal necessity and poetic spirit provides a new way to understand

¹³⁸ “Kandinsky made non-objectivity the very foundation of his pictorial imagery. Kandinsky formulated his ideas of non-objective painting over an extended period of time. Notes for his essay, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, date back to 1901 while the book was completed in 1910. His thoughts were continued in his essay “Über die Formfrage” for the famous almanac *Der blaue Reiter*. Both essays were first published in 1912. These essays are to a considerable extent based on previous aesthetic theory and were very much in keeping with the avant-garde thinking of the prewar years. They also constitute almost a programmatic manifesto for the expressionist generation.” Selz, “The Aesthetic Theories of Wassily Kandinsky,” 127.

¹³⁹ See Kandinsky, “Autobiographical Note,” in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, 343.

¹⁴⁰ For Kandinsky’s time as an art student, see Annette and Luc Vezin, *Kandinsky and Der Blaue Reiter* (Paris: Finest S.A./Editions Pierre Terrail, 1992), 42-48.

¹⁴¹ For Kandinsky’s educational background and ethnographic studies, see Vezin, *Kandinsky and Der Blaue Reiter*, 31-32. and Peg Weiss, *Kandinsky and Old Russia: The Artist as Ethnographer and Shaman* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 1-70.

¹⁴² “Compared to those of his own generation, Kandinsky was a late starter. ... Though a tardy beginning can be discouraging, given the right circumstances and temperament, a late starter can harvest the best and highest fruit from his generational tree. This happened with Kandinsky. His extensive travels and belief in synthesis put him into a position to pluck the fruit that most of his predecessors in France, Russia, and Germany could see but not reach – non objective painting.” Lindsay and Vergo, Introduction to *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, 19.

Akutagawa's argument in "Bungeiteki," and Kandinsky's writings on structure and the literary elements of painting also help clarify Akutagawa's thoughts on *dessin* and its relationship to *hanashi*, specifically the '*hanashi*' *rashii hanashi no nai shōsetsu*.

(4.2) Internal necessity and poetic spirit

The key concept in *Über das Geistige*, and the central idea around which Kandinsky constructs the whole of his art theory, is what he calls "internal necessity." This term appears frequently in Kandinsky's critical writing, not only in *Über das Geistige*, but in many of his essays as well, and is key to understanding Kandinsky's approach to art. Internal necessity, as he describes it, serves as a starting point for all of an artist's creative efforts and dictates everything of significance about the creative process. Internal necessity arises from within the artist and is independent of the material world; it is a *generating* force that is inborn and preexisting, and is not *produced* as a reaction to an external environment.

Internal necessity arises from three mystical sources. It is composed of three mystical necessities:

1. Every artist, as creator, must express what is peculiar to himself (element of personality).
2. Every artist, as a child of his time, must express what is peculiar to his own time (element of style, in its inner value, compounded of the language of the time and the language of the race, as long as the race exists as such).
3. Every artist, as a servant of art, must express what is peculiar to art in general (element of pure and eternally artistic, which pervades every individual, every people, every age, and which is to be seen in the works of every artist, of every nation, and of every period, and which, being the principal element of art, knows neither time nor space).¹⁴³

¹⁴³ Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, 173. Alternative translation of this passage: "Inner necessity originates from three elements: (1) Every artist, as a creator, has something in him which demands expression (this is the element of personality). (2) Every artist, as the child of his time, is impelled to express the spirit of his age (this is the element of style) – dictated by the period and particular country to which the artist belongs (it is doubtful how long the latter distinction will continue). (3) Every artist, as a servant of art, has to help the cause of art (this is the quintessence of art, which in all ages and among nationalities)." Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art, and painting in particular*, trans. Michael T. H. Sadler (New York: George Wittenborn, Inc., 1955), 52.

This mystical force is the main drive behind an artist's efforts; internal necessity pushes artists to create works of art that have strong "inner sounds." These "sounds" connect the artist's soul to the work and the work to the souls of the audience. The expansiveness of the term "internal necessity" becomes clear when Kandinsky attempts to define it – the three mystical necessities that he outlines include everything from the individual up to the concept of art on a universal scale. The first element in Kandinsky's list is what is now generally expected to appear in any work of art or literature – this is the value of personal expression that was established as the modern movement progressed.¹⁴⁴ The second element expands outward from the individual to include the context in which that individual lives.¹⁴⁵ It is the third element, however, that of the "pure and eternally artistic," that Kandinsky values above all else.

Kandinsky's explanation of internal necessity shows an overlap of his concept with Akutagawa's "poetic spirit." Reading Akutagawa through Kandinsky helps make sense of Akutagawa's fairly disjointed but clearly important statements in "Bungeiteki" and other essays on the topics of poetic spirit, structure, and purity.

Regarding the element of personality in art, the idea that an author can only express what already exists in his or her mind and heart is a recurring theme for Akutagawa. It comes up in an essay on the topic of I-novels,¹⁴⁶ and later in a section of "Bungeiteki" as well, where he explains his stance this way: "I have no intention of writing only 'storyless stories' from now on. Each of us can do *only what he is able*. I doubt whether my abilities are even suited to creating this kind of novel. Not only that, but doing so is by no means an ordinary job... novels, among all art forms, are the most inclusive – this is the reason why I have been so devoted to them."¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ See Suzi Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed?* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2004), 34-41.

¹⁴⁵ Matisse wrote in *Der Blaue Reiter* [*Almanac*], "Whether we like it or not, we belong to our time and we share its opinions, its feelings and even its mistakes." Vezin, *Kandinsky and Der Blaue Reiter*, 215. See also René Huyghe, ed., *Larousse Encyclopedia of Modern Art: From 1800 to the Present Day*, trans. Emily Evershed, Dennis Gilbert, Hugh Newbury, Ralph DeSaram, Richard Waterhouse, and Katherine Watson (New York: Prometheus Press, 1965), 250. "...art can never in fact divorce itself from its times, and it reflects them all the more profoundly when it tries to escape them."

¹⁴⁶ Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, "Watakushi shōsetsuron shiken," in *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshū*, volume 5 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1928), 101-107.

¹⁴⁷ Akutagawa, "Bungeiteki," 712-713. Italics appear as *bōten* (emphatic dots) in the original text.

An earlier essay, “Shōsetsu sakuhō jussoku” (“Ten Rules for the Composition of Novels,” 1926), contains more discussion on what constitutes this element of personal expression in the expansive, inclusive format of the novel.

Novelists are, aside from being poets, historians and biographers as well...[If this is the case], then inside each author must also exist a writer of the singular biography, the autobiography. It follows that the novelist, moreso than the ordinary person, must complete time and again works regarding his own gloomy life...Supposing that the poets residing inside of novelists are stronger than the historians and biographers, the fact is inescapable that their lives get more and more disastrous as they go.

The writer’s multi-faceted inner self is a source of creative power, but can also be a destructive force. “Those who become novelists are like chauffeurs who drive cars on the street without graduating driving school. They can’t expect life to be peaceful and uneventful.”¹⁴⁸ There is a connection here as well to the discussion regarding Akutagawa’s use of source materials and his defensiveness over being seen as unoriginal or derivative. If the novelist must play the roles of historian and (auto)biographer as well as writer, then even the most fictional works contain a part of the person who wrote them.

Moving outward from the personal to the element of cultural and temporal specificity, Akutagawa includes the following passage in a later section of “Shōsetsu sakuhō jussoku” addressing the connections between literature and the conventions of a given location or time:

(#8) The novels of a given country in a given age are subject to their own various conventions. (As determined by history.) Those wishing to become novelists must work hard and submit to these conventions. The benefits of submitting to these conventions are, first, being able to create your own novels riding on the shoulders of your predecessors; and second, being able to avoid the barking of the *bundan* dogs through diligent observation of the conventions. Even so, it’s still not the same as leaving behind works that are your original creations.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ Akutagawa, “Shōsetsu sakuhō jussoku,” in *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshū*, volume 6 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1928), 838-839.

¹⁴⁹ Akutagawa, “Shōsetsu sakuhō jussoku,” 840-841.

Akutagawa rather ironically states that for those who cast off the conventions of the time and place in which they live, it becomes impossible to function; those who try to work completely outside of the existing arrangement of the literary world are destined to “remain lonely stars floating outside of the literary solar system.”¹⁵⁰ This statement is intended to be read as tongue-in-cheek, coming as it does from one of those very “lonely stars” working to develop a kind of expression that does not depend on existing conventions. In Kandinsky’s list of the mystical necessities that make up internal necessity, the second element of “style,” which is temporally and spatially bound, inevitably appears in every work of art, reflecting the context of its creation. The presence of this element is not inherently negative in Kandinsky’s view, though he makes the point that works that are too heavy in personal and historical elements will not have long-lasting significance.

In contrast, Akutagawa’s opinion on adhering to the conventions of a given place or time seems much more negative. Like Takamura Kōtarō, he sees such conventions as potential restrictions on an artist’s free expression. Akutagawa recognizes that the temporal and locational elements of art do not necessarily correspond with the personal element, and he upholds the element of individuality in cases where the two conflict, even if it results in writers divorcing themselves from their literary community. However, by the next year, the personal element in his theory had ceded some territory to the temporal:

From time to time I think along these lines – there is no doubt that, even had I never been born, someone would have written the literature I have written. Accordingly, rather than being creations of me personally, such works are individual blades of grass that grew up among so many blades from the soil of the age. . . . Whenever I think this way, without fail I become strangely dejected.¹⁵¹

A similar passage is found in an essay from earlier the same year, “Shibai mandan,” (“Play Chat”) in which Akutagawa writes that “of course, even if one writer should perish, right away someone else will grip the handle of the spade that he left

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 841.

¹⁵¹ Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, “Zoku bungeiteki na, amari ni bungeiteki na,” in *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshū*, volume 15 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1997), 230-236.

behind.”¹⁵² In these two passages, Akutagawa considers the relationship between the artist and the age, seemingly concluding that his works had become largely products of his temporal and spatial location, rather than his individual expression.

When Kinoshita Mokutarō translated Kandinsky’s writing, he used the term *naishin yōkyū no genri* for the “principle of internal necessity” (this was later translated by others as *naiteki hitsuzensei no genri*).¹⁵³ For Kandinsky, this key term played a central role in his writing and theory throughout his career.¹⁵⁴ In Akutagawa’s writing, the term that serves as a focal point for discussing artistic inspiration and its effects is *shiteki seishin*, or “poetic spirit,” which appears prominently in the “Bungeiteki” essays. Like “internal necessity” for Kandinsky, Akutagawa’s “poetic spirit” is a broad concept that seems to inform his entire outlook on literature and provides an organizing principle by which other important features of his art and philosophy can be understood.¹⁵⁵

The term “poetic spirit” first appears in “Bungeiteki” in section two, “Answering Mr. Tanizaki Jun’ichirō,” which is the beginning of the famous “debate.” In response to Tanizaki’s argument that “excluding the interest of plot is throwing away the privilege of the novel form,” Akutagawa writes that Tanizaki is looking for markers of literary value in all the wrong places. Rather than structural elements and source material, it is the depth of the poetic spirit that went into the creation of a given work that determines its value.¹⁵⁶ Akutagawa identifies poetic spirit as a quality belonging to the artist, but notes that it can be more or less apparent in the works of the same author – for example, he sees

¹⁵² Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, “Shibai mandan,” in *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshū*, volume 5 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1928), 117.

¹⁵³ Ijiri Raku, “Kandinsukii juyō saishōki no kōsatsu – 1912/Taishō gannen goro no uchi to soto.” (*Kyoto Sangyo University Essays, Social Sciences and Humanities Series* 36, 2007), 79.

¹⁵⁴ See Lindsay and Vergo, Introduction to *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, 21, 32. “Artists sometimes adopt a word or phrase that is central to their thought. For Alberti, it was *historia*; for Reynolds, the *element of mind*; for Cézanne, the *motif*; and for Kandinsky, *inner necessity*. Kandinsky used this phrase with a quiet yet assertive conviction. Many paragraphs in his writing lead into thickets of unprovables, leaving this phrase to be discovered in the dense center, lying in wait like the serene smile on Buddha’s face.”

¹⁵⁵ See Seiji M. Lippit, *Topographies of Japanese Modernism* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2002), 46. Akutagawa says the “poetic spirit” is essential to the novel, but never concretely defines it.

¹⁵⁶ Akutagawa, “Bungeiteki,” 726. See also Lippit, *Topographies*, 48. Poetic spirit is not “poems”, but “refers to a general literary category opposed to prose” ... poetic spirit “signals Akutagawa’s resistance to the reduction of the novel – an essentially mixed genre – to a single principle of confession or autobiography.”

poetic spirit in Tanizaki's *Shisei (The Tattooer, 1910)* but not in *Ai sureba koso (Because One Loves, 1922)*.¹⁵⁷

In a later "Bungeiteki" section, entitled "Shiteki seishin," Akutagawa recounts a follow-up conversation with Tanizaki:

When I met with Tanizaki and stated my refutation [to his earlier statements], he asked me, "So what does your 'poetic spirit' indicate?" My 'poetic spirit' is lyrical poetry in the broadest sense. Of course I gave this response. And so Tanizaki said, "If it's like that, isn't it in everything?" As I stated at that time, I'm not denying that it's in everything. *Madame Bovary, Hamlet, The Divine Comedy, Gulliver's Travels* – all of these are the products of poetic spirit. Any kind of idea, above and beyond being served up in a literary work of art, must have the sacred fire of poetic spirit running through it. What I'm talking about is how you can get that flame to blaze up. Half or more is probably natural talent. No, the power of diligence will not have more than the expected effect. But the height of the flame of that sacred fire directly determines the height of the value of a given work.¹⁵⁸

Akutagawa describes poetic spirit as a quality of the artist and identifies it as something that is apparent in widely varied works, spanning many years and multiple countries and cultures. He suggests, as Kandinsky does with internal necessity, that poetic spirit arises in many contexts – that it is an enduring and universal source of creative power and artistic value.

Following Kandinsky's logic, an artist should be compelled to create by internal necessity, while realizing that *both* the personal element and the stylistic element gradually lose significance; only the third, universal "mystical necessity" is immortal and gains, rather than loses, strength over time.¹⁵⁹ The weakening of the personal and historical elements in a given work corresponds to an increase in this third mystical element. Kandinsky explains that a work of art dominated by the personal and the stylistic will more easily resonate with the minds and souls of its contemporary audience, but will ultimately have less staying power. Conversely, the greater the strength of the

¹⁵⁷ See also Akutagawa, "Bungeiteki," 753-755. Akutagawa extends this to readers and consumers of literature and art, who may also have poetic spirit.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. 726.

¹⁵⁹ "So we see, finally..., that the search for the personal, for style (and thus, incidentally, for the national)... is not of such importance as we think today." Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual*, 175.

third element – the “pure and eternally artistic” – the longer it will take a work to start touching peoples’ souls; however, its impact will be greater and longer-lasting.

This ineluctable will for expression of the objective is the force described here as internal necessity, which requires from the subjective today one general form, tomorrow another. It is the constant tireless impulse, the spring that drives [us] continually “forward.” The spirit progresses, and hence today’s inner laws of harmony are tomorrow’s external laws, which in their further application continue to have life only by virtue of this same necessity, which has become externalized. It is clear that the spiritual, inner power of art merely uses contemporary forms as a stepping stone to further progress.

In short, then, the effect of inner necessity, and thus the development of art, is the advancing expression of the external-objective in terms of the temporal-subjective. . . . For example, today’s accepted form is the triumph of yesterday’s inner necessity, which has attained a certain external level of emancipation, of freedom.¹⁶⁰

In this passage, Kandinsky uses “objective” and “subjective” in very specific ways, as indicated by his second paragraph. The “external-objective” corresponds roughly to the third element on the list of mystical necessities – this is something that exists independently of the time, location, or individual, wholly separate from the material world: an undercurrent or *basso continuo* of universal artistic energy, which may be more or less audible in any given person, place, or time. The “temporal-subjective,” on the other hand, combines the first and second elements, referring to that which is changeable in relation to the external-objective, namely chronological time, trends and movements in the arts, and the specific individuals who carry out artistic activities. It must also be noted that Kandinsky uses the word “external” in two different ways in this passage. The first is as it functions in the “external-objective” compound, meaning ‘external to the physical, material, temporary world’ – in other words, the metaphysical or spiritual aspect. The second meaning of “external” is something that is equally visible

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 174-175. Alternative translation of this passage: “The inevitable desire for expression of the *objective* is the impulse here defined as “internal necessity.” This impulse is the lever or spring driving the artist forward. Because the spirit progresses, today’s internal laws of harmony are tomorrow’s external laws, which in their further application live only through this necessity which has become external. It is clear, therefore, that the inner spirit of art uses the external form of any particular period as a stepping-stone to further advancement. In short, the effect of internal necessity and the development of art is an ever advancing expression of the eternal and objective in terms of the historical and subjective.” Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual*, 53.

and accessible to any viewer, that is, something that has been brought forth into material existence.¹⁶¹

In other words, the external appearance of art is expected to continuously change with the times, but the force driving the creation of art remains constant. This justifies Kandinsky's later argument for the equality between realistic and abstract depictions, and for the freedom of the artist to use whatever external forms he feels are necessary to express his inner content.¹⁶² Though artists and critics alike tend to view whatever form is presently popular as the ultimate form, such stylistic elements are always temporary, and will inevitably be eclipsed by whatever new means of expression the next generation of artists devises.¹⁶³ However, the "principal element of art" is, Kandinsky argues, that of the "pure and eternally artistic."

Akutagawa writes about purity in both artistic works and in individuals over the course of "Bungeiteki." In the first section, it is a characteristic of *'hanashi' rashii hanashi no nai shōsetsu*, which he sees as the most pure type of novel by virtue of having no "vulgar interest" – that is, the type of appeal that is the domain of dramas, or derived from incidents in everyday life. If the interest in a given work is based solely on the people, objects, and events that are depicted in a story or painting, then the work is the result of *mimesis*, not creation, no matter how skillfully it may be executed. To illustrate his point, Akutagawa offers the example of an incident he witnessed:

Today while I was standing in the road, I saw a fight between a rickshaw man and a driver. Not only did I witness this take place, but I felt a certain amount of interest. What could my interest have been? Any way I think about it, I can't see it as being any different from the interest of watching a fight in a stageplay. ... It's not that I am repudiating works of literature that give off this kind of interest, but I believe that there is a higher kind of interest than this. ... Novels with no 'story'-like story have limited vulgar interest.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ See also Everdell, *The First Moderns*, 316.

¹⁶² See Kandinsky, "On the Question of Form," in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, 235-257.

¹⁶³ Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual*, 175.

¹⁶⁴ Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, "Bungeiteki na, amari ni bungeiteki na," in *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshū*, volume 6 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1928), 709.

The appeal of “vulgar interest” tethers artwork to events and characters within a conventional narrative. As an example of a writer who eschews vulgar interest, Akutagawa turns his discussion to Shiga Naoya, writing that “[he] is the most pure writer of us all – or if not, he is among those who are the most pure.”¹⁶⁵ In this first section of “Bungeiteki,” purity is defined as the absence of vulgar interest in a text, a designation that applies very well to many of Shiga’s stories. Insofar as this kind of purity stems from avoidance of plot and drama, Donald Keene’s description of Shiga’s *shishōsetsu* pieces as lacking dramatic incident seems to be in line with Akutagawa’s assertion of their purity. The characterization of Shiga’s shorter works as “hardly more than sketches or meditations on trivial incidents,”¹⁶⁶ and of the celebrated *Anya kōrō* (*A Dark Night’s Passing*, 1921-1937) as a “seemingly uncontrolled, even shapeless bulk”¹⁶⁷ also suggests qualities in Shiga’s works that connect to Akutagawa’s notion of purity.

In the fourth section of “Bungeiteki,” however, the reader encounters a new definition of purity that does not seem to apply to Shiga – the aforementioned heterogeneity and willingness to use all materials and formats that Akutagawa ascribes to “the great writers of old.”¹⁶⁸ This is the path that Akutagawa takes in his own writing, experimenting with a variety of genres and styles and incorporating material from multiple literary traditions. These two distinct types of “purity” that appear in Akutagawa’s theory can be reconciled through a consideration of the key terms *hanashi* and *dessin*.

By connecting literature and painting, Akutagawa equates the roles that *hanashi* and *dessin* play in their respective media. The term *dessin* has a number of meanings, the most general of which is “sketch” – more specifically, a preparatory or underlying sketch that lays the ground for a forthcoming painting. By this definition, Akutagawa’s identification of Kandinsky’s *Improvisations* as paintings with no *dessin* falls through: Kandinsky typically executed a number of sketches and preliminary watercolors prior to completing these works.¹⁶⁹ Rather than a preparatory sketch, *dessin* in “Bungeiteki”

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 714.

¹⁶⁶ Keene, *Dawn to the West*, 462.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 466.

¹⁶⁸ Akutagawa, “Bungeiteki,” 713.

¹⁶⁹ See also Kandinsky, “On the Spiritual,” 218. He defines his three types of paintings by the process that inspired them, not by the appearance of the finished product. *Improvisations* are defined as “Chiefly

appears to indicate “structure,” as in the typical composition of a picture featuring subjects such as landscapes, objects, and people. Extended to a literary context, *dessin/hanashi* indicates conventional narrative structure, which includes plot, dramatic incident, and characterization.¹⁷⁰

Though Akutagawa argues in “Bungeiteki” for the value of ‘*hanashi*’ *rashii hanashi no nai shōsetsu*, he expresses uncertainty about his ability to write one.¹⁷¹ He also declines to speak explicitly about how an author might go about creating this type of work. By bringing Shiga into the discussion, Akutagawa offers an example of a writer who, by his consideration, has already successfully created ‘*hanashi*’ *rashii hanashi no nai shōsetsu*, using methods very different from his own.

Shiga’s works, like all *shishōsetsu*, are written within a “mode of sincerity”¹⁷² that allows little distance to exist between the roles of author, narrator, and hero, and which diminishes the possibility of dramatic irony. This absence of irony allows for a sense that such stories are truthful and direct, characteristics that came to be strongly valued by *bundan* critics and readers. Shiga’s stories are retold in carefully composed and curated forms, which satisfies the sincerity required by the genre.¹⁷³ He avoids fictionality and dramatic incident, preserving the appearance of direct narration and negating the possibility for vulgar interest.

Akutagawa writes in “Bungeiteki” that “Shiga is a realist, who doesn’t rely on fantastic descriptions,”¹⁷⁴ but it can be difficult to see how the path of realism, sincerity, and apparent nonfictionality can lead to the same goal as Akutagawa’s imaginative, abstract experimentations. Approaching this problem through Kandinsky’s theory reveals the similarities underlying these superficial differences.

unconscious, for the most part suddenly arising expressions of events of an inner character, hence impressions of ‘internal nature.’”

¹⁷⁰ It must be emphasized that this set of essential elements of a novel applies to and is derived from the patterns of works in the Western tradition. The adoption and adaption of Western modes of writing was central to the development of the *shishōsetsu* form that Shiga is considered to have mastered. “Shiga, therefore, as *shōsetsu no kamisama*, was the first acclaimed master of modern (Western-influenced) serious fiction.” Orbaugh, “Extending the Limits of Possibility,” 338.

¹⁷¹ Akutagawa, “Bungeiteki,” 712.

¹⁷² See Fowler, *Rhetoric of Confession*, 43-70, 188-189. Shiga’s “realism” does not indicate an absolutely faithful depiction of everything that happens in his actual life, just as it happened, but rather shows “the authoritative demonstration of his moral integrity.” In this case, realism = sincerity.

¹⁷³ Orbaugh, “Extending the Limits of Possibility,” 345-346.

¹⁷⁴ Akutagawa, “Bungeiteki,” 715.

In “On the Question of Form,” Kandinsky makes the case that realism and abstraction are simply two poles on the continuum of expression, and that “these two poles open up two paths, which lead ultimately to a single goal,” with neither pole being inherently better or more correct than the other.¹⁷⁵ According to Kandinsky’s explanation of what each of these “poles” denotes, the “great realism” renders objects simply, dispensing with unnecessary flourishes. By reducing what he calls the “artistic” element to a minimum, the bare object, which has little of the usual superficial beauty that viewers expect in an artwork, can transmit its inner sound most effectively. In a footnote to this passage, Kandinsky explains why artists working toward the “great realism” must strip away conventional beauty.

The spirit [of the viewer] has already absorbed the content of accustomed beauty and can find no new nourishment therein. The form of this accustomed beauty gives the accustomed pleasure to the indolent corporeal eye. The effect produced by the work of art remains limited to the realm of the corporeal. Spiritual experience becomes impossible. Hence this kind of beauty often constitutes a force that leads not toward spirit, but away from it.¹⁷⁶

Shiga’s works, with their spare, direct style, avoid the mannerisms of “accustomed beauty.” Everything from the episodes he chooses to narrate to his much praised way of writing, featuring unusually short sentences and limited vocabulary, contributes to creating the necessary simplicity.¹⁷⁷

Conversely, in the context of the “great abstraction,” objects are excluded completely and “nonmaterial” forms are used to reveal the inner sound of the artwork. “Just as in the case of realism the inner sound is intensified by the exclusion of the abstract, so too in the case of abstraction this sound is intensified by the exclusion of the real.”¹⁷⁸ In both realism and abstraction, what is important is not what ultimately appears on a canvas or in a story – that is, the individual elements, whether “objective” or “artistic” – but rather the incorporeal inner sounds that those elements convey.

¹⁷⁵ Kandinsky, “On the Question of Form,” 242. See through 243.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 243.

¹⁷⁷ For a discussion of Shiga’s language, see Orbaugh, “Extending the Limits of Possibility,” 346-356.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 244.

Thus, finally, we see that if in the case of great realism the real element appears noticeably large and the abstract noticeably small, and if in the case of great abstraction this relationship appears to be reversed, then in their ultimate basis (=goal) these two poles equal one another. Between these two antipodes can be put an = sign:

Realism = Abstraction
Abstraction = Realism

The greatest external dissimilarity becomes the greatest internal similarity.¹⁷⁹

The justification Kandinsky offers for equating the seemingly opposite poles of realism and abstraction clarifies Akutagawa's reaction to Shiga. If the two poles are equivalent as long as they allow the artist free expression and facilitate the transmission of the work's inner sounds, then there is no contradiction in an artist like Akutagawa, who was beginning to pursue the "great abstraction," admiring Shiga, who exemplified the "great realism." Both Shiga and Akutagawa de-emphasize *dessin* and reduce the importance of *hanashi* in their works, but they take different approaches to doing so. Just as both the "great abstraction" and the "great realism" are inspired by the forces of internal necessity, Akutagawa recognized that Shiga's strongly egocentric productions were driven by the same creative force – poetic spirit – that guided his own work, in which the self is fractured and dissolved.

By branching out and seeking inspiration from the visual arts, Akutagawa arrives at the '*hanashi*' *rashii hanashi no nai shōsetsu* as a viable way to implement what he learned from Kandinsky and others. In the essay "Shibai mandan" he echoes "Bungeiteki" when he writes, "I want to come across novels and plays with no plot-like plot,"¹⁸⁰ that is, with no *dessin* or conventional structure. His desire to see such works is tied to a sense of frustration or constraint at the hands of the *bundan* institution, as he makes clear later in the same essay. "[Use] a lot more ideas' – I've always wanted to say something like this

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 243-245.

¹⁸⁰ Akutagawa, "Shibai mandan," 114.

to the Japanese *bundan*. The feeling that I want more novels and plays without plot-like plots probably came about as a part of this desire.”¹⁸¹

This type of writing, and the question of whether or not it is possible to eliminate the *dessin* or *hanashi* in a piece of literature, raises questions regarding the relationship of form to content. These two parts of a work of art, whether a painting or a short story, must be coordinated in order to bring the work to completion, but both Kandinsky and Akutagawa found it necessary to clarify and rethink the ways that form and content came together as each of them worked on developing a new type of art.

(4.3) Relationship between form and content and the removal of the *dessin*

In the autobiographical “Reminiscences,” Kandinsky describes the impression of two works that informed the development of his artistic philosophy, both encountered shortly before his departure from Moscow in 1896. “I experienced two events that stamped my whole life and shook me to the depths of my being. These were an exhibition of French Impressionists in Moscow – first and foremost, *The Haystack*, by Claude Monet – and a performance of Wagner at the Court Theatre – *Lohengrin*.”¹⁸² His encounter with *The Haystack* led Kandinsky to doubt the importance or even necessity of portraying discrete objects in visual works, while the synesthetic experience of *Lohengrin* reinforced the connection between music and painting, a connection that he would later explore in his works and essays.

Concerning his experience viewing *The Haystack*, Kandinsky writes:

Previously I had known only realistic art... and suddenly, for the first time, I saw a picture. That it was a haystack, the catalogue informed me. I didn't recognize it. I found this nonrecognition painful, and thought that the painter had no right to paint so indistinctly. I had a dull feeling that the object was lacking in this picture. And I noticed with surprise and confusion that the picture not only gripped me, but impressed itself ineradicably upon my memory, always hovering quite unexpectedly before my eyes, down to the last detail. It was all unclear to me, and I was

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 115.

¹⁸² Kandinsky, “Reminiscences,” 363.

not able to draw the simple conclusions from this experience. What was, however, quite clear to me was the unsuspected power of the palette, previously concealed from me, which exceeded all my dreams. Painting took on a fairy-tale power and splendor. And, albeit unconsciously, objects were discredited as an essential element within the picture.¹⁸³

Kandinsky's experience with *The Haystack* marked the beginning of a process that led eventually to his breakthrough into abstraction around 1910-1911, a development informed by careful questioning of the value of including recognizable objects in pictures.¹⁸⁴

While Kandinsky was arguably among the most successful artists of his generation experimenting with abstraction, he was hardly alone. Starting with the Pointillists, artists in the last decades of the nineteenth century had begun a campaign of division and analysis.¹⁸⁵ Whereas earlier painting, grounded in Renaissance sensibilities, separated objects from one another by means of color, tone, and shadow, the new painting styles separated colors and shapes, allowing for all manner of distortion, breakdown, and abstraction to affect the object along the way.¹⁸⁶ With paintings like *Un dimanche après-midi à l'Île de la Grande Jatte – 1884* (*A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte – 1884*), Seurat and others challenged continuity in painting – colors were separated from each other, as well as from compositional space, and dimensions, subjects, etc. were separated from themselves and from the rest; “The dialectic of parts and wholes was inescapable.”¹⁸⁷

¹⁸³ Ibid., 363.

¹⁸⁴ “Traditionally, painting especially has been associated with the activity of *mimesis*, which signifies an imitation or copy of objects in the external world. Its problems are those associated with the representation of the visible world, such as the depiction of light or perspective. What is revolutionary in Kandinskian abstraction is that the apparent connection between the painting, the eye, and the visible is undone.” Scott Davidson, translator's introduction to Michel Henry, *Seeing the Invisible: On Kandinsky*, trans. Scott Davidson (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009), ix-x.

¹⁸⁵ Starting with Seurat, divisionism/pointillism “gave the unmistakable signal for art to move into the new world...Parts can always be made into wholes, but at every level of magnification a different set of parts might appear. By dividing optical perceptions into their discrete elements the *Grande Jatte* suggested, in a way that painting never had before, that the phenomenal world – and perhaps the noumenal one as well – was itself irreducibly divided into parts, that continuity was an illusion and atoms the only reality.” Everdell, *The First Moderns*, 64.

¹⁸⁶ See Everdell, *The First Moderns*, 74. Impressionism was the first discontinuous painting since the Renaissance.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 74.

The Cubists, particularly Picasso with the impactful *Demaiselles d'Avignon* (*The Young Ladies of Avignon*, 1907), showed that neither a privileged point of view nor an objective, determinate reality were still relevant in the new century.¹⁸⁸ Portraying objects and people from several different points of view at once undermined existing conventions for representing simultaneity and continuity in stationary art, so that “Cubism, the new perspective, not only represents the final breaking of both the painting and the world into discrete parts or atoms; it also opens the way to recombining those parts in new and startling ways.”¹⁸⁹ Following the Cubist deconstruction of space and figure, the Futurists challenged perceptions of sequentiality by painting moving objects on a single canvas from multiple points of view and at multiple different moments in time.

The new type of division and analysis was not isolated to the realm of painting, but also extended to film, photography, and literature. Not just color and shape and plane, but time and space and the human self (in both the psychological and the physical senses) were broken up into disparate chunks.¹⁹⁰ Whereas previously the form, content, and subject of a given artistic work were one and the same, with abstraction it became not only possible but necessary to understand them as distinct entities.

Kandinsky examines form and content separately in his writing, but he is nevertheless very clear that they cannot ever be entirely divided in practice:

The work of art comprises two elements:
the inner and
the outer.

The inner element, taken in isolation, is the emotion in the soul of the artist that causes a corresponding vibration (in material terms, like the note of one musical instrument that causes the corresponding note on

¹⁸⁸ “No observer had a privileged point of view, and observations even from several points of view were not enough to make reality determinate or ‘objective’.” Ibid., 249.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 249.

¹⁹⁰ “Modernist painters, faced with equally strange, disturbing, and even terrible metaworlds, found themselves forced, if they were to communicate their vision, to give up the fixed point of perspective that they had inherited from the Renaissance... Analogously, modernist fiction moved away from the linear sequentiality, omniscient and reliable narrators, fixed narrative relationships, and consistency of narrative mode by means of which their nineteenth-century predecessor had tried to account ‘realistically’ for their relatively secure sense of reality. Instead, modernist novelists experiment with techniques that accentuate the discontinuity between the conventional understanding of reality and the sense of reality that informs their works.” Richard Sheppard, *Modernism – Dada – Postmodernism*, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 43-44.

another instrument to vibrate in sympathy) in the soul of another person, the receiver.

As long as the soul remains joined to the body, it can as a rule only receive vibrations via the medium of the senses, which form a bridge from the immaterial to the material (in the case of the artist) and from the material to the immaterial (in the case of the spectator).

Emotion – sensation – the work of art – sensation – emotion.

The vibration in the soul of the artist must therefore find a material form, a means of expression, which is capable of being picked up by the receiver. This material form is thus the second, i.e., external, element of the work of art.

The work of art is the inseparable, indispensable, unavoidable combination of the internal and external element, i.e., of content and form.¹⁹¹

Akutagawa, who, like Kandinsky, examines the relationship between these two aspects of an artistic work over the course of several essays, also cautions against separating them too strictly. Discussing form and content in “Bungei ippanron” (“A General Consideration of the Literary Arts,” 1925), Akutagawa acknowledges that dividing them into entirely discrete entities is disingenuous,¹⁹² but, like Kandinsky, justifies doing so for the sake of convenience in theoretical discussion. He uses an extended metaphor, comparing a piece of literature to the human body, in order to emphasize the importance of harmony between form and content: “If we now represent the ‘literary arts’ in the body of a person, words and letters are the flesh. Even if the flesh is somehow perfect, if there’s no spirit inside, after all, it’s just a corpse.”¹⁹³ In this case, the “spirit” indicates content and the “flesh” is the form – that is, the external portion by which the individual or literary work can interact with the material world. “The spirit isn’t something that’s contained within the flesh. But at the same time, it isn’t something that exists outside of the flesh. It’s just that only *through* the flesh can we express our consciousness. The making of literary art is no different than this spirit.”¹⁹⁴

¹⁹¹ Wassily Kandinsky, “Content and Form,” in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art, Volume One (1901-1921)*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall & Co., 1982), 87-88. The beginning of this essay is almost identical to the beginning of “Painting as Pure Art,” 349-350.

¹⁹² Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, “Bungei ippanron,” in *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshū*, volume 6 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1928), 524.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 516.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 517.

Form and content develop in tandem as a piece of literature is brought into being, and Akutagawa makes it clear that these two components are equally essential and must be given equal weight by both the artist and the audience. The artist who creates perfect form with no content (a constant accusation from Akutagawa's critics) creates corpses, while another who focuses solely on content with no attention to form chases ghosts.¹⁹⁵

An earlier essay shows that the relationship between form and content had been an issue of concern for Akutagawa for years. "Geijutsu sono ta" ("Art, etc." 1916) is a typically fractured piece, divided into twenty one untitled sections roughly arranged around the topics of art and the artist's life. This early essay contains some uncharacteristically direct statements on the relationship of content to form.

The content is the foundation, and form comes last. --- that kind of theory is popular lately. However, that is a true-seeming lie. A work's 'content' is the content that inevitably becomes one with the form. If there's someone who thinks that first you have content, and then later arrange the form, those are the words of someone who is blind to the ultimate truth of the work. ... Form is not what is skillfully prepared for the sake of content. Form is within content. Or vice-versa. To the person who can't understand this subtle connection, art must be forever nothing more than a closed book.¹⁹⁶

...

But it's also a disaster to believe in mistaken theories overestimating form. I fear there's no avoiding the fact that this is even more of a disaster than believing in mistaken theories overestimating content. The latter at least offers meteorites instead of stars. The former thinks it sees stars when it's only looking at fireflies.¹⁹⁷

A reader who focuses too much on either form or content, Akutagawa argues, is destined to misunderstand the artwork. Neither the reader who overestimates the importance of content nor the one who overestimates the importance of form can access the whole of a work in which form and content are so carefully intertwined.

"Form" can vary in meaning, referring variously to the physical materials one uses to create a work of art, to genre, to the type of art (e.g., painting, film, theatre,

¹⁹⁵ See *ibid.*, 517.

¹⁹⁶ Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, "Geijutsu sono ta," in *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshū*, volume 5 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1928), 16-17.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

writing, etc.), to style; the term can essentially indicate any aspect of the work with which one can interact by means of the physical senses. Kandinsky's definition specifically addresses form in works of visual art:

Form in the narrower sense is nothing more than the delimitation of one surface from another. This is its external description. Since, however, everything external necessarily conceals within itself the internal (which appears more or less strongly on the surface), every form has inner content.*¹⁹⁸ Form is, therefore, the expression of inner content. This is its internal description.¹⁹⁹

Form must be flexible; both Kandinsky and Akutagawa argue that each artist has his or her own unique content, inspired by internal necessity or poetic spirit, and that because each artist's content is unique, each artist's chosen forms can be expected to differ from those of others. In fact, each instance of art by an individual artist might require a different form than his or her previous efforts, and whatever external form is necessary for complete, unhindered expression should be accepted as correct. Kandinsky's statement below from *Über das Geistige* expresses this sentiment and calls to mind the advice that Natsume Sōseki gave to Akutagawa upon the latter's publication of "Hana": namely, that he must not grow worried if his works attract little attention, but instead press on and continue to create.²⁰⁰ Kandinsky also confirms the foolishness of blindly ascribing to any particular style or movement, advocating instead that the artist be guided by his own sensibilities and needs.

The artist should be blind to 'accepted' or 'unaccepted' form, deaf to the precepts and demands of his time.

His eyes should be always directed toward his own inner life, and his ears turned to the voice of internal necessity.

¹⁹⁸ Asterisks are used in the Lindsay and Vergo volumes to indicate footnotes that were included by Kandinsky himself in the original texts.

¹⁹⁹ Kandinsky's own footnote to this passage reads: * "If a form produces an indifferent effect and, so to speak, 'says nothing,' then this should not be understood literally. There is no form, any more than anything else in the world, that says nothing. Still, what it has to say often fails to reach our souls, and this is what happens when what is said is itself indifferent or – more correctly – has not been used in the right place." Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual*, 165.

²⁰⁰ For Soseki's letter, see Nakamura Shinichirō, ed., *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke annai* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1955), 54.

Then he will seize upon all permitted means, and just as easily upon all forbidden means.

This is the only way of giving expression to mystical necessity.

All means are moral if they are internally necessary. All means are sinful if they did not spring from the source of internal necessity.²⁰¹

Akutagawa addresses the same issue in “Bungeiteki” when he discusses heterogeneity in an author’s works, making the case that such heterogeneity is, in fact, a positive trait, since an author who is willing to use any means necessary for artistic expression will naturally end up creating works that show a great deal of variety. The use of whatever external forms are needed – without worry over continuity of style or conformity to genre standards, whether set by the context of one’s own *oeuvre* or by the standards of the greater artistic community – is the mark of a great artist. “I am an extremely confused author, but being a confused author is by no means an affliction of mine. No, it is not an affliction for anyone. Those purported ‘great writers of old’ were altogether confused authors. They threw everything into their works.”²⁰²

Akutagawa’s discussion of “confused” authors was perhaps inspired by Kandinsky’s text “On the Question of Form.” In that essay, Kandinsky writes that the greatness of a given age can be gauged by the heterogeneity of the works produced by the artists who live in it. “And it is self-evident that the greater the epoch, i.e., the greater (quantitatively and qualitatively) the strivings toward the spiritual, the richer will be the number of [available] forms, and the greater the common tendencies (group movements) to be observed.”²⁰³

A great artist will have both the drive of internal necessity or poetic spirit and the skill to express it. As explained by Akutagawa, there is no point in constructing form that has no content. Kandinsky defines content in a 1916 catalogue entry entitled “On the Artist,” in a footnote to the following paragraph.

²⁰¹ Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual*, 175-176. In 1918 Akutagawa wrote in a similar way about the pointlessness of ascribing to an ‘ism’, due to the constraining nature of applying prescriptive labels to artists who should feel free to use any means of expression necessary. See Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, “Izumu to iu go no imi shidai,” in *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshū*, volume 6 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1928), 407-408.

²⁰² Akutagawa, “Bungeiteki,” 713-714.

²⁰³ Kandinsky, “On the Question of Form,” 239.

That unity, which today penetrates everything within the spiritual life and unites them all in the same aspirations, consists of the desire to put the internal in place of the external. This uniformity does not mean that all artists use similar forms, but that each one eschews the aimlessness of using various ‘beautiful’ or ‘true’ forms, so that *his own form* serves *his own spiritual content*. The artist is recognized not by form but by content.*²⁰⁴

This passage explains that a single standard artistic form cannot exist, and, even if it could, would be unnecessary. Kandinsky’s footnote to the above paragraph reads:

* “Content” is here understood not as a ‘literary story,’ but as the sum of those indescribable inner experiences that are the basis of the work. These experiences belong to a world that cannot be reached by any “literary means.” They can only be brought to light through art without words, i.e., through those means of expression that belong only to such art – within the lines and colors of the art of painting, those means that are predestined for painting – and that, if necessary, can seek nature’s assistance.²⁰⁵

Kandinsky’s use of the word “literary” here deserves some consideration, especially in light of the possible influence of his theory on a writer. Looking at the body paragraph and the footnoted paragraph together, it is clear that Kandinsky does not discount the value of *literature*, but the *literary* in painting; he distinguishes “content” from ‘subject’, which is an optional part of ‘form’. Subjects, such as buildings, people, flowers, and horses, could be removed from a picture at will, and their removal would not

²⁰⁴ “Unity” here refers to the purpose of this document, as outlined by Kandinsky several paragraphs earlier:

“The direct goal to which these lines refer involves a two-fold desire: --

1. The desire to show that in the seeming confusion of the current stormy times there is the same conformity to law that always controls the world of art.

2. the desire to demonstrate that there is no unified song to be found or enjoyed within that unity which evidently prevails in the present, already solidified times; that there is only one choir where each specific voice does not lose, but only gains in independence – just as the *differences* in the various voices within this rich, full-sounding choir must be considered as the good fortune of our time.

Our providential time is the time of the *great liberation*, liberation from the formal, from the superficial. The free individual not only rises upward; he also lets himself sink to the depths. Wherever he goes, he observes with wide-open eyes and listens intently, seeking life everywhere and everywhere listening to the voice of the living spirit which is hidden from the superficial; this is the spirit that he wants to discern. It is in this spirit where life can be recognized and not in those forms that even dead things possess. The unfree individual recognizes life only in form, and thereby often mistakes the dead for the living.” Wassily Kandinsky, “On the Artist,” in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art, Volume One (1901-1921)*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall & Co., 1982), 410-411.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 411.

damage the expressive potential of a given work (indeed, as per the earlier quotation about *The Haystack*, removal of the subject could be an improvement). Thus “literary means” can be understood to refer to the “objects” that he writes about elsewhere – that is, to recognizable figures and events that might obscure or dampen the inner sounds of the individual elements that comprise a given work.

In “Reminiscences,” Kandinsky describes his reaction to recent discoveries regarding the existence of multiple parts of the atom.²⁰⁶ The ‘disintegration of the atom’ shook his belief in a rational world and supported his growing doubts about the “ability of science or of the intellect to cope with ‘true’ – that is, intuitive – reality.”²⁰⁷ Not just the necessity of the object, but even the *existence* of the material object was called into question. An experience with one of his own works that is reminiscent of his earlier viewing of *The Haystack* confirmed his suspicions:

Much later, after my arrival in Munich, I was enchanted on one occasion by an unexpected spectacle that confronted me in my studio. It was the hour when dusk draws in. I returned home with my painting box having finished a study, still dreamy and absorbed in the work I had completed, and suddenly saw an indescribably beautiful picture, pervaded by an inner glow. At first, I stopped short and then quickly approached this mysterious picture, on which I could discern only forms and colors whose content was incomprehensible. At once, I discovered the key to the puzzle: it was a picture I had painted, standing on its side against the wall. ... Now I could see clearly that objects harmed my pictures.

A terrifying abyss of all kinds of questions, a wealth of responsibilities stretched before me. And most important of all: What is to replace the missing object?²⁰⁸

²⁰⁶ “A scientific event removed one of the most important obstacles from my path. This was the further division of the atom. The collapse of the atom was equated, in my soul, with the collapse of the whole world. Suddenly, the stoutest walls crumbled. Everything became uncertain, precarious and insubstantial. I would not have been surprised had a stone dissolved into this air before my eyes and become invisible. Science seemed destroyed: its most important basis was only an illusion, an error of the learned, who were not building their divine edifice stone by stone with steady hands, by transfigured light, but were groping at random for truth in the darkness and blindly mistaking one object for another.” Kandinsky, “Reminiscences,” 364.

²⁰⁷ Peter Selz, *German Expressionist Painting* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957), 175.

²⁰⁸ Kandinsky, “Reminiscences,” 369-370. See also Kenneth Lindsay, “The Genesis and Meaning of the Cover Design for the First Blaue Reiter Exhibition Catalogue,” *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 35, no. 1 (March 1953): 49. “Kandinsky was involved in the creation of a unique pictorial world. To forsake the visual fascinations of the objective world he loved was a shattering experience for a painter of his integrity. To be the first person to do so without the precedence of something which could substitute for this loss must have been like closing the door of the world, turning around, and being confronted by an abyss.”

Kandinsky would attempt to answer this question through work in various styles and media for the rest of his career.²⁰⁹ If objects were harmful to his pictures, then Kandinsky had no choice but to work to remove them so that they would no longer interfere with his expression. This does not mean, however, that Kandinsky was opposed to objects in any kind of absolute way. In fact, in the aforementioned essay “On the Question of Form,” Kandinsky ultimately concludes that there *is* no question of form, since realism and abstraction are fundamentally the same and both can potentially express the same content.²¹⁰

Kandinsky realized when he saw Monet’s *Haystack*, and again when viewing his own painting, that the object is not necessary for the creation of meaningful images. Like Kandinsky, Akutagawa came to realize that what he calls *dessin* was detracting from his art rather than contributing to it, obscuring rather than aiding the expression of his inner content. Kandinsky’s “literary means” therefore correspond to Akutagawa’s idea of *dessin*. These terms, though somewhat obscure in the original texts, tie together several key ideas in those texts, neatly connecting not only Kandinsky’s and Akutagawa’s art theories, but also the media in which they worked. In their respective critical writings, each of these two artists reconsiders some aspect of their own medium through the medium of the other: “literary means” is used by a painter to describe something than a writer calls *dessin*, which is equivalent to *hanashi*. This permeability of concepts across arts was extremely important to both of Kandinsky’s and Akutagawa’s theories.

Reducing the dominance of *dessin* in the picture, in Kandinsky’s case, means freeing every pictorial element – color, line, shape, depth, tension, tone, shade, sharpness – from its conventional, subordinate role modeling figures and landscapes; it allows each piece to lead a ‘life’ of its own and to exist as an independent entity that interacts with all

²⁰⁹ “It took a very long time before I arrived at the correct answer to the question: What is to replace the object? I sometimes look back at the past and despair at how long this solution took me. My only consolation is that I have never been able to persuade myself to use a form that arose within me by way of logic, rather than feeling. I could not devise such forms, and it disgusts me when I see them. Every form I ever used arrived “of its own accord,” presenting itself fully fledged before my eyes, so that I had only to copy it, or else constituting itself actually in the course of work, often to my own surprise.” Kandinsky, “Reminiscences,” 370.

²¹⁰ “In principle, it is of absolutely no significance whether the artist uses a real or an abstract form. For both forms are internally the same.” Kandinsky, “On the Question of Form,” 248. See also Selz, “Aesthetic Theories,” 131.

of the other elements present on the picture plane, so that the whole construction resonates with the viewer, without interference from representation and figuration. It is important to remember that Kandinsky was advocating abstraction for a purpose. If a viewer's attention is captured by the narrative of a scene, then that viewer will not usually pay as much attention to the colors, lines, and other elements that make up the picture. The "sounds" of the picture itself will not be able to come through as strongly if it portrays something recognizable, since viewers are inclined to focus on the literary content and narrative.²¹¹

What Kandinsky calls the "inner sound" (*inneren Klang*) can be thought of as a kind of emotional resonance that connects an artistic element to the viewer. While it is never strictly defined, Kandinsky makes it clear that the strength of an element's inner sound depends upon the artist's choices regarding his or her means of expression. Abstracting artistic elements, removing them from a narrative or literary context, strengthens the presence of inner sound. Further, the inner sounds of a given artwork can reverberate with one another, creating a strong vibration within the work as a whole. The viewer is simultaneously affected by this larger vibration and by the smaller vibrations of each individual element, and so the work has a greater effect.

The concept of inner sounds extends from a visual context to a literary one when Kandinsky writes in *Über das Geistige* that "words are inner sounds. This inner sound arises partly – perhaps principally – from the object for which the word serves as a name. But when the object itself is not seen, but only its name is heard, an abstract conception arises in the mind of the listener, a dematerialized object that at once conjures up a vibration in the 'heart.'"²¹² Here, form and content are once again tied closely together, for a different word, even if it denoted the same object, would provide the listener or reader with a different vibration. Thus, in order to express the intended content, the writer must carefully choose the word with the most desirable inner sound.²¹³

²¹¹ See Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual*, 169-170.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 147.

²¹³ It has been argued that Akutagawa's "poetic spirit" and Kandinsky's "inner sound" are one and the same, and that looking at them together allows a direct line to be drawn between Akutagawa and Kandinsky's theories. However, Akutagawa clearly identifies works (*Madame Bovary*, etc.) as the *products* of poetic spirit, and not as things that *possess* poetic spirit. Poetic spirit more closely corresponds with internal necessity as a quality of the artist; poetic sounds arise in literary or visual works that result from internal

Akutagawa takes up this idea in his essay “Geijutsu, sono ta,” in which he makes the case that the specific words chosen by a writer have a power that extends beyond their literal meanings. Again, external form must be used to express content and not merely indicate a given subject, if the words are to have the desired effects.

Everyone knows that Oswald from “Ghost Story” says “I want the sun.” What is the content of those words “I want the sun”? Previously, Professor Tsubouchi interpreted it to mean “it’s dark” in his commentary on “Ghost Story.” Certainly, from the standpoint of reason, “I want the sun” and “it’s dark” are probably the same. But beyond the basic meanings of those words, they’re as far apart as white clouds separated by a thousand miles. The content of the impressive words “I want the sun” is not revealed by any form other than “I want the sun.”²¹⁴

In the later essay “Bungei ippanron,” Akutagawa proposes that all words, down to the smallest interjections, (he uses ‘aa’ and ‘oya’ as examples) possess both unique connotative meanings and distinct sounds. He expands this argument further to include not only individual words, but also whole works, and even entire literary categories such as ‘novels’ or ‘stageplays’, each of which has its own particular meaning and sound.²¹⁵

If each word has a distinct and significant inner sound, then the act of repeating words takes on new power. Kandinsky writes that “skillful use of a word (according to poetic feeling) – an internally necessary repetition of the same word twice, three times, many times – can lead not only to the growth of the inner sound, but also bring to light still other, unrealized spiritual qualities of the word.”²¹⁶ Repetition separates a word from its standard context and releases the word from its task as signifier; it creates structure without relying on *dessin*. Kandinsky explores some of the “spiritual qualities” of words in his book *Klänge*, which combines prose poetry and woodcuts. In Akutagawa’s work, the device of repetition is used in “Haguruma” to separate sound from meaning and make words foreign and strange, forcing the narrator to assign them new significance. Both of these works will be discussed later in this chapter.

necessity. See Andō Masami, “Akutagawa Ryūnosuke: Idea no pinpon wo moteasobu –Kandinsukii to shiteki seishin, ‘tsuioku’ no modanizumu –,” *Bungaku* 12, no. 1 (January-February 2011): 164, 166-167.

²¹⁴ Akutagawa, “Geijutsu sono ta,” 16-17.

²¹⁵ Akutagawa, “Bungei ippanron,” 517-518. This idea parallels Kandinsky’s assertion that the sounds of each element in a picture combine to create the sound of the work as a whole.

²¹⁶ Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual*, 147.

As Akutagawa's art theory solidified, concepts such as the non-necessity of *dessin* were reflected in his works. In his translator's note to "Shinkirō" ("Mirage," 1927), Beongcheon Yu writes that the piece was a conscious attempt by Akutagawa to write a "pure" story – his '*hanashi*' *rashii hanashi no nai shōsetsu* which de-prioritizes *dessin*. In this short story, which Keene describes as "the account of an almost pointless experience that is given an unforgettable intensity by the eerie apprehension of death,"²¹⁷ Akutagawa strips away anything that could distract from the "sounds" that make up the work. The focus throughout is on impressions of emotions and atmosphere, to the point where it hardly matters whether it is "the account of an almost pointless experience," a complete invention, or something in between. Though characters and events populate the story, they exist in an almost dream-like setting where material reality is repeatedly brought into doubt and scenes fade easily from one to the next: the "mirage" of the title not only describes the shimmering vision that the three men (narrator, Mr. O, and Mr. K) see on the beach, but also the story itself.

The narrator of "Shinkirō" describes a number of surreal experiences that take place during a day in the seaside resort town of Kugenuma, where he is staying in a rented cottage with his wife. The work is divided into two halves, the first of which focuses on a walk that the narrator takes with his visiting friend Mr. K and a local hotel owner Mr. O, hoping to see a mirage on the beach. Though the three do witness the minor spectacle, their attention is focused instead on the "new era" couple sitting nearby,²¹⁸ especially once a second, indistinguishable couple appears, startling the narrator. The significance of this doubling effect is tied to the idea of "second selves" or *doppelgänger*s – a theme that appears again in "Haguruma".

If someone meets their *doppelgänger*, they are supposed to die – and death is the logic that connects the encounter with the two couples to the next scene, in which Mr. O finds the pieces of a wooden cross that the men speculate must have washed ashore from a burial at sea. As they ruminate on the type of person for whom the cross may have been

²¹⁷ Keene, *Dawn to the West*, 583.

²¹⁸ This designation seems to be mostly due to the woman's wardrobe and haircut – she is described as having bobbed hair, carrying a parasol, and wearing low-heeled shoes: "the very embodiment of a new era." Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, "The Mirage," trans. Beongcheon Yu. *Chicago Review*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1965): 55.

intended, the narrator experiences an eerie, uncomfortable feeling, which is later intensified by the discovery that the town's main street, ordinarily busy, is deserted.

The second half of the story is even more uncanny, as the focus turns to the existence of things that lie outside of normal perception. On another walk down the beach with Mr. O and his wife, the narrator loses himself in thought until Mr. O begins lighting matches and looking around at the sand.

“What are you trying to do?”

“Nothing special. With just a lighted match you can see a hell of a lot of things.”²¹⁹

The use of the match emphasizes the characters’ limited perceptive range, especially since once the matches burn out, “the darkness seem[s] even more intense than before.”²²⁰ This theme holds for the rest of the walk, during which the narrator tells Mr. O about a dream he had in which the face of a female reporter he had met years ago was superimposed upon that of a truck driver with whom he was speaking.

“Then, was it a woman driver?”

“No. It was a man all right. Just with her face. Whatever we see even once may make a lasting impression somewhere in our brains.”

“Probably it does. Even a face, if it is particularly striking.”

“I must confess, though, I took no interest in her face. That’s why it is all the more eerie. It seems to me a lot of things are lurking beyond the threshold of our consciousness, too.”

“It's like that with a lighted match, you can notice lots of things...”²²¹

Accentuating and validating experiences that lie in the realm of the spiritual, “beyond the threshold of our consciousness,” was one of the tasks of abstract art as Kandinsky undertook it. In “Shinkirō,” Akutagawa seems to have found his own way of portraying such abstraction in writing. The atmosphere of “Shinkirō,” and the images that fade into one another – such as a man’s tie pin being revealed to be the light from his

²¹⁹ Ibid., 57.

²²⁰ Ibid., 57.

²²¹ Ibid., 58.

cigarette as he approaches the narrator near the end of the work – are found again in *Asakusa kōen*, (*Asakusa Park*, March 1927) a “scenario” published the following month.

With its constantly-changing images and loose structure, *Asakusa kōen* is probably the best example among Akutagawa’s fictional works of a story with no *dessin*. There is no plot to speak of, merely the premise of a boy of twelve or thirteen wandering around the Nakamise shops at Asakusa after being separated from his father. As he wanders, the boy witnesses a succession of bizarre occurrences, too many to account for one by one. The strangeness begins when the boy, having approached two different men, neither of whom are his father, turns to the window of an eyeglasses shop, where the head of a display doll morphs into a human head and begins speaking.²²² Later, words and names written on signs change before the boy’s eyes. (sections 32, 33) A snowflake pattern on an obi becomes real snowflakes, falling to the ground. (section 41) A cat dons a fez hat and speaks to the boy, asking him to buy a sweater. (section 43-44) A war veteran changes into an ostrich and back. (section 50) The reader is left just as bewildered as the lost boy, but the refusal of these vaguely ominous mini-scenes to resolve into narrative amplifies the emotional impact of the sequence.

Works like *Asakusa kōen* creates a fluid boundary between the solid and materially “real” world and that of the mental or imaginary through hallucinatory transitions and nonsequiturs. Some of this strangeness can be attributed to the fact that Akutagawa was writing for a very new medium – film – and playing with the cinematic format that allowed such tricks and transitions, mimicking psychological experience in a new way. However, similar devices aimed at portraying unconventional perceptions of time and space appear in a number of Akutagawa's other works as well.

Like those of Kandinsky, these works never do away with *dessin* simply for the sake of doing so, but only in cases where conventional structure would interfere with artistic expression. What Akutagawa inherited from Kandinsky, as shown in his later works, was the willingness to remove story elements and structure if they obscured rather than aided the expression of internal content. This is not destruction for destruction’s sake, nor is it indicative of a failure of the organizing power of literature or a collapse of a specific

²²² Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, *Asakusa Park*, trans. Seiji M. Lippit. Big City Lit. (New York, NY: February 2004). (Section 12)

worldview. This is the deliberate and careful dismantling of narrative conventions for the sake of fuller artistic expression – a calculated move to privilege the poetic spirit over fidelity to material reality.

Replacing *dessin* and *hanashi* is a new logic of juxtaposition and association that allows connections and resonances to emerge that may otherwise have been obscured or confused by narrative. “Narrative” and the “literary,” whether in a piece of writing or in a painting, require the delineation of objects and figures, but those works that utilize an alternative structure allow the sounds of more basic elements to take the fore. Reducing the relative strength of the external, the representative, and the mimetic encourages the process of synthesis, which breaks down boundaries between arts, allowing for the greatest expression of an artist’s inner content and the clearest transmission of vibrations from the artist, through the work, and to the viewer or reader.

(4.4) Synthesis

Without *dessin* to provide the structuring principle of art, artists like Akutagawa and Kandinsky needed to reconsider established conventions about *what* can be portrayed in a work of art and *how* it can be portrayed.²²³ They sought inspiration and guidance from other works, foreign or domestic, from the past, from other countries, from other types and genres of art, and from artists working in completely different traditions.

The analysis that the Pointillists and Cubists had undertaken aimed to examine in detail each piece that makes up an image – color, line, tone, figure, plane – and, in the process, these pieces gained a measure of autonomy. Artists working toward abstraction, like Kandinsky, could then make use of those elements independent of the roles they

²²³ *Expressionismus* was a term first used in 1911 in Germany, which came to designate the German avant-garde painting; new goal of art: “to paint not the observed moment in the life of nature, but nature’s inner life, and the inner life of the artist as well.” ; this style had started around the turn of the century with Die Brücke (in Dresden), the Worpswede Group (near Bremen), and Neu-Dachau, Phalanx, and Scholle (in Munich), which had an effect on Kandinsky; “Kandinsky, in other words, was not trying to paint what he saw, but what he felt, or rather what he knew inside himself. Though the things he knew inside had no shape at all, Kandinsky was quite certain they were substantial, and well worth painting.” Everdell, *The First Moderns*, 305-306.

might have previously played in mimetic depictions of objects or scenes.²²⁴ In Kandinsky's case, the resulting break of elements like color or line away from object allowed for a reconceptualization of their possibilities. Analysis freed elements from subordinate roles in creating depictions of the material world, after which the underlying connections between differing elements of disparate arts could be discovered and explored through juxtaposition and combination.

This recombination and fluid association across categories of art that were previously thought of as distinct is the goal of the synthetic principle, which could be fully employed only after analysis had begun to do its work. Synthesis refuses to recognize divisions within media (e.g., the difference between poetry and prose) or across media (e.g., the difference between painting and music) – an artist operating under this principle must be prepared to draw from all arts and utilize any medium in the pursuit of total expression.

Akutagawa often discusses strict divisions between poetry and prose, concluding that such divisions are ultimately detrimental to writers and readers alike.²²⁵ In “Bungeiteki,” he describes the inherent heterogeneity of the novel form, which is inclusive of all kinds of styles and genres between which definite boundaries cannot and should not be drawn.²²⁶ He writes about the way that art forms work together as a web of influences and reminds the reader that no art form – not novels, nor plays, nothing at all – exists entirely independently: they are all connected together and influence each other.²²⁷

Though the focus in Akutagawa's essays is on literary genres, the cross-media application of the synthetic principle is apparent in his fictional works. A look at his fiction reveals more than one type of synthesis in action: in stories that draw from earlier texts such as *Uji shūi monogatari* or *Konjaku monogatari*, Akutagawa consciously combines older materials with a modern mode of writing; in stories that draw from the

²²⁴ “What is ultimately clear about abstraction, however, is not where it came from, but how it was done. The analysis of the subject of a picture into its smallest components, a procedure that had begun with the impressionists and was systematized by Seurat, reached a final point with the abstractionists of 1911. They broke up the subject into parts, and then used the parts more and more selectively. Finally the subject itself disappeared as the parts no longer recalled it.” Ibid., 318.

²²⁵ Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, “Watakushi shōsetsuron shiken,” in *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshū*, volume 5 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1928), 101.

²²⁶ See Akutagawa, “Bungeiteki,” 713-714, 726-727. and Lippit, *Topographies*, 48-50.

²²⁷ Akutagawa, “Bungeiteki,” 718-720.

works of Nicholas Gogol²²⁸ or Anatole France,²²⁹ he combines materials from multiple traditions; in stories like “Shinkirō” and “Haguruma,” he uses techniques from film and visual and theatrical elements to expand his range of expressive possibilities.

In his essays, Akutagawa discusses boundary-crossing on a relatively small scale – in addition to keeping his critical discussion focused on literature, he talks mostly about the individual artist or the local arts community. But Akutagawa was not the only Japanese artist embracing synthesis, and others did engage with the international aspect. Notably, Takamura Kōtarō’s essay “Midori iro no taiyō” (“A Green Sun”) touches on synthesis when Takamura writes that artists should think of themselves as artists first, and only later as Japanese. As Kandinsky’s translators point out, “synthetic ideology is opposed to barriers that artificially separate. Artists are human beings first and Germans, French, Americans, or Russians second.”²³⁰ While it did not take exposure to Kandinsky specifically to engender this line of thought in Japan around the Taishō period, encountering his works and essays would have reinforced the validity of Akutagawa’s own practice of bringing together influences and materials from various sources.

As Akutagawa repeats a number of times throughout the “Bungeiteki” essays, it is not the case that novels without a ‘story’-like story – that is, with minimal or no *dessin* – are the sole route to artistic expression. Rather, these kinds of works, which shift the focus away from “narrative” aspects, serve a specific purpose. Minimalization of *dessin* leads to increased avenues for expression (artist) and interpretation (viewer) and opens up possibilities for cross-media expression by making it easier to recognize similarities in externally dissimilar works.

Dessin, “literary story,” “narrative structure” – these were the types of logic that had dominated art in the West for centuries²³¹ and had become increasingly prevalent in the fine arts of Japan as the presence of Western literature expanded during the modern period. This was the element of *hanashi* that *shōsetsu* in late Meiji and Taishō period Japan were built around, away from which Akutagawa wanted to move.

²²⁸ Yoshida cites Gogol’s “The Nose” (1835-1836) as a source for “Hana.”

²²⁹ Yoshida cites France’s *Penguin Island* (1908) as a source for “Mensura Zoili.”

²³⁰ Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo, introduction to *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art, Volume One (1901-1921)*, 15.

²³¹ The European Renaissance spanned roughly the 14th-17th c., and set the narrative and pictorial traditions for much of the Western world; perspective was formalized as an artistic technique during this time.

The new logic, which destroyed conventions and created possibilities, was what Kandinsky and others called synthesis, a concept that is often associated with German composer Richard Wagner's idea of the *gesamtkunstwerk* (“total work of art”).²³² Kandinsky wrote in “Reminiscences” of the impact that Wagner’s *Lohengrin* had on him, citing the opera as one of two artistic events to make a major impression before his move to Munich and the beginning of his career as an artist. Wagner’s attempt to create the total or monumental work of art came out of a desire to alleviate the dominance of one element (i.e., music) over another (i.e., drama) in a combined art (opera).²³³ Though Kandinsky criticizes Wagner for dealing only with the external natures of music, movement, and words (the three principal elements that Wagner was working to combine), he builds upon the idea of the total or monumental work of art that incorporates multiple genres of expression.²³⁴ Among the artistic works that make up Kandinsky's *oeuvre*, those that best represent this synthetic ideal are *Klänge*,²³⁵ a collection of poetry and woodcuts, and the color plays, of which *Der gelbe Klang* (*The Yellow Sound*) is the best known. *Der Blaue Reiter* [*Almanac*], a collaborative effort primarily between Kandinsky and Franz Marc, which includes the works of many artists (and Kandinsky’s *Der gelbe Klang*), was also created as a model of synthesis.

Wagner’s *gesamtkunstwerk* concept had a wide impact throughout the arts, and brought the logic of synthesis to the fore in Europe; divisions and categories gave way to fluidity, permeability, cooperation, and coordination between the arts and among individuals. This impact was heightened in Kandinsky’s case by his personal reaction to scientific discoveries taking place about the nature of the atom, including the results of experiments conducted during the late 1890s by Henri Becquerel and Marie and Pierre

²³² The *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which combined all of the arts together into one monumental art, was Kandinsky’s goal and was supposed to cure the ills of modernity – all the art groups that he spent time with were “convinced that modernity involved some kind of a secular Fall and was in need of redemption by art because of the decay of established religion.” Sheppard, *Modernism-Dada-Postmodernism*, 148.

²³³ See Kandinsky, “On Stage Composition,” in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art, Volume One (1901-1921)*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall & Co., 1982), 260.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 260-262. See also Hugo Ball, “Kandinsky,” in *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary*, trans. Ann Raimés and ed. John Elderfield (New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1974), 233-234.

²³⁵ Kandinsky referred to *Klänge* in a 1938 article “as a ‘synthetic work,’ thus revealing its significance to him as a type of *Gesamtkunstwerk*.” Peg Weiss, *Kandinsky in Munich: The Formative Jugendstil Years* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), 84. See also Weiss, *Kandinsky and Old Russia*, 106. and Weiss, “Kandinsky and the Symbolist Heritage,” *Art Journal*, Vol. 45, No. 2, Symbolist Art and Literature (Summer 1985): 142.

Curie.²³⁶ There was a connection between these discoveries and Kandinsky's certainty that his inner ideas could be perceived and comprehended by others – that the ego was permeable and fluid, and individuals could be temporary receptacles for greater currents of energy and thought.²³⁷

Kandinsky had always felt ties between the arts due largely to the fact that he had experienced synesthesia since childhood,²³⁸ and as the modern world developed, his sense of the permeability and interconnection between every part of life grew stronger. Like many others, Kandinsky understood the rapid changes that were taking place around the turn of the twentieth century as a kind of dissolution of boundaries, which would alter the way that people thought about and perceived phenomena.

Viewed from without, our own time – by contrast with the “order” of the preceding century – can likewise be characterized by *one* word: *chaos*.

The most extreme contradictions, the most bitterly opposed views, denial of the common good for the sake of the individual, overthrow of the accustomed and attempts immediately to re-erect what has been overthrown, conflict between the most varied ideals – all these things create an atmosphere that brings modern man to despair, to a kind of confusion that, it appears, has never before existed.

Modern man is constantly faced with split-second decisions: he is supposed to affirm immediately one given phenomenon and reject another – either-or – which means that both phenomena are regarded in a purely external, exclusively external light. This is the tragedy of our age. New phenomena are viewed from the old standpoint and treated in a dead manner.

But just as, at that time, those with acute hearing were able to perceive the rumblings within the ordered calm, the sharp-eyed can see within the present chaos a new order. This order departs from the basis of “either-or” and gradually attains a new one: *and*.

The twentieth century stands in the shadow of the device “and.”

²³⁶ “A scientific event removed one of the most important obstacles from my path. This was the further division of the atom. The collapse of the atom was equated, in my soul, with the collapse of the whole world. Suddenly, the stoutest walls crumbled. Everything became uncertain, precarious and insubstantial. I would not have been surprised had a stone dissolved into thin air before my eyes and become invisible. Science seemed destroyed: its most important basis was only an illusion, an error of the learned, who were not building their divine edifice stone by stone with steady hands, by transfigured light, but were groping at random for truth in the darkness and blindly mistaking one object for another.” Kandinsky, “Reminiscences,” 364. See also Sheppard, *Modernism-Dada-Postmodernism*, 146.

²³⁷ See Sheppard, *Modernism-Dada-Postmodernism*, 55-56.

²³⁸ See Kandinsky, “Reminiscences,” 357-382 for the first-hand account.

This “and” is, however, only a consequence. The cause is the slow, almost invisible move away from the previous standpoint of the external (form) and the attainment of a new one, the internal (content).²³⁹

Kandinsky’s “and,” predicated on a focus on content rather than form, is one way of presenting the idea of permeability and the connections that he felt between the arts; “and” here is another way of expressing the idea of “synthesis.” Synthesis was essentially a modernist response to the condition of modernity: the feelings of chaos and the loss of absolute truths could be processed by bringing ideas, cultures, peoples, and individuals together through the combination and juxtaposition of works of art.²⁴⁰

The chaos that Kandinsky seeks to understand through the synthetic device of “and” was also part of the Japanese experience. In “Bungeiteki,” Akutagawa addresses this feeling:

No matter what you say, we’ve all of us been given life during an age of violent transition, when contradiction piles on contradiction. Light comes from the West, rather than from the East, at least in Japan, but it also comes from the past. . . . There are lots of verdant, vibrant things stirring in the Japanese poetry of the past, mutually reverberating ‘somethings’ – . . . This must be the very edge of literature – to be strangely captivated by those lazily waving green ‘somethings’.²⁴¹

By arguing that the “light” of expressive possibility comes from both the West and from the past, Akutagawa allows Japanese writers a wealth of material with which to work: not just the new literature coming from the West, or from the edge of the avant-garde, but also material originating from the Japanese cultural and literary heritage. Modern artists, he argues, must be aware of and open to all pathways to expression. These sentiments resonate with the idea of synthesis as described by Kandinsky; the logic of “either-or” is

²³⁹ Kandinsky, “Synthetic Art,” in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art, Volume Two (1922-1943)*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall & Co., 1982), 710-711.

²⁴⁰ See Sheppard, *Modernism-Dada-Postmodernism*, 72-74. and Dennis C. Washburn, *The Dilemma of the Modern in Japanese Fiction* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 212.

²⁴¹ Akutagawa, “Bungeiteki,” 747. See also Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, “Zoku bungeiteki na, amari ni bungeiteki na,” in *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshū*, volume 15 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1997), 230-236. “Sometimes I think along these lines. – Even if I had not produced the works that I have written, I’m absolutely certain that they would have been written. So then, more than the works of me personally, rather they are many blades of grass sprung up from the soil of one generation. Accordingly, they must not be a source of my personal pride.”

discarded and “and” is embraced in Akutagawa’s stories, which seamlessly draw in various materials as dictated by the force of his poetic spirit or internal necessity.

There are two types of synthesis that show up not only in theoretical writings, but also artistic works by both Kandinsky and Akutagawa: the combination of different artforms (e.g., painting, music, dance, poetry), and the combination of art from different time periods and locations (e.g., medieval tales + modernist prose; African masks + cubism). Frequently, a single work incorporates both types of synthesis, as both artists drew from a wide range of inspirations and influences. It is important, then, to consider synthesis from two angles: the first regards the temporal and spatial or locational aspects, including connections between works of different time periods and communities, while the second deals with the physical or material aspect of the work.

The fact that Akutagawa uses, as they become necessary, materials both close and distant in time and space is obvious in works like “Yabu no naka” (“In a Grove,” 1921), which famously makes use of not only the original brief tale from *Konjaku monogatari* *shū*, but also utilizes a mode of storytelling that biographer Yoshida Seiichi identifies as originating from Robert Browning’s *The Ring and the Book*.²⁴² Yoshida identifies potential sources for sixty-two of Akutagawa’s works, and critics since have continued speculating and proposing further additions to the list. Works like “Saru-kani gassen” and “Ryū,” mentioned earlier, show Akutagawa drawing on different materials from the Japanese literary tradition, while others, like “Hokyōnin no shi” (“Death of a Martyr,” 1918) and “Toshishun” (1920), more clearly exhibit the influence of international sources. Finally, stories such as “Butōkai” (“The Ball,” 1920) and *Kappa* seem to point directly to the recent literature of Europe and America. In a sense, this type of synthesis has always been recognized in Akutagawa’s works and has long been a topic of critical attention.

Unfortunately, most discussion of Akutagawa’s sources glosses over the connection between the demands of the artist’s poetic spirit and the necessity of using any and all material that furthers the possibilities for expression. The appeal of synthesis in the temporal and locational sense is that it creates an art community that is effectively

²⁴² Yoshida Seiichi, “Akutagawa bungaku no shutten,” in *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke: Kindai bungaku kanshō kōza 11* (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1958), 334.

boundless, in which a given artist can access and interact with the works of all eras and regions. Working toward this type of synthesis expands the possibilities of both intake and output for any given artist, and also allows a dialogue to emerge between traditionally separate works – works which, taken together, reflect a variety of worldviews and perspectives on art.

The material aspect of synthesis is related to the issues of content and form – namely, the necessity for an artist to be open to using any available and appropriate form that aids in expressing his or her inner content. What is significant mostly in cross-media synthesis, rather than inter-media synthesis, is the idea that each type of art is particularly well-suited to a certain type of expression.²⁴³ By using multiple artforms at once, their respective strengths can be combined. By taking influence from a range of genres, the artist opens up to a multitude of materials that may inform his or her work; by incorporating more than one genre into his own product, the artist expands his or her expressive reach.²⁴⁴

Focusing on content rather than form allows the artist to see the synthetic connections between seemingly disparate works of art. Kandinsky writes,

And we see that the common relationship between works of art, which is not weakened by the passage of millennia, but is increasingly strengthened, does not lie in the exterior, in the external, but in the root of roots – in the mystical content of art. We see that the dependence upon “schools,” the search for “direction,” the demand for “principles” in a work of art and for definite means of expression appropriate to the age, can only lead us astray, bringing in their train misunderstanding, obscurity, and unintelligibility.²⁴⁵

Getting down to the basics makes the logic of synthesis clear – if every art reaches into a common stream of content, materials, and inspiration, then surface differences in the

²⁴³ This idea was put forth for possibly the first time in *Laocoön*, a book first published in 1766 by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in which he discusses the strengths, limitations, and expressive possibilities of poetry (broadly, any art that is made with words) and painting (broadly, art that is made with physical materials, including flat images and sculpture). Since this book is referenced in Soseki’s *Kusamakura*, it is likely that Akutagawa read it.

²⁴⁴ See Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual*, 153-155.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 175-176.

finished products are negligible.²⁴⁶ Kandinsky expands on this point in a later essay: “The general – one might say, subterranean – relationship between the arts – which can, basically, be traced back to one single root (synthetic method) – reveals the shared content of the arts as a whole, whose blossoms, when they appear above the earth, are quite separate from one another, something that should never be forgotten.”²⁴⁷

This subterranean relationship became more apparent as abstraction removed the narrative content of paintings and other works of art, not because narrative is inherently obscuring, but because it was the dominant mode of showing and telling at the time. Familiarity prevented the audience from thinking critically; they had to be confronted with something othering to be awakened to the relationship Kandinsky describes above. Rejecting narrative was necessary in order to free up elements for use in new ways and allow for synthesis.

While Kandinsky would not actively reject the “literary” in his paintings until about 1910, the tendency toward synthesis is present in his early works, gradually evolving over the course of his career. In Kandinsky’s early paintings, synthesis that draws connections across time and location can be seen in his use of material from Russian folktales, and the presence of figures like St. George and traditional shamans as motifs. Kandinsky’s background in ethnographic studies and interest in folk art contributed significantly to his philosophy on art and life as well as to the imagery in his visual works. These themes never fully disappear,²⁴⁸ and their presence creates a continuity that is not immediately apparent in the more abstract images.²⁴⁹ Peg Weiss outlines how, throughout his entire painting career and all the way up to his last paintings, St. George in particular shows up in more or less abstracted forms. However, as Kandinsky’s career progressed, the ties to the past grew more obscure, and temporal synthesis became less pronounced as cross-media synthesis became a stronger force in his work.

²⁴⁶ For critical languages of art and the use of cross-media metaphors, see Christopher Butler. *Early Modernism: Literature, Music, and Painting in Europe, 1900-1916* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 74-76.

²⁴⁷ Wassily Kandinsky, “Abstract Art,” in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art, Volume Two (1922-1943)*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall & Co., 1982), 514-515.

²⁴⁸ See Will Grohmann, *Wassily Kandinsky: Life and Work* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 1959), 58, 61-62.

²⁴⁹ Weiss, *Kandinsky and Old Russia*. 33-72.

Kandinsky worked consciously with the *gesamtkunstwerk* ideal from his time with the Neue Künstlervereinigung Münchens (New Association of Munich Artists, or NKVM²⁵⁰), which he founded in 1909 with Alexej Jawlensky and others in response to the growing conservatism of the Munich Secession.²⁵¹ The goals of NKVM were based on the idea of synthesis between the arts – in the catalogue to the first exhibition of NKVM, Kandinsky writes,

Our point of departure is the belief that the artist, apart from those impressions that he receives from the world of external appearances, continually accumulates experiences within his own inner world. We seek artistic forms that should express the reciprocal permeation of all these experiences – forms that must be freed from everything incidental, in order powerfully to pronounce only that which is necessary – in short, artistic synthesis. This seems to us a solution that once more today unites in spirit increasing numbers of artists.²⁵²

Although the NKVM was relatively short-lived,²⁵³ Kandinsky carried its ideals to the next group that he headed: Der Blaue Reiter.²⁵⁴ In 1911, Kandinsky and Franz Marc

²⁵⁰ NKVM had first been conceived around 1905 as a Bavarian version of Die Brücke, but did not come into being for four more years. NKVM shared with Die Brücke the desire to take over the opposition position from the weakened Secession, but did it in a different way. Vezin, *Kandinsky and Der Blaue Reiter*, 80. Kandinsky was president (“since no one else was up to it” – Muntz) and Jawlensky vice-president in this organization that did not really live up to its name – most members were Russians and the group was based in Schwabing. Everdell, *The First Moderns*, 304.

²⁵¹ “After a hiatus of two years [between Phalanx and NKVM], during which he had resided in Paris and Berlin, he returned to Munich and in January 1909 founded a new exhibition group, the New Artists’ Society, which was to become his vehicle for change. With its second exhibition in the autumn of 1910, it was to establish the international scope of the avant-garde movement, with Kandinsky at the fore.” Weiss, *Kandinsky and Old Russia*, 52. See also Selz, *German Expressionist Painting*, 185.

²⁵² Kandinsky, “Forward to the Catalogue of the First Exhibition of the Neue Künstler-Vereinigung, Munich,” in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art, Volume One (1901-1921)*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall & Co., 1982), 53. Alternate translation of this passage: “Our point of departure is the idea that, as well as the impressions he receives from the outer world and from nature, the artist is constantly collecting events from his inner world; the search for artistic forms in which to express the interaction of all these events; the search for forms that are free of everything secondary so they clearly reveal what is important; in short, the search aimed at achieving an artistic synthesis, this is what seems to us to be an appropriate watchword for bringing more and more artists together spiritually at this time.” Vezin, *Kandinsky and Der Blaue Reiter*, 84.

²⁵³ NKVM split in December 1911 over differences in aesthetic ideology and rejection by the jury for the 3rd exhibition of Kandinsky’s *Last Judgment*; and held their third and final exhibition in Galerie Thannhauser December 1911, but it was not well-received and attracted little notice. Selz, *German Expressionist Painting*, 197-198.

²⁵⁴ The first Blaue Reiter exhibition opened December 18, 1911 in Moderne Galerie Thannhauser in the rooms adjoining those of the last exhibition of NKVM. For more on Der Blaue Reiter, see Selz, *German Expressionist Painting*, 199-213.

split from the NKVM to form this eclectic, international collection of artists whose dual purposes were to show the infinite possibilities for artistic expression and to inspire a “rebirth of looking” through the juxtaposition of works in many different styles and genres. To these ends, they included not only contemporary, professional works, but also ‘primitive’ art and works by children in their publication *Der Blaue Reiter [Almanac]*,²⁵⁵ which contains two essays by Kandinsky (“On the Question of Form” and “On Stage Composition”) as well as his play *Der gelbe Klang*. The *Almanac* was conceived from the first as an example of synthesis, its combination of different means, forms, and genres into one work expressing more than any single art alone.

Kandinsky’s entry in the catalogue for the first Blaue Reiter exhibition is a more or less a continuation of his writing for NKVM. But, while the language in the NKVM catalogue is aspirational, the statement in the Blaue Reiter catalogue emphasizes achievement: “In this small exhibition, we do not seek to propagate any **one** precise and special form; rather, we aim to show by means of the **variety** of forms represented how the **inner wishes** of the artist are embodied in manifold ways.”²⁵⁶ Kandinsky believes that the art in the exhibition has achieved the free use of form sought by NKVM, and hopes that it will raise awareness in viewers of the breadth of possibility for artistic expression.

Der Blaue Reiter, both the group (which had a constantly changing membership) and the *Almanac* that Kandinsky and Marc edited and produced, indeed achieved both kinds of synthesis: fluid interaction between contemporaneous art forms and genres, as well as free association across temporal and spatial boundaries. The *Almanac* as a whole is a synthetic production, juxtaposing works that seem extremely disparate but which are nevertheless connected by the new artistic logic. By including works from many different traditions – and works that would not ordinarily be included in any “tradition,” such as children’s drawings – the editors of the *Almanac* encouraged viewers to participate in the

²⁵⁵ Vezin, Kandinsky and Der Blaue Reiter, 150-151.

²⁵⁶ Wassily Kandinsky, “The First Exhibition of the Editors of the *Blaue Reiter*,” in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art, Volume One (1901-1921)*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall & Co., 1982), 113. Bold text is in the original. Two alternative translations are available: “We do not seek to propagandize a *single* precise and special form in this small exhibition, but we aim to show in the *variety* of represented forms how the artist’s inner desire results in manifold forms.” Selz, *German Expressionist Painting*, 206. and “This little exhibition is not seeking to propagate one specific form; our aim is rather to show through a variety of different forms the multiplicity of ways through which the inner wishes of artists take shape.” Vezin, *Kandinsky and Der Blaue Reiter*, 178.

new way of evaluating art and to expand their thinking about how externally dissimilar works are connected to one another through “subterranean” roots. *Der Blaue Reiter* [Almanac] declared again that internal necessity is the only value that matters in a work, not whether it conforms to the given standard of beauty or quality of a specific era and location.²⁵⁷

Synthesis was the conscious goal of the editors of the *Almanac*, who wanted to encourage a “rebirth of looking” through the free association of images in their book. The juxtapositions that they curated were intended to have a profound effect on viewers as part of the push by Der Blaue Reiter and others to replace the materialism of the nineteenth century with a new spiritualism.²⁵⁸ However, the *Almanac* was, for the most part, unintelligible and disconcerting to its 1912 audience, a public which had still not fully accepted Cubism and Fauvism.²⁵⁹

In addition to the reproductions of visual works, the *Almanac* contains essays by artists, poetry, musical scores, and drama in the form of Kandinsky’s *Der gelbe Klang* (*The Yellow Sound*), one of Kandinsky’s greatest personal successes at creating a synthetic work. According to Kandinsky, this composition for stage is an attempt to put internal necessity into action.

There are here three elements that are used as external means, but for their inner value:

1. musical sound and its movement
2. bodily spiritual sound and its movement, expressed by people and objects

²⁵⁷ “By proclaiming the equivalence between a 20th-century painting and a sculpture from New Caledonia or a child’s drawing, the editors of *Der Blaue Reiter* invented a new vision of the history of art. Henceforth artistic creations were no longer to be judged according to their fidelity to a certain idea of beauty or style, but according to the inner necessity which engendered them.” Vezin, *Kandinsky and Der Blaue Reiter*, 151.

²⁵⁸ “Only today are we beginning to appreciate the incredible symbolic subtlety and inherent cohesiveness of this almanac [Blaue Reiter], until now seen by most as an interesting but disjointed mélange of ideas and illustrations. It appears indeed that from the beginning Kandinsky and Franz Marc, his coeditor, had a fairly unified, coherent program for the book. The almanac was to be a kind of “medicine book” – an agent of healing, even of exorcism and salvation, prescribed to restore a society diseased with the multiple ills of materialism and decadence.” Weiss, “Kandinsky and the Symbolist Heritage,” 142-143.

²⁵⁹ Vezin, *Kandinsky and Der Blaue Reiter*, 150-151. and Lindsay and Vergo, introduction to “*The Blaue Reiter Almanac*,” 229-232.

3. color-tones and their movement (a special resource of the stage)

Thus, ultimately, drama consists here of the complex of inner experiences (spiritual vibrations) of the spectator.

re 1. From opera has been taken the principle element – music – as the source of inner sounds, which need in no way be subordinated to the external progress of the action.

re 2. From ballet has been taken dance, which is used as movement that produces an abstract effect with an inner sound.

re 3. Color-tones take on an independent significance and are treated as a means of equal importance.

All three elements play an equally significant role, remain externally self-sufficient, and are treated in a similar way, i.e., subordinated to the inner purpose.²⁶⁰

The three elements that he outlines at the end of the essay “On Stage Composition,” which immediately precedes *Der gelbe Klang in Der Blaue Reiter* [*Almanac*] and seeks to prepare viewers for the play, are combined in multiple ways to create the desired spiritual vibrations. Kandinsky argues the need for both collaboration and opposition between elements, which must work together without overwhelming the expression. He also touches on the role that words play in his composition – they are used not to tell a story or as dialogue between characters, but “to create a particular ‘mood,’ which prepares the ground of the soul and makes it receptive.”²⁶¹ The voices that say those words, too, are used “purely,” as sounds that do not produce narrative meaning.²⁶²

Der gelbe Klang was never staged during Kandinsky’s lifetime, though plans were made at least three times to do so;²⁶³ the play was not performed until 1972. Whether on stage or on paper, it is a bewildering work, and by Kandinsky’s own admission, experimental and imperfect. Still, appearing at the end of the *Almanac*, it illustrates the

²⁶⁰ Wassily Kandinsky, “On Stage Composition,” in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art, Volume One (1901-1921)*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall & Co., 1982), 264.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² “He gave a few hints as to how we are to understand his play. Sound, color, and movement remain outwardly independent, but are all subordinated to the inner purpose. Words serve merely to record a certain mood, occasionally appearing only as sounds without conceptual meaning.” Grohmann, *Kandinsky*, 99-100.

²⁶³ Lindsay and Vergo, introduction to “On Stage Composition,” in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art, Volume One (1901-1921)*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall & Co., 1982), 231.

culmination of the artistic theory presented in the essays preceding it and embodies the *gesamtkunstwerk* ideal.²⁶⁴

In late 1912 or early 1913, after the initial publication of *Der Blaue Reiter* [*Almanac*], Kandinsky published *Klänge*, which he considered to be a “miniature *Gesamtkunstwerk*.”²⁶⁵ This book, in which poetry and woodcut images harmonize, often uses words in order to invoke a certain mood or feeling, or to resonate in non-narrative ways with the images and words around them. In this sense, the text in *Klänge* operates in a way that is not unlike its function in *Der gelbe Klang*. The synthesis demonstrated in *Klänge* is somewhat more subdued than that of *Der Blaue Reiter* [*Almanac*] or *Der gelbe Klang*; comprising thirty eight poems, twelve color woodcuts, and forty four black and white woodcuts, *Klänge* remains within just two media, and both the poetry and the images range between fairly representational and completely abstract.

Woodcuts were especially important for Kandinsky’s transition into abstraction, as evidenced by his continuing work in the medium throughout his career. *Klänge* was preceded by two woodcut albums, *Stichi bez slov* (*Poems without Words*) in 1903-1904, and *Xylographies* (*Xylographs*) in 1909,²⁶⁶ from the titles of which can be seen the connections that Kandinsky was drawing to both poetry and music. “For Kandinsky, the woodcut represented a *Klang*, a synthesis of poetic, musical, and artistic elements.”²⁶⁷ Kandinsky notes the significance of the woodcut to the development of his art in a later essay,²⁶⁸ and *Klänge* offers a record of the possibilities that he found in that medium. The relationships between the images and the text are not made explicit in *Klänge*; as in *Der Blaue Reiter* [*Almanac*], the audience is expected to make connections between juxtaposed elements and independently consider possible meanings.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁴ See also Vezin, Kandinsky and Der Blaue Reiter, 164-165.

²⁶⁵ Kandinsky, “My Woodcuts,” in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art, Volume Two (1922-1943)*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall & Co., 1982), 818.

²⁶⁶ Weiss and others have proposed that Kandinsky chose this title, meaning “woodcut,” that features the Greek prefix xylo- (“wood”) because of the connection that it would bring up to the xylophone, and thus to music. See Weiss, *Kandinsky in Munich*, 213, note 2.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 127.

²⁶⁸ “In these woodcuts as in everything else – woodcuts and poems – one discovers the steps of my development from the “figurative” to the “abstract” (“concrete” according to my own terminology – which is more accurate and more expressive – in my opinion at least).” Kandinsky, “My Woodcuts,” 818.

²⁶⁹ Translator Elizabeth R. Napier discusses the question of how the text and images are connected in her introduction, noting that the issue is complicated by the fact that the order of the woodcuts changed between the proposed Russian edition (never published) and the German edition. See introduction to

Rather than illustrations in the conventional sense, repeating or reinforcing the events of the text in visual format, Kandinsky's woodcuts in *Klänge* are independent entities whose "vibrations" resonate with the "vibrations" of the prose-poems they accompany. He frequently uses repetition and alliteration in the poems, which acts to release the words from their usual function and allows them to be perceived for their sound, shape, placement, and other non-narrative attributes.²⁷⁰ When words are used in a narrative or literary way – to construct sentences about characters who do and think things – the primary purpose and effect of those words is to carry the description through; they are not easily perceived as independent elements (much less so are the letters that make up the words). This mirrors the arguments in other Kandinsky texts regarding the elements that make up images, and how treating them as autonomous "beings" impacts the artist's perspective and products.

A short essay that Kandinsky wrote for a Russian arts journal²⁷¹ in 1919 addresses the effects of separating certain items – in this case, the point (period) and the line (hyphen or dash) – from their usual contexts, an act which forces the viewer to interact with them in new ways. This act can also cause the elements to cross the boundary between writing or typography and graphic art. The practical significance of something like a point, Kandinsky writes, blinds the viewer to its essence and inner sound, which it possesses as one of the "beings" that make up the "inexhaustible material of art."

Our normal encounter with this living, powerful being constantly occurs in the written or printed line, where it serves as an outwardly expedient sign with a factual meaning.

By carrying out a few experiments with this point to which we have become accustomed, I shall try to part the thick veil dividing us from the inner essence of the point and stifling its inner sound.

At this juncture I put a . A whole world now vacillates because of this unimportant event. The point is in the wrong place and its external expediency has suffered radically. The accustomed eye has already lost its total indifference. ...

Wassily Kandinsky, *Sounds*, trans. Elizabeth R. Napier (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), 9.

²⁷⁰ "Skillful use of a word (according to poetic feeling) – an internally necessary repetition of the same word twice, three times, many times – can lead not only to the growth of the inner sound, but also bring to light still other, unrealized spiritual qualities of the word." Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual*, 147.

²⁷¹ *Iskusstvo: Vestnik Otdela IZO NKP* (IZO NKP = Visual Arts Section of the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment)

I refute the practical meaning of the point and put one here:

•

In doing so, I abstract the point from its usual conditions of life. It has become not only not expedient, but also unpractical, nonsensical. ... The reader, who has suddenly been transformed into a spectator, sees the point on a clean part of the page. He says farewell to the now insane punctuation mark and sees before him a graphic and painterly sign.²⁷²

This process of separating form from meaning so that the form can take on an independent significance is similar to what expressionist painters had done with color and line, removing them from their roles depicting objects. With *Klänge*, Kandinsky sought to do the same with words.

These techniques can be seen in some of the poems that were translated by Koizumi Magane for the September 1913 issue of *Shirakaba*, the earliest instance of part of *Klänge* appearing in Japan. Out of thirty eight poems, only nine were translated, and none of the accompanying woodcuts were reproduced, resulting in a situation where only the features of the text can be considered in the Japanese context. It is worth noting again, however, that the translator writes in the introduction of his intention to select only the most easily comprehensible poems, though he does not explain what makes a given poem comprehensible.²⁷³

Still, in poems like “Vorhang” (“Curtain”) and “Kreide und Russ” (“Chalk and Soot”), the repetition and alliteration have a strong effect, which is maintained in the English and Japanese translations.

Curtain

The rope went down and a certain curtain went up. We have all waited so long for this moment. A certain curtain hung. A certain curtain hung. A certain curtain hung. It was hanging down. Now it's up. When it went up (started up), we were all so very pleased.²⁷⁴

²⁷² Wassily Kandinsky, “Little Articles on Big Questions,” in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art, Volume One (1901-1921)*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall & Co., 1982), 423-424.

²⁷³ Koizumi Magane, introduction to *Hibiki*, in *Shirakaba*, September 1913, 76.

²⁷⁴ Kandinsky, *Sounds*, 85.

幕

紐は下方に行き、幕は上方に行く。この瞬間を私達は皆とうから永い間待って居たのだ。幕はかかった。幕はかかった。幕はかかった。幕はなほ下方にかかった。今は幕は上方にある。幕が上方に行く（行き始める）とき、私達は皆大変よろこんだ。²⁷⁵

These sorts of devices, popular among modernist writers, had value for Kandinsky as a way to release the external (signifying) qualities of a word from its internal properties. Turning a word or group of words into “nonsense,” obscuring or denying their connection to the material world, was one path by which to access the undercurrent of artistic energy and get straight to the spiritual content of the text without allowing the conventional meanings or uses of the words to act as distractions. “Meaning,” if it hinders expression, must be done away with in the same way as “narrative” and “objects” were. In “Curtain,” the focus is placed on sound and rhythm by means of repetition; as the ordinary, narrative meanings of the repeated words grow weaker with every repetition, the strength of the abstract builds.

The poems in *Klänge* are often concerned with transformation – this is one of the central ideas conveyed by the book and a theme in all of the poems, whether they are relatively representational or completely abstract. The continuously appearing, disappearing, mutating, and dissolving images and objects in Kandinsky’s work are created and reinforced by devices like repetition that “affords access into the realm of the alogical and the absurd.”²⁷⁶ Akutagawa uses many of the same literary devices in his own works, notably “Haguruma,” which is among the best examples of materials synthesis in Akutagawa’s *oeuvre*. The passages in “Haguruma” that include word associations and repetition reinforce the cross-cultural and cross-media connections that the author and narrator make throughout the story.

There are two key moments in the text of “Haguruma” when the conventional meanings fall away from words that would otherwise be familiar to the narrator and the inner “vibrations” of those words take over. Near the end of the first section, the narrator

²⁷⁵ Kandinsky, *Hibiki*, trans. Koizumi, in *Shirakaba*, September 1913, 81-82.

²⁷⁶ Introduction to Kandinsky, *Sounds*, 4.

overhears a snippet of conversation between two bellboys in the hotel where he is staying, catching only the two English words “all right.” The narrator repeats the phrase to himself, struggling at first to grasp the meaning, and finally writing it over and over again, almost automatically. These words, which presumably were used with their usual significance in the bellboy’s utterance, go through a process of losing their meaning – becoming sounds and then letters without content, “flesh” with no “spirit” – and then gaining new meaning as the narrator ascribes to them a personal significance.

That significance is decided when the phone in the narrator’s room rings, interrupting his mechanical scrawling with the news of his brother-in-law’s death, delivered by his distraught niece. His attempt to call a bellboy yields no response – whereas just a few minutes earlier the hallway echoed with their voices, now the hotel seems deserted.

More out of anguish than annoyance, I pressed the button again and again, understanding at last what Fate was trying to tell me with the words “All right.”

That afternoon, in a nearby Tokyo suburb, my sister’s husband had been killed by a train. Despite the season, he had been wearing a raincoat.²⁷⁷

In a later section of the story, the narrator’s experience is in a sense reversed. After a successful two or three hours of writing, this time with purpose, his pen stops “as if pinned down by some invisible being” and he begins wandering around the room, musing on the joy that writing brings him. Again the phone rings, but this time the narrator answers only to hear the party on the other end repeating “some kind of indistinct foreign word”²⁷⁸ In this instance, meaningful words are interrupted by nonsense, and again the narrator assigns meaning to this meaningless sound, transforming it eventually into another reference to his brother-in-law’s demise.

I seemed to be hearing “more” or “mole.” I finally abandoned the phone and walked around the room again, but the word stuck to me with a strange tenacity.

²⁷⁷ Akutagawa, “Spinning Gears,” 211.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 225.

“Mole...” I didn’t like the idea of the animal referred to by the English word, but a few seconds later I recast “mole” as the French word “*la mort*.” “Death”: with that came a new rush of anxiety. Death seemed to be bearing down on me just as it had borne down on my sister’s husband.²⁷⁹

Both the disagreeable “mole” and the ominous “*la mort*” do indeed follow the narrator, and the appearance of each word is tied to his increasing anxiety and paranoia, though not in any logical – that is, “narrative” – way. *La mort*, especially, continues to appear in situations where the salience of language falls through. While taking whiskey in a bar for stomach pains, and suffering under the gaze of two French reporters that he imagines to be talking about him, the narrator catches snippets of their conversation.

“Bien...très mauvais...pourquoi?”
“Pourquoi?...le diable est mort!”
“Oui, oui...d’enfer...”²⁸⁰

“Good...very bad...why?”
“Why?...the devil’s dead!”
“Yes, yes...from Hell...”²⁸¹

By decoupling words, images, and objects from their communicative functions, Akutagawa allows a logic of association and juxtaposition to take a larger role. As in Kandinsky’s *Klänge*, certain words and images in “Haguruma” are important because of the way they are used and the feelings that they convey, rather than their contribution to narrative or description.

This synthetic logic ties “Haguruma” together not only through wordplay, but also through the use of colorful and allusive imagery. There are a number of references throughout the text to myths and other literature, largely from the West and specifically from Greco-Roman mythical tradition. Leaving the bar where he has overheard the French reporters’ conversation, the narrator spots a small signboard bearing an image of wings, which reminds him of Icarus’ ill-fated flight. The burning of Icarus’ wings (Akutagawa replaces the melting wax from the original story) ties this image to the references to Dante’s *Inferno*, which in turn is reinforced by the frequent mention of fire,

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 225.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 228.

²⁸¹ Rubin, notes to “Spinning Gears,” in *Rashōmon and 17 Other Stories*, 267.

burning, and of course the arson incident over which the narrator's brother-in-law was agonizing at the time of his death.²⁸²

Dante's *Inferno* leads to Strindberg's *Inferno* – Strindberg is mentioned twice in the text of “Haguruma,” once as the author (that is, as the actual, historical Strindberg),²⁸³ and a second time when the narrator, returning home, encounters “the neighborhood Swede who suffered from a persecution delusion and whose name was actually Strindberg”²⁸⁴ (that is, a false Strindberg or a doppelgänger). The true Strindberg appears in the story by way of *Legends*, an edited volume of his journals, which the narrator discovers while browsing the Maruzen bookstore. This text, which the narrator says “described an experience that was not much different from [his] own,”²⁸⁵ ties the literary and mythical references in “Haguruma” to a kind of loose color symbolism, by way of its yellow cover.²⁸⁶

Yellow plagues the narrator throughout “Haguruma,” appearing in situations where he is already feeling nervous or uneasy, or presaging some sort of disaster. It is a highly unpleasant, even frightful color, one which the narrator avoids wherever possible: “I stood outside waiting for a taxi, but not many came that way. The only cabs that did come by were, without exception, yellow. (For some reason, the yellow taxis I took were always having accidents.) Before too long, I found a lucky green one and decided to take it to the mental hospital near the cemetery in Aoyama.”²⁸⁷ The color's chilling presence is not limited to taxicabs and books: yellow objects punctuate the story, heralding trouble and negative feelings.

Green, on the other hand, is generally a safe, peaceful color for the narrator of “Haguruma,” appearing several times in the lobby of the hotel where he stays. The lobby serves as a kind of refuge for the narrator, a place where he can rest and calm down following intense, emotional experiences. For instance, after a nightmare in which he

²⁸² As the narrator is going to see his sister, the trees in a park along the street remind him of those who committed suicide and got turned into bushes at the bottom of hell in Dante's *Inferno*. Akutagawa, “Spinning Gears,” 213.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 217.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 232.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 217.

²⁸⁶ Immediately before this encounter with *Legends*, the narrator had been in another bookstore looking at a yellow-covered book of Greek myths, after which he begins to feel the Furies from Greek mythology following him. *Ibid.*, 217.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 216.

encounters a “nearly-mummified” vision of his “goddess of vengeance – the crazy girl”²⁸⁸ onboard an ominous sleeper train, the narrator awakens in fright and runs to the lobby, where he sits in front of the large fireplace and spots a woman dressed in green.

Feeling a kind of salvation, I determined that I would sit and wait for the night to end, just as a sick old man waits quietly for death after long years of intense suffering.²⁸⁹

While green and yellow are associated with the narrator’s reactions to the objects that make up the physical reality that he inhabits, the colors black and white, especially in combination, are associated with “other” realities – dreams, altered states (drunkenness), and literary imaginings. The “crazy girl” who the narrator sees in his dream lies behind a white curtain. The whiskey that he drinks at the bar is brand Black and White. “Strindberg” wears a black and white tie. After returning home from Tokyo, the narrator (while sitting in the garden accompanied by black and white animals) is reminded by his wife’s mother that “we *are* in the real world here, after all.”²⁹⁰ The way that Akutagawa uses colors in “Haguruma” contributes to creating an alternative kind of structure that is similar to what he praises in Cézanne’s and Kandinsky’s paintings in “Bungeiteki.”

Seiji Lippit argues that “what ‘madness’ in *Cogwheels* signifies is [the] inversion of the distinction between text and life, the collapse of the ordered textual universe and the production of random, uncontrolled flows of signification.”²⁹¹ It must be remembered, however, that the “uncontrolled flows of signification” that are so unsettling for the narrator of the story serve a different purpose for the reader, whose awareness of and attention to unconventional connections between and across media become heightened through these kinds of purposeful breakdowns. Akutagawa carefully releases the elements of literature, specifically words, from their typical roles, and a reader who is primed to look for unusual connections becomes a participant in the work, one who can be reached more easily by its vibrations and spiritual content.

²⁸⁸ In Rubin’s notes to “A Fool’s Life,” this woman is identified as the poet Hide Shigeiko, with whom Akutagawa had an affair at age twenty-nine.

²⁸⁹ Akutagawa, “Spinning Gears,” 222.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 233.

²⁹¹ Lippit, *Topographies*, 56.

The visual and auditory hallucinations that the narrator endures over the course of “Haguruma” reinforce the presence of cross-media synthesis, lending it an almost cinematic quality. In fact, “Haguruma” was written around the same time as Akutagawa’s two film scenarios, *Yūwaku* and *Asakusa kōen*, suggesting that writing film effects may have opened up possibilities for his fiction that then carried over into “Haguruma.” The translucent cogwheels that plague the narrator are particularly reminiscent of the *Asakusa kōen* film scenario, in which images fade in and out and objects and people transform at a moment’s notice.

Film is an inherently multi-media artform, one which combines images, sounds, music, text, and speech, and has the capacity to show both tableau moments and the passage of time. The cinematic effects in “Haguruma” owe something to *Asakusa kōen*, and the connection between the two works is strengthened by considering the way that Akutagawa uses text in the film scenario. Two instances in particular feature text that changes as the viewer looks at it:

32

A black signboard. In chalk, the words “North wind, clear” are written on the board in chalk. Yet these words dissolve and change into “Strong south wind. Possible rain.”

33

A nameplate stall seen at an angle. The samples lined up beneath the tent include the names of Tokugawa Ieyasu, Ninomiya Sontoku, Watanabe Kazan, Kondō Isami, Chikamatsu Monzaemon. Yet before long these change into common names. A pumpkin field gradually comes into focus beyond the signs.²⁹²

Here, as the written words transform, the visual quality of the text is emphasized, while the ability of these phrases and names to convey any information – the primary function of language – is called into question.

Works like “Haguruma” and *Asakusa kōen* showcase the high level of synthesis that Akutagawa’s writing achieved as he continued to incorporate devices and techniques from other media, along with allusions to earlier texts from multiple traditions. In

²⁹² Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, *Asakusa Park*, trans. Seiji M. Lippit. Big City Lit. (New York, NY: February 2004).

general, Akutagawa's later works, including "Haguruma," primarily feature the aspect of synthesis related to the combination of different types, media, and genres of art, while earlier works show more of the temporal/locational variety. Synthesis of both types functioned ultimately as both a precursor to and result of the minimalization of the dominance of *dessin*. Looking beyond established boundaries – of nationality, genre, or materials – enables the artist to access new expressive modes. Working without *dessin*, outside of conventional structure, naturally results in synthetic art as the artist uses whatever materials and forms he or she finds necessary. Thus, the process of removing *dessin* from one's works and the incorporation of synthesis are closely related, and are both guided by internal necessity or the poetic spirit.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

When Akutagawa writes about reducing the dominance of *dessin* in literature, he uses the terms of one art – painting – to describe an ideal that he would like to see realized in another – literature. Kandinsky does the same, using musical terminology to describe phenomena in the realm of painting. In both cases, the use of cross-genre terminology is intentional and thoughtful – both Akutagawa and Kandinsky incorporate elements from painting, music, and poetry into their work. Kandinsky commented extensively about the multimedia aspects of his art in his critical writing, but Akutagawa was less direct, often approaching the topic through extended metaphors and allusions. As a result, the significant influence of the visual arts on Akutagawa’s literary and critical writing has gone largely overlooked.

While a great deal of critical attention has been paid to Akutagawa's literary influences and source material, any assessment of his *oeuvre* that examines only its relationship to other literature is necessarily incomplete. Evidence from Akutagawa’s published essays and personal documents makes it clear that he engaged with the visual arts throughout his professional career; an analysis that accounts for the significant influence of painters like Cézanne, van Gogh, and most importantly Kandinsky, thus offers a more thorough understanding of his literature.

Other critical frameworks unnecessarily – and often counterproductively – divide and categorize Akutagawa’s *oeuvre* according to period or genre, giving the false impression that his artistic philosophy underwent one or more major, sudden changes. However, incorporating the influence of visual artists, specifically Kandinsky, into the conception of Akutagawa's career unifies the whole of his body of work, revealing continuity rather than division, and making sense of those shifts that do occur in his fiction between 1915 and 1927. Reading Akutagawa through the lens of Kandinsky’s art theory illuminates certain difficult concepts important to Akutagawa's critical writing, such as *shiteki seishin* and ‘*hanashi*’ *rashii hanashi no nai shōsetsu*, and also illustrates that the apparent changes in his literary style are the continuous product of Akutagawa’s

poetic spirit, leading him to utilize a variety of external forms as vehicles for artistic expression.

This principle of internal necessity, which exists as part of an artist's natural spirit, must guide every aspect of his or her artistic creation. Kandinsky outlines a set of relationships that inform the works of all artists across all genres: between artist and self, between artist and temporal/cultural context, and between artist and art in general. This principle is the central focus of Kandinsky's influential text *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, and was embraced by Japanese artists and critics studying his work. Thoughtful examination of Akutagawa's critical essays, particularly the "Bungeiteki na, amari ni bungeiteki na" series, with the context of Kandinsky's artistic philosophy in mind, makes it apparent the former incorporated the latter's principle of internal necessity into his own concept of poetic spirit. Thus, the two concepts, while not identical, show a certain amount of telling overlap. For Akutagawa, the clarity of the artist's poetic spirit determines, above all else, the spiritual power of a given work of art. This inner content, or "sacred flame," was more powerful and meaningful to Akutagawa than any excellence of superficial form.

Both Akutagawa and Kandinsky were greatly concerned with the relationship between external form and internal content. Both make clear in their critical writing that an artist must not put too much focus on the formal elements that he or she uses to materialize expressive content. No particular form, they both argue, is best for all artists; rather each artist must seek out those forms best suited for his or her individual expressive needs at any given moment, discarding any formal elements that hamper internal artistic expression. This ideal contrasted sharply against a perceived overreliance on formalized schools and restrictive standards. It resonated strongly with Akutagawa, who saw the narrow standards of the Taishō *bundan* as claustrophobic, stifling genuine expression. Even the question of abstraction versus realism was unimportant in this new framework: whichever means best suited the artist's inner content were inherently correct.

After 1910, Kandinsky chose to utilize primarily abstract methods, through which he believed that the inner sounds and vibrations that connected artist to work and work to viewer could be heard and felt most strongly. Emphasizing the independent nature of

“beings” such as colors, lines, and planes, Kandinsky created images in which the emotional or spiritual impact arises not from the classical depiction of objects and scenery – that is, not from the “literary” content of the image – but from the arrangement of these “beings,” divorced from their typical contexts. Kandinsky’s *Improvisations* and *Compositions* are structured according to this logic: the driving concern is the interaction between individual elements and their combined resonance as a whole work of art. It is obvious why Akutagawa would cite these paintings as examples of pieces that do not rely on *dessin*.

As his artistic philosophy matured, moving away from dependence on the *dessin* became one of Akutagawa’s major goals. Works like “Shinkirō,” “Haguruma,” and *Asakusa kōen* show his experimentation with the ‘*hanashi*’ *rashii hanashi no nai shōsetsu*. Such works also reveal Akutagawa’s use of materials and techniques from multiple artistic genres – “Shinkirō” and “Haguruma” are full of cinematic effects, while the film scenario *Asakusa kōen* incorporates theatrical staging and textual elements. This principle of synthesis, another major tenet of Kandinsky’s art theory, informed every stage of Akutagawa’s career.

Synthesis seeks to unite art from all over the world, from every time period, style, genre, and medium. Kandinsky drew upon traditional Russian and German folktales and culture in his paintings and woodcuts, and as an editor of *Der Blaue Reiter* [*Almanac*], he selected for inclusion works that were externally different, but still resonated strongly with one other – these examples demonstrate the temporal/locational aspect of synthesis. The cross-media aspect is apparent in Kandinsky’s experiments with creating a *gesamtkunstwerk*, or monumental work of art, that simultaneously utilizes many different types of artistic expression. His play *Der gelbe Klang*, which combines color, speech, song, dance, and staging, best exemplifies this type of synthesis. Akutagawa also used both types of synthesis to great effect in his fiction, incorporating material both Japanese and western, ancient and modern.

Examining Akutagawa’s career and body of work within the context of their connection to the visual arts highlights his continuous pursuit of the best means for the expression of his individual artistic content. It also brings to the foreground his abiding concern over the limiting or even homogenizing tendencies of Taishō era *bundan* culture

on authors. Far from negating or contradicting his early work, the literature and essays of Akutagawa's last years represent the apex of his theoretical and philosophical development, influenced by exposure to many different writers and artists, including Kandinsky.

Recognizing the influence of Kandinsky clarifies Akutagawa's views on art as expressed in "Bungeiteki" and other essays. For example, Akutagawa's stance in the literary debate with Tanizaki can be easily reconciled with the entirety of his *oeuvre*. This is particularly relevant to the evaluation of some of his final works. Akutagawa's praise of Shiga in "Bungeiteki" has led to the perception that *shishōsetsu*-like works such as "Shinkirō" and "Haguruma" were attempts to imitate Shiga. However, a full understanding of Akutagawa's notion of the poetic spirit, as it was shaped by the influence of Kandinsky's principle of internal necessity, reveals that Akutagawa's decision to use the form of personal fiction was not a result of imitation or external pressures, but of experimentation and the desire to best express internal content. From Akutagawa's perspective, I-novelists who were working within confessional modes solely because of their popularity at the time were making empty gestures, though the same forms could be meaningful in the hands of Shiga and others who were driven to use them by internal necessity/poetic spirit.

Future critical consideration of Akutagawa's writing will benefit from an understanding of the influence of Kandinsky's art theory. Many key concepts central to Akutagawa's work, including poetic spirit/internal necessity and synthesis, are explored extensively in Kandinsky's writing and art, and their impact on Akutagawa's artistic development is apparent. And while Kandinsky may have been one of the most significant sources for inspiration, Akutagawa engaged with a variety of visual art throughout his career. Such connections open up many avenues of critical exploration that will inevitably broaden the understanding of Akutagawa as an artist, critic, and theorist.

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