

Article

## Recovery versus Reversion: The Implications of Multiple Signifieds in Ōoka Shōhei's *Fires on the Plain*

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Much of the scholarship on Ōoka Shōhei's *Fires on the Plain* (Nobi, 1952; trans. 1957) is predicated on the assumption that the protagonist, Pfc. Tamura, is insane. This issue crystallizes when, at the end of the novel, Tamura returns to behavior he had previously rejected, now unconcerned about what people might think of him. The language Ōoka uses is subject to slippage which, in turn, creates trace structures of related meaning that problematize this assumption of insanity. As a consequence, the reader is forced to consider what meaning the text might have with a sane narrator, and why the author may have chosen to claim insanity for his protagonist. The answers point to both the expectations of readers in the aftermath of Japan's defeat in World War Two, and a strengthening of the cautionary message implicit in the novel.

**Keywords:** Trace Structures, *Shishōsetsu*, Japanese Militarism, Post-structuralism

In the summer of 2014, the efforts by the government of Prime Minister Abe Shinzō to effect a controversial reinterpretation of Japan's post-war constitution were in the news daily. The primary goal was a redefinition of the term *shūdanteki jieiken* (right of collective self-defense) from one that was extremely restrictive, limiting Japanese Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) to military actions only on Japanese territory, to one that expanded on "collective" and conceptualized "self-defense" as geographically unrestricted.<sup>1</sup> The Abe Government wanted authorization for the JSDF to participate jointly in military operations outside of Japan's sovereign territory, ostensibly to come to the aid of an ally under armed attack. A year later, despite substantial resistance and "opinion polls that showed the legislation to be exceedingly unpopular, the laws were rammed through the Diet on September 19, 2015" (Muto 1).

Over seven decades after the end of the Greater East Asia War, the conflict that occasioned the constitutional limitations that so irked the conservative Abe Government, it is beneficial to look at some of the literature that came out of that same conflict. There we may find a cautionary tale for those intent on moving Japan closer to its imperial past, as Abe seemed interested in doing when he "declared at an Upper House Budget Committee hearing that he was committed to revising the constitution within his term of office" (Muto 1). In response to Abe's "intention to secure the first change to Japan's Constitution by 2020" (Sasaki 2), we might

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<sup>1</sup> At its most benign, the change might appear, to some advocates, as simply a logical extension of the PKO debates of the 1990s.

see in this moment an opportunity to reflect on the consequences of Japan's past military endeavors. There is no shortage of literature that appeared in Japan at the end of World War II, and much of that corpus illuminates the human costs of war and the dangers of passive acquiescence to the government's bellicose policies. Many of the authors writing of the Pacific conflict appear unequivocal in their condemnation of the militaristic stance that gave rise, ultimately, to Japan's defeat and singular instance of occupation. At least one well-regarded novel paints a compelling picture of one end to which such a policy might lead and argues caution in embracing remilitarization.

### 1. Thesis and Context

Sixty years prior to the revisionist efforts by the Abe government, seven years after Japan's defeat in World War II, and two years into the Korean War, *Fires on the Plain* (*Nobi*, 1952; trans. 1957) by Ōoka Shōhei<sup>2</sup> (1909–1988), hit Japanese bookshelves. This version of the story is, in fact, a revision of its first public appearance some four years earlier,<sup>3</sup> a point of note precisely because one of the reasons Ōoka gives for reworking the novel was the outbreak of another war (*OSZ* 14:183–84), and his disappointment at the celerity with which nations reengaged in this destructive form of statecraft. The protagonist, Tamura, is writing “the novel six years after he lost his memory in the war” with the consequence that “it places the telling of the tale in temporal proximity with the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950. Ōoka notes that the events of the day now meant a reworked story in which [...] the protagonist could write the story ‘now’ rather than leave it for someone to find after his death as was Ōoka's original plan” (Lofgren, “Christianity” 273).

Although *Fires on the Plain* does not directly address the hawkish maneuvers of the Abe Government, its anti-war message is as relevant today as it was when Ōoka published it in 1952. The current political environment offers, then, an opportunity to revisit one of the seminal anti-war novels to have come out of Japan in the aftermath of the Second World War by “the author most notable among the many post-war authors” (Kusunoki 17).<sup>4</sup> Of particular relevance is the putative psychological state of the protagonist. His apparent insanity has allowed him, in no small degree, to sidestep responsibility for his cannibalistic actions in the Philippines. The following reading, however, suggests that a slippage between signifiers (two separate but clearly related character compounds) at one crucial moment late in the text means that accepting the claim of insanity unreservedly may be injudicious. Concomitant with that awareness comes the realization that responsibility for one's actions is not easily evaded by escape into sophistic excuses. Because one has little difficulty allowing the concrete example of cannibalism to expand into a metaphor for the totality of war, that conclusion, that cautionary note, should resonate forcefully as Japan appears to be edging closer to its militaristic past.

Immediately after the end of the Second World War in Japan, Ōoka Shōhei engaged in the cathartic process of literary construction, a process that served as a form of autotherapy for many intellectuals who experienced the deracinating effects of that conflict. He, like many of his peers, published a novel, but unlike his fellow writers, his work survived the heady days of easy obscurity that plagued many writing contemporaneously with him. Almost seven decades later, *Fires on the Plain*, “Ōoka's representative work, holding the position of a post-war classic” (Isoda 77), offers significant insight into the trauma experienced by the Japanese who

<sup>2</sup> All Japanese personal names are presented in accordance with Japanese custom: surname preceding given name.

<sup>3</sup> *Fires on the Plain* first appeared in serialized form in 1948 in *Buntai*. The magazine's bankruptcy after the fourth issue meant that only half of the story appeared. Ōoka subsequently reworked the novel and it was serialized in the journal *Tenbō* in 1951 before it was published as a book in 1952. The initial text setting the context for the story as it originally appeared in *Buntai* is available in *Ōoka Shōhei zenshū* 3:137–43. All subsequent references to this collection will be cited as *OSZ*.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that this evaluation was originally written in 1952, shortly after *Fires on the Plain* was published and when numerous novels treating the war by a broad group of authors loosely classified as the *Après-Guerre* writers were appearing regularly. All translations from the Japanese are mine unless otherwise indicated.

were conscripted and fought in the waning months of the Pacific War, and still evokes powerful images of a time that many in Japan would rather forget.<sup>5</sup> Its notoriety, as well as its controversial themes and images, have marked *Fires on the Plain* as fertile ground for academic scrutiny. This, and the almost intractable ideological orientation adopted by the Japanese towards the end of the war, and after the American occupation, that requires a fervid rejection of war in general,<sup>6</sup> have assured that its place in the literary canon of major post-war works has remained virtually unassailable.

Much of the early critical writing that treats *Fires on the Plain* concerns itself with questions of influence, intention, or the points of homologous symbolism between the two main themes of cannibalism and Christianity. Such concerns, while offering valuable insights into the work, fail to fully explicate the text for the simple reason that most have been predicated, implicitly or explicitly, upon the assumption that the narrator/protagonist was insane.<sup>7</sup> Careful consideration of the text suggests that such a reading might be incomplete at least, if not outright erroneous. Attention to the tenability of Tamura's insanity provides a profitable approach in teasing out one interpretation of the text that has, to date, been overlooked by scholars. The following reading debunks the underlying assumptions inherent in many works that antedate this one: namely, that the protagonist of this memoir is, or was, mentally unstable. Once the text is allowed to liberate itself from the carefully nurtured façade of insanity, a deeper understanding of tensions immanent in the text imposes itself on the reader, one with far-reaching implications for a significant rereading of this pivotal Occupation-era work that stretches into the Abe era.

A brief synopsis will serve as a foundation for the following analysis. The bulk of story is set near the end of World War II on Leyte Island in the Philippines and concerns Private first class Tamura of the Japanese Imperial Army. It opens *in medias res* as he is expelled from his unit because his tuberculosis<sup>8</sup> prevents him from gathering food, the primary concern of the routed Japanese troops. After wandering alone in the mountains for many days, he encounters two of his countrymen who have been surviving on the flesh of straggling Japanese soldiers they have killed. A confluence of circumstances conspires to draw Tamura into their sordid world. The treachery of one of the trio requires the remaining two to kill him, ostensibly for protection, but protection both in the sense of removing the threat of bodily injury, as well as the sense of prolonging life through the

<sup>5</sup> Abe's attempts to revise the constitution are but the most recent in a long line of efforts that offer an imperfect reflection of one aspect of this desire.

<sup>6</sup> In contrast to what appears to be broad support for this anti-war stance, there is a marked lack of enthusiasm, often played out publicly, for a sweeping recognition of Japan's guilt for its imperialistic actions in World War Two. In this, Japan differs noticeably from the other major axis power, Germany. This ideological stance is undoubtedly a component of the Abe government's position on constitutional reform.

<sup>7</sup> Some representative examples might be both Terada Tōru and Miyaji Yutaka who, in the 1950s, reference Tamura's insanity when discussing Ōoka's unusual approach to writing about natural scenery in *Fires on the Plain* (Terada 25; Miyaji 47). Terada, however, is even more explicit, saying that "[t]he entirety of *Fires on the Plain* is the memoirs of a madman" (26), a fact that undergirds his disquisition. Kusunoki Michitaka sees the "madman's diary" aspect of *Fires on the Plain* as an essential component in the novel's successful and unusual construction (19). He claims that "Pfc. Tamura's starvation brought him to insanity" (20) and, after invoking the name of Freud, goes so far as to name the illness: "schizophrenia" (20). Writing of the changes between the first appearance in *Buntai* (1948) and the revised appearance in *Tenbō* (1951), Ikeda Jun'ichi highlights Ōoka's decision to conceal the fact that the protagonist is insane until the end of the novel as a significant improvement rectifying the original "danger that [the reader] will lose interest" (140). Finally, Haniya Yutaka gives an implicit nod to the protagonist's insanity by referencing *Fires on the Plain*'s insights into the psychology of its readers (40–44, *passim*).

<sup>8</sup> Tuberculosis is a provocative choice of illness beyond its long and obvious history in literature. The word for "tuberculosis"—*kekaku*—has a homophonic meaning of "disqualification", suggesting that Tamura's sickness disqualifies him from continued service in the army. Tamura says of his actions (he is specifically describing murder rather than cannibalism) "even if I were to be rescued, it was undoubtedly forbidden to me to dwell in [the world of ordinary men]" (OSZ 3:91). The name of the disease thus serves as a constant reminder of the fact that he is unqualified to live in the world of humans. Such a rational awareness of one's own worth is one point in the argument against his claim of insanity.

consumption of his flesh. Morally unable to continue living in this way, Tamura kills his remaining companion and at that point loses his memory. The novel reopens six years later in a sanatorium. Tamura has withdrawn from the world and suffers from Messianic delusions. He is, ostensibly, insane and supposedly has been since he first considered eating human flesh. Tamura writes *Fires on the Plain* in an attempt to combat his retrogressive amnesia and stimulate his memory about the events between murdering his companions and being put into an American POW camp.

## 2. The Author/Narrator Homology Trap

Of the many topics for investigation immanent in *Fires on the Plain*, one that seems to inform much of the early scholarship<sup>9</sup> on the novel focuses on the question of fictionality and authenticity. A substantial body of the critical writing in this area intersects with *shishōsetsu*,<sup>10</sup> a monumental tradition which has been the dominant discourse of Japanese fiction in the modern era. Although *shishōsetsu* resist an easy definition, it is possible to offer a general framework within which they exist. Usually rendered into English as the “I-novel” reflecting the fact that the protagonist/narrator is often a thinly-disguised representation of the author, the primary concern lies in the *unmediated* representation of the author’s life which is achieved by an author with an attitude of “unconcerned egocentricity that guarantees his sincerity and spontaneity” (Hijiya-Kirschnerreit 186). In other words, *shishōsetsu* are a first- or third-person “narration about the author’s own experiences with no fictional embellishment” (Fowler 292) read with an assumption of the authenticity of the experiences represented therein.<sup>11</sup> This form is deeply rooted both in the literary establishment in Japan, and in the apprehending consciousness of the readers. It took many decades before authors were truly able to break away from this form and experiment with newer styles without concern that their works might be measured against the expectations of the *shishōsetsu*. In the aftermath of the Pacific War, it still remained difficult to escape fully from the influence of this tradition. It is, therefore, not unreasonable to assume that the public would expect the work of an author writing immediately after the Second World War to conform to the dictates of this discourse, especially in those cases when the subject matter of the novel *appeared* to hew so closely to his life experiences.

Two qualities of the *shishōsetsu* contribute to the present argument. While qualifying as a novel in the Japanese context, *shishōsetsu* share some similarities with autobiography, albeit with notable caveats.<sup>12</sup> The basic premise of the *shishōsetsu* is that of the unmediated presentation of the author’s life and emotions, but in practice, this is not entirely accurate. Indeed, while the myth of sincerity fostered by the *shishōsetsu* might induce one to claim it lacks any fictionality at all, the simple truth is that for authors writing *shishōsetsu*, “their common struggles with ‘authentic’ narrative representation were resolved in ways that, for all their supposed fidelity to lived experience, reveal considerable editorial license and imagination” (Fowler 292). In other words, mediation comprises an integral part of the process whereby a *shishōsetsu* is created (as it does in any written work) which introduces a degree of fictionality into the story for the simple reason that the mere act of writing is, *a priori*, a fictionalizing process. The conclusion that either *shishōsetsu* or autobiography are, to some extent, fictional should come as no surprise.

The second and more compelling point concerns the audience role of the literary coterie of the writer creating the *shishōsetsu*. The works were, in general, written for a specific group of people, people who were

<sup>9</sup> I am referring here to roughly the quarter-century period immediately after the novel’s publication.

<sup>10</sup> The *shishōsetsu* is more formally known as *watakushi-shōsetsu*, the difference in pronunciation arising from the two possible readings of the first character. Most people accept *Futon* (“The Quilt”, 1907; trans. 1981) by Tayama Katai (1872–1930) as the prototypical example of *shishōsetsu*. Both Edward Fowler (*The Rhetoric of Confession*) and Irmela Hijiya-Kirschnerreit (*Rituals of Self-Revelation*) provide thorough explanations of what the *shishōsetsu* is and what its role in modern Japanese letters has been.

<sup>11</sup> This simple description, although convenient, is particularly problematic in its implicit ignorance of the mediating effects of writing.

<sup>12</sup> For a more complete explication of the relationship between autobiography and *shishōsetsu*, see Tomi Suzuki.

intimately familiar with the life of the author. Consequently, a reading of any given work operated on two levels: intratextual and extratextual. Those people reading the text brought to that task a knowledge of the author's life. Thus armed, they would read the work and see in it elements of the author. Once the protagonist was identified as the author, intratextual modification would take place as the work was further explicated *vis-à-vis* the earlier, privileged knowledge of the author's life. The immediate consequence of this was an extratextual codification of the author's rewritten life in light of the new material gleaned from the story: actions and thoughts of the protagonist were transferred out of the text and onto the author to enhance and expand the body of knowledge surrounding him. The reader embeds this new, revised knowledge back into the text and the process starts anew. The work does not become a *shishōsetsu*, however, simply because the reader wants it to be one. There is, rather, an implicit requirement that the author, too, agrees that the work fits this category. Only when there is this kind of unspoken agreement between the reader and author does the novel become a *shishōsetsu*. This distinction is essential to bear in mind as we consider *Fires on the Plain*.

Broadly speaking, the literary milieu in Japan at the time Ōoka was first writing, and for many years prior to that, predisposed the reading public to expect an author to write in accordance with the dictates and within the confines of the *shishōsetsu* framework. Ōoka was trying to contravene that convention in an atmosphere very unforgiving of such an attempt. While *Fires on the Plain* is clearly not a *shishōsetsu*, for a number of technical reasons, it is certainly possible for a reader to imagine echoes of that *shishōsetsu* tradition within its fictional confines.<sup>13</sup> Therein lies the problem. What is there in the text that would encourage the reader to associate the protagonist Tamura with author Ōoka? Although there is no clear one-to-one correspondence on all counts, one occasionally catches a reflection or refraction of the latter in the former.<sup>14</sup> Ōoka's fictionalized use of his lived experiences within the text of *Fires on the Plain* has, at the very least, the potential effect of encouraging readers to link him with his protagonist. That, in turn, has implications for understanding the insanity Tamura claims for himself.

### 3. Insanity and Linguistic Slippage

In the seven decades since *Fires on the Plain* first appeared in print, the prevailing apprehension, tending towards a consensus among readers, critics, and academicians, is that the protagonist produced the text as a form of therapy and that this action was rendered necessary by his mentally unstable state. Indeed, Tamura says "I am writing this in a room in a psychiatric hospital in the suburbs of Tokyo" (OSZ 3:124). If he were not insane, why else would he have voluntarily committed himself to a sanatorium six years after the end of the traumatic, disorientating, deracinating Pacific conflict? Why else would he have lost his memory shortly after partaking in the taboo of cannibalism, culminating in the murder of both of his cohorts? Indeed, one might well ask why else would he have engaged in the normally reprehensible act of cannibalism in the first place? In fact, the entire novel is revealed to be nothing more than "A Madman's Diary" (*Kyōjin nikki*), a point which is seemingly made explicit in the final three chapters (37–39) of the novel. There, we see the title of chapter 37, "Kyōjin nikki" which would seem to make the relation between Tamura's psychological state and the text

<sup>13</sup> Although too numerous to detail here, the similarities between the protagonist and the author of the novel are notable. A few representative examples are: age and rank, exposure to cannibalism, expulsion from the unit because of illness, and a childhood connection to Christianity.

<sup>14</sup> Critics often danced around the issue of how to evaluate *Fires on the Plain* in relation to the *shishōsetsu* for years after it was published. Isoda Kōichi is just one of many critics who are clear in their distancing of *Fires on the Plain* from a *shishōsetsu*. "I do not think of these works as *shishōsetsu* in the usual sense" (77). A representative summary of the general consensus might be that "[e]ven as *Fires on the Plain* is dependent upon actual experiences, it objectifies them and appeals to us by placing in a fictional world the warp and woof of war's calamity and the importance of the self" (Suzuki, *Ōoka Shōhei ron* 19). In other words, despite its clear reliance upon Ōoka's own experiences, it functions in a way fundamentally different from a *shishōsetsu*, making it, "fictional through and through" (Suzuki, *Ōoka Shōhei ron* 140).

of the preceding 36 chapters incontrovertible.<sup>15</sup> Despite this apparent evidence to the contrary, various textual, semantic, and linguistic elements argue persuasively against the convenient but naïve conclusion that Tamura is insane. It is to one of these textual ambiguities that we shall now turn our attention.

A close reading of *Fires on the Plain*, in its several iterations, reveals a linguistic contradiction that problematizes the long-accepted premise of the novel. In fact, Pfc. Tamura's putative insanity may simply be a condemnation of the very society that seeks to excoriate him for his extra-societal activities. The social sanctions and restructuring that serve as conventional limiters on humanity's excesses were, in essence, not applicable to the reality of the Philippines which the soldiers of the Imperial Japanese Army knew in the depths of their abandonment and subsequent disorganized katabasis.

The problematic linguistic element is rooted in the structure of the Japanese language itself. The myriad ideographs (*kanji*) that are currently in use in standard writing were largely originally imported from China over many years. The chronological gaps that separated the periods of borrowing provided the evolving Japanized character system with a vast number of *kanji* that were phonetically and visually dissimilar (multiple signifiers), yet ostensibly denoted the same thing (single signified). Further, although the characters were intrinsically differentiated phonetically an author could, in fact, assign to any character a reading (*ateji*) that matched the original Chinese meaning of the character.<sup>16</sup> The possibility of synonyms was great, but often synonyms that might be synonymous with two words of unrelated or opposite meanings: a root word with two branches of signifieds or synonyms while the branches remained dissimilar save for the root word.

The relevance this historical development has for understanding the uncertainty of Tamura's insanity is evident in a single word that appears at a critical moment in the text. In pre-war Japan, there were two accepted ways of writing *kaifuku* (回復 and 恢復), a compound made up of two characters, *kai* and *fuku*.<sup>17</sup> The second character, 復, is the same in both compounds. Among its varied, independent meanings are the following: "revert to", "be restored to", "return to normal or original state". It is the first character that is of significance to this discussion. Prior to the post-war educational reforms, the two characters used for the first element of the compound attributed different meanings to the new conjoined linguistic element. This multiplicity of forms, each ostensibly signifying the same thing, yet each concomitantly allowing slight slippage in that which is signified, construct the foundation upon which an insidious contradiction is built within the structural assumptions that govern the characters in the text of *Fires on the Plain*. In this tension is revealed how the text "functions against its own explicit (metaphysical) assertions, not just by creating ambiguity, but by inscribing a systematic 'other message' behind or through what is being said" (Derrida, *Dissemination* xiii, emphasis in original).

The trace structures that inhere in the first character of the compound thus complicate the potential meaning of *kaifuku*. When we consider the two possibilities, the character in the first compound, 回, implies a simple revolving. In the second compound, the first character, 恢, implies a widening or enlarging. Strictly speaking, when this "widening" *kai* is combined with *fuku* 復, the second compound (恢復) connotes a simple

<sup>15</sup> Ōoka relates in both *Sokai nikki* (Evacuation diary, 1953) and *Nobi no ito* (My intention in *Fires on the Plain*, 1953) (not to be confused with an earlier essay with the same title that appeared in the July 1952 issue of *Sōgen*) that an early working title for *Fires on the Plain* was *Kyōjin nikki*. See OSZ 14:3–23 and OSZ 14:173–93. In "Jinnikushoku ni tsuite" (On cannibalism, 1973), Ōoka mentions the turn-of-the-century Chinese author Lu Xun's (1881–1936) *Kuangren riji* (Diary of a Madman; trans 1990) written in 1918 as an inspiration for both the concept and the title.

<sup>16</sup> This simplification ignores another aspect of *ateji*: characters may be assigned a reading (and, by extension, a specific signified) that is at odds with convention.

<sup>17</sup> Miyaji Yutaka claims his philologic study will consider "the characters and vocabulary" (41) Ōoka uses to explicate *Fires on the Plain*. Sadly, although he does discuss the frequency of some specific vocabulary items, he does not actually delve as deeply as individual character choices such as the one under consideration here. It is worth noting, however, that he does offer a general comment on Ōoka's choice of *kanji*. Despite the fact that Ōoka is consistent in his use of classical orthography, he "gives no consideration whatsoever to matters such as officially-sanctioned characters for daily use [*tōyō kanji*]" (45), although Miyaji opines that this may be a function of the author's age.

restoration to a previous condition (either good or bad) in contradistinction to the first compound (回復) which denotes not only a restoration to a previous condition but also a recovery from an illness to a healthy state; in short, getting better.<sup>18</sup>

In the years since 1948, this distinction has blurred to the point of meaninglessness. Asking a junior or senior high-school student in Japan today if there is a difference between these two compounds will likely elicit exclamations of uncertainty mixed with ignorance: most may not even know the *kai* character 恢 for the simple reason that it lies outside the 2,136 *jōyō kanji* (characters for regular use) currently proscribed for basic literacy by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology. The *kai* character 回 has almost fully replaced the multiplicity available to earlier authors. Ōoka, however, was under no such restriction in 1952 when he published the first complete serialized edition of *Fires on the Plain*. In order to distinguish between these two compounds, I will use the following convention. The 回復 compound shall be represented by (Kf)<sub>rc</sub>, where (Kf) denotes *kaifuku* and the subscript 'rc' corresponds to recovery. In contrast to this (Kf)<sub>rc</sub> shall represent the 恢復 compound where (Kf) again represents *kaifuku* and the subscript 'rv' implies a reversion.

(Kf)<sub>rc</sub> = recovery from an illness 回復

(Kf)<sub>rv</sub> = reversion to a previous state 恢復

The meaning of *kaifuku*, in other words, is far from the stable meaning equated with speech precisely because it is written, that is to say, visual. Yet even in speech, the homophonous nature of the Japanese language resists stability. In fact, it struggles against the diacritical sense of language with its dependence on “a structured economy of differences which allows a relatively small range of linguistic elements to signify a vast repertoire of negotiable meanings” (Norris 25).

However, even the distinction between (Kf)<sub>rc</sub> and (Kf)<sub>rv</sub> presented above is artificial simply because (Kf)<sub>rv</sub> can signify (Kf)<sub>rc</sub> by convention reflecting the diachronic linguistic change all languages undergo. That is, the trace structure of *kaifuku* and the multiple implications the term embeds as a result of its constantly sliding signifieds means that the interpretation, the reading, is necessarily endlessly deferred. This instability, combined with the fact that both (Kf)<sub>rc</sub> and (Kf)<sub>rv</sub> can only be distinguished visually, not aurally, naturally calls to mind a neologism that encapsulates this avoidance of semantic stability. It is in the systematic play of the differences between the concepts inscribed in the chain of signification within which it refers to the other that “such a play, *différance*, is thus no longer simply a concept, but rather the possibility of conceptuality, of a conceptual process and system in general” (Derrida, “Différance” 11). The violent tension inherent in Derrida’s usage of *différance*, which engenders a disruption or disturbance on the level of the signifier creating a visual reminder of the plurality of meaning suspended within the interstices of language, compares favorably with the tissue of interconnected traces that the term *kaifuku* sets up, its refusal to yield to a transcendental signified.

Ōoka’s use of *kaifuku* appears at the end of the novel. Tamura has become the victim of a psychosomatic “illness” stemming from an incident during his time on Leyte. “[His] left hand grabbed the wrist of [his] right hand, which was holding the bayonet” (*OSZ* 3:100) when he attempted to cut off the meat from the body of a dead compatriot freely offered just prior to his death. The extent of this psychosis gradually expanded until all food, whether meat or not, prompted the same physical response. Tamura explains that “this strange action has become a habit for my left hand. When I think of eating something I shouldn’t, my left hand moves of its own accord and grips the hand holding the spoon, that is, my right wrist, from above even before that food appears in front of me” (*OSZ* 3:100). Moreover, he would apologize to any food—animal or vegetable—prior to consuming it. Years later, while Tamura languishes in the mental institution, he ruminates about the course and root of his “illness,” a natural consequence of which is reflection on his abnormal behavior. As the following

<sup>18</sup> See Morohashi: *fuku* 復, no. 10183; *kai* 回 (revolving), no. 4690; *kai* 恢 (widening), no. 10577.

passage indicates, however, Tamura himself is not convinced that his actions and, the conditions that gave rise to them, are particularly abnormal; nor, by extension, that he is ill.

Consequently, even when I again *reverted to* the ceremony of bowing before my dinner table and refusing all food five years later, there was, as far as I was concerned, no basis to think it particularly strange nor to feel it must be stopped. Even when once again, my left hand grabbed my right, I could not help it for—perhaps it was God—it was moved by something other than me.

(OSZ 3:126, emphasis added)<sup>19</sup>

That the English translation does not—indeed, cannot—accurately reflect the subtle implications of the (Kf)<sub>rv</sub> characters used for *kaifuku*<sup>20</sup> is the linguistic sticking point of concern in this discussion.

Any system of language is entirely differential, for the meaning of a signifier lies not in a relation or representation, as a word to a thing, but only in its syntagmatic and associative difference from other signifiers. Consequently, because “‘writing,’ for example, no longer simply means ‘words on a page,’ but rather any differential trace structure, a structure that *also* inhabits speech” (Derrida, *Dissemination* xiii), one cannot simply accept the standard interpretation of *kaifuku* as (Kf)<sub>rv</sub>. The text itself creates an ambiguity that resists disambiguation. Neither (Kf)<sub>rv</sub> nor (Kf)<sub>rc</sub> can claim presence as both are always-already in the text and, at the same time, not there, engaged in an eternal oscillation. This is, however, precisely the environment that produces a *différance*, a moment in the text where the unintentional significations borne of the pluripotency inherent in a sphere of meaning that lie beyond consciousness (although not out of its reach) are suddenly evident. Language is always bound and expanded by a network of differential traces, such as those we see with *kaifuku*, which can never fully be grasped by the individual speaker, yet which are essential for communication. Without the trace, all words would have an inviolable meaning, clear to all. The play, the uncertainty, that gives rise to contradictory meanings or double entendre, for example, would not exist. In the case we are considering, the *shishōsetsu* tradition placed Ōoka in the difficult position of—apparently and without his consent—being merged into the novel by readers.<sup>21</sup> These traces are also violently disruptive of the received truth of the work as it has been perceived for the past 70 years.

#### 4. Insane or Sane?

Recognition of the play in signifieds inherent in *kaifuku* raises an important issue that substantially undermines any claim of insanity on the part of the protagonist. To say that Tamura was recovering something

<sup>19</sup> Ōoka uses (Kf)<sub>rv</sub>. For the sake of comparison, I include here the text from Ivan Morris’s translation:

When, five years after my return, I *resumed* the ceremony of bowing in front of the dining table, and once more began to refuse all sorts of food, I was not inclined to regard this behavior as strange or to give it up. Nor could I help the fact that now my left hand would again stretch out to grasp my right hand; for I was being impelled by something outside myself—by God, perhaps.  
(Ooka, *Fires* 230, emphasis added)

<sup>20</sup> It is important to recognize that this appears to be the only instance in the entire novel in which Ōoka uses *kaifuku* of either stripe. Thus, it is impossible to state categorically that Ōoka was working consciously to subvert a particular reading through this specific choice; however, the fact that the choice was made—consciously or otherwise—is clear, and the potential consequences of that decision are what concern us here, for language constantly seeks to escape the fetters of intention.

<sup>21</sup> Obviously, the most damning equivalence would be in the realm of cannibalism. Ōoka categorically rejected any notion that he had actually practiced cannibalism in “*Nobi no ito*” (1953): “[h]ad I the experience of cannibalism, that would have been terrible” (OSZ 14:176). Two decades later, Ōoka still felt it necessary to stress his innocence. In “*Jinnikushoku ni tsuite*” (1973), he reiterates that “[T]he question I am asked most frequently is whether or not that [cannibalism] is my experience. If I had actually had a cannibalistic experience, that would have been abominable; of course, it is fiction” (OSZ 16:520).



lost [(Kf)<sub>rv</sub>], returning to an original state, is merely to say that that original state is once again the dominant discourse of his actions. If, however, the additional, *permitted and logical*, reading of “recovery from an illness” [(Kf)<sub>c</sub>] is privileged, then the situation changes dramatically. It is to a supposedly anomalous state that he is recovering. Consequently, he is “getting better” by reverting to a state he—and the critics writing about *Fires on the Plain*—had thought was symptomatic of his insanity. In other words, what appeared to be sanity was, in fact, insane, and his “reversion” from that state was to one perceived as insane but which really is that of sanity.<sup>22</sup> Might, then, that state be, in fact, one that is not associated with insanity but, rather, normalcy? Certainly, this is neither unreasonable nor impossible given the extreme situation of ostracism, abandonment, and physical decay in which Tamura had been enveloped on Leyte.

Clearly, one might advance the argument that context guides the reading and this supposed ambiguity should be resolved before it becomes an issue. While this supposition is not without merit, it also fails to consider two points. The first is the effects of the readers’ desire to see elements of the *shishōsetsu* in *Fires on the Plain* and the implications that has for a constant re-reading of a text in light of the information gleaned from that text and that known about the author. The second is the discontinuity inherent in Tamura’s residence in a sanatorium which stands in direct contrast to—indeed, struggles against in an attempt to invalidate—his experiences in the Philippines.<sup>23</sup> The text up to the point in question has established that the protagonist views the ritualistic reaction of his hands with some sense of disquietude. The first time it occurred, Tamura was delirious, famished, and close to death.

“What, are you still here? Poor bastard. When I die you can eat this” (OSZ 3:99). With these words, a soldier on the verge of death offers Tamura his emaciated left arm as food. Tamura is thrown into a moral and ethical dilemma over whether he should eat this man’s arm to preserve his own life. The thought is not a new one. Tamura has already seen countless corpses that were, mysteriously, “missing the flesh on their buttocks” (OSZ 3:95). A harbinger of the implications inherent in these mutilated bodies were the dead soldiers Tamura discovered around the church in an abandoned village by the sea. Gradually it dawns on him that these wounds originate not from the fierce battle for Leyte Island, but in the equally fierce struggle by the disorganized and unsupported Japanese troops to survive. Concomitant with this realization comes an assault by similar desires, and a sense of revulsion that the idea of cannibalism came to him so readily.

The rapid putrefaction of corpses under the tropical conditions of the Philippines as well as his own spiritual vacillation have kept Tamura from acting on his inhuman—or, extremely human—impulses. But now, not only is he presented with a fresh corpse, he has the blessings of its owner. Tamura decides to save himself and eat this gift. As soon as he makes a move in that direction, however, his body betrays him by instinctively protecting him from violating one of society’s greatest taboos.

At that moment, an odd thing occurred. My left hand grabbed the wrist of my right hand, which was holding the bayonet. Since that time, this strange action has become a habit for my left hand. When I think of eating something I shouldn’t, my left hand moves of its own accord and grips the hand holding the spoon, that is, my right wrist, from above even before that food appears in front of me.

(OSZ 3:100)

<sup>22</sup> Kamei Hideo focuses on this precise passage, also singling out the term *kaifuku* for emphasis, and arrives at a similar conclusion, albeit for a different reason. “That [resumption] is not to insanity; that is a “reversion” [(Kf)<sub>rv</sub>] to sanity” (192). He goes on to observe that “[i]n this moment, one can recognize the actual meaning with which the author imbued this novel...” (192).

<sup>23</sup> This shift is seen by many critics as the novel’s major flaw, a failed attempt to connect the context of one past war (World War II) to a conflict contemporaneous with the publication of the novel (the Korean War). Ichikawa Kon’s 1959 film adaptation of *Fires on the Plain* omits these final chapters, a change that figures prominently in my earlier analysis. See Lofgren, “Christianity.”

This is part of the evidence Tamura offers for his supposed insanity, yet where is the insanity in attempting to preserve the taboo against cannibalism? Surely this is a normal state. Or, perhaps, the insanity is simply an unwillingness to preserve life.

Tamura's cannibalism is certainly not unthinkable when considered rationally. Logically, the situation in *Fires on the Plain* should engender no sense of moral outrage, save that which might be associated with war in general. It was a soldier's obligation to fight for the Emperor and Japan. To do so, he had to be fit, which requires food. The Filipino natives were enemies of the Japanese Imperial Army, so shooting them was an action not without justification in the context of a military need for security. Once dead, why should the flesh not be consumed if it could save the lives of the Japanese soldiers, thereby allowing them to fight on for their country? Taken one step further, to kill a straggling Japanese soldier with no chance of survival in order that other soldiers might live and carry on the battle is not as execrable as it might, at first glance, appear. This aspect of the equation is seen in the contrast between Tamura's moral reticence and his companions' pragmatic approach to a life-sustaining substance (although in this case, neither Nagamatsu nor Yasuda had any intention of continuing to function as soldiers in service of their country).

Once the idea of insanity has been destabilized, it is, in effect, undergoing erasure, replaced, at least temporarily, with the possibility of sanity. It is instructive, in this context, to consider Derrida's observation that "if writing is *inaugural* it is not so because it creates, but because of a certain absolute freedom of speech, because of the freedom to bring forth the already-there as a sign of the freedom to augur" (*Writing* 13, emphasis in original). In the context of *kaifuku*, the augured already-there in  $(Kf)_{rv}$  is the equally acceptable  $(Kf)_{rc}$  which turns the text in upon itself: Tamura is sane. Therefore, when he is discussing his resumption of his ceremony of bowing before a meal, he is reverting to a healthy state and, by extension, one of sanity. Indeed, Tamura speaks of this condition as normal, for it is neither new nor surprising. "People saw me as insane. Yet I have decided—and it is still so—to feel no shame for performing an action I cannot help performing" (*OSZ* 3:125).

Recall that  $(Kf)_{rv}$  and  $(Kf)_{rc}$  are both signifiers of the notion of "recover" but that  $(Kf)_{rv}$  also allows the slippage seen in the trace to the  $(Kf)_{rc}$  notion of healing. This multiplicity, in turn creates an *aporia* of uncertainty. It is certain that "in speech there is already mediation but the signifiers disappear as soon as they are uttered; they do not obtrude, and the speaker can explain any ambiguities to insure that the thought has been conveyed. It is in writing that the unanticipated aspects of mediation become apparent. Writing presents language as a series of physical marks that operate in the absence of the speaker" (Culler 91). It is not, however, misfortune but insight that is offered here by the effects of mediation. They provide the valuable explication of the text that yields a revised reading which expands the understanding of *Fires on the Plain* and the discourse it engenders.

What value was there to Ōoka to present an image of Tamura as insane even though that contradicts a possible trace-structure reality of the written word which would indicate he is in full possession of all his mental faculties? It is not clear until the last section of the novel that the narrator/protagonist is ostensibly in a condition of mental instability. This delay also encourages the freeplay of the trace for readers are, as a consequence, already implicitly encouraged to consider Tamura sane. With this new (revealed) interpretation, the text disrupts itself with the result that Tamura's story becomes questionable, and once the narrative is loosed from the moorings of insanity, the freeplay immanent in the text and exemplified by the logographic distinction we have been considering work in concert to further the problematization of Tamura's claim of insanity.

Tamura relates the events leading up to his voluntary internment with a coldly clinical eye for detail. His analytical style and precise notation of the myriad details along his journey undermine his statement that he is (or was) insane. It is quite obvious that the chronological order of the events leading up to the point at which Tamura loses his memory is generally without the anachronous relationships that might be expected to permeate the story of a madman. In fact, even though the entire narrative is subordinate to the present in which

Tamura is in a sanatorium, the factual, chronological, accuracy is constant. Indeed, to paraphrase Derrida, how can Tamura “be mad when [he] think[s] and when [he has] clear and distinct ideas” (*Writing* 52).

We see, in some of the critical corpus, intimations that support this conclusion. Miyoshi Yukio, ostensibly writing about the war and God as manifest in *Fires on the Plain*, offers one such example. The seed of his argument lies in the duality Miyoshi perceives between the competing forces of reality and insanity that operate in the novel. Because Ōoka was unable fully to resolve the contradictions between these two forces, Miyoshi argues, he was forced to decide which would take precedence. Opting for the former, insanity is relegated to an ancillary position in the structure of the novel and reality is privileged in service of believability. Miyoshi builds a case against an insane person accurately describing an extreme situation, asserting instead that one requires full cognizance and use of one's mental faculties to engage in such a task.

Of course the words “extreme situation of the insane” contain a clear self-contradiction. When a clear-headed person reports on the despairing consciousness of a situation that has happened to him, that is when the extreme nature of the situation materializes. He must not be insane. At the same time, Ōoka, author of *Diary of a POW*, absolutely could not have entrusted the reporting of the extreme conditions pursuing those humans thrown into the battlefield to a madman.

(370–71)

This is a bold assertion that the author of *Fires on the Plain*, by virtue of the extreme conditions he is narrating, cannot be insane.<sup>24</sup> One cannot help wondering, however, why this conclusion, so carefully developed by Miyoshi, is not taken to its logical completion: explicit absolution of Tamura's insanity. The very element that casts doubt on Tamura's claim also suggests a solution to this conundrum:

It is because of *différance* that the movement of signification is possible only if each so-called “present” element, each element appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element, this trace being related no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past, and constituting what is called the present by means of this very relation to what it is not: what it absolutely is not, not even a past or future as a modified present.

(Derrida, “Différance” 13)

The text has the past and future traces of a polysemous signifier in its present. The play of signifieds produces readings that inscribe both possibilities for it must embody that multiplicity and it, logically, offers even more readings. While it is clear that the text signifies in more than one way, it is equally evident that there will be varying degrees of explicitness in this signification. It is hardly surprising that within the critical corpus, the explicitness of “reversion” has overshadowed that of “recovery” for many years.

A second result of this revealed, alternate reading—although it has always-already been in the text—concerns a struggle extrinsic to the novel.

Ōoka, saddled with the historical predisposition of the *bundan* and reading public to judge

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<sup>24</sup> Miyoshi also implies that Ōoka and Tamura are, effectively, synonymous, demonstrating his faith in the Husserlian transparency of language—a position fundamental to the *shishōsetsu* paradigm and discourse which obviously informs his reading of this text and our consideration of (Kf)<sub>r</sub>.

a novel's worth by the extent to which the author is visible in the work, [...] had to do something to break out of this constricting mold [...]. Consequently, he was forced to cast doubt upon the authenticity of *Fires on the Plain* by drawing attention to the one point that could most damn him in the eyes of the public judge. By problematizing the issue of culpability, Ōoka was, in effect, distancing his person from what the public may have been inclined to interpret as his literary persona.

(Lofgren, "Ideological" 412)

It is evident, thus, that Ōoka retreated from factual reality *vis-à-vis* the theme of cannibalism as he tried to distance his person from that of his persona, Tamura.<sup>25</sup> From the point of view of subverting the undesirable assumption that *Fires on the Plain* was a *shishōsetsu*, it is evident that creating a character who is insane as a result of his contravention of a social taboo only strengthens the distancing of Ōoka from Tamura. A reading that acknowledges the trace structures inherent in *kaifuku*, however, subverts the simple conclusion that insanity is the implicit theme of *Fires on the Plain*. This is of particular importance as the veil of insanity is but one of several devices utilized by Ōoka in his effort to convince the reading public of the novel's unquestioned fictionality.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, the simple binary opposition established on the surface of the text, between sanity and insanity is called into question by a single word. This *aporia* generates a second text diametrically opposed to the first, where each becomes the other. Yet in so doing, a new binary opposition is created which, in turn, leaves itself open for rereading. The text collapses in on itself and, in the process, provides a tantalizing glimpse of the conflict of discourses that abound in the novel and, despite Derrida's contention that "*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*," outside it as well. For a comprehensive reading and understanding of *Fires on the Plain* and Ōoka's relation to that work and the reading public, it is essential that the trace structures of a single word *kaifuku* at the end of the novel be accorded the influence they are due. Failure in this regard beggars the text.

## 5. Conclusion

It is easy to see why scholars believe that Ōoka was "criticizing Japan for aligning itself with war" (Suzuki, *Ōoka Shōhei ron* 143) through its support of the United States. As we noted at the outset, the time in which Tamura was writing *Fires on the Plain* "coincides with the outbreak of the Korean War" (Kamei 192). This made him a putative spokesman for the nation which had just emerged from a disastrous war half a decade earlier, and whose people were still actively adopting a position of victim, both of the atomic bombs, and of their own government's militaristic excesses. In such an environment, critics and readers alike may be excused for accepting Tamura's narrative of insanity at face value, yet to do so unquestioningly is, as we have seen, to lose perspective that is equally important for evaluating Japan's war efforts and the ideological nexus that supported it.

The implications for an understanding of the novel of the slippage between (Kf)<sub>rv</sub> and (Kf)<sub>rc</sub> are profound. Insanity is one device Ōoka used to provide cover for his protagonist, and that cover is particularly important

<sup>25</sup> Kaga Otohiko echoes this view when he argues that having the story take place on Leyte rather than Mindoro implies a conscious distancing of creation from author (42).

<sup>26</sup> It is of particular note that Ōoka felt the need to buttress the fictionality of Tamura's narration. This was not, however, the only context in which he found himself battling readers' perceptions. His first novel, *Furyoki (Taken Captive: A Japanese POW's Story)*, 1952; trans. 1996) explicitly drew upon the author's experiences as a prisoner of war. Even so, Ōoka preferred to view it as predominantly non-fiction reportage with a modicum of fictional license. Ōoka stresses this point, saying that while in some sense, *Furyoki* does accord with the tradition of *shishōsetsu*, "I would like to confess that in my case, however, as I was writing the novel of a POW, the 'I' in the work gradually moved away from me, myself" (*OSZ* 14:61). The putative reason for this gradual separation was a desire not to expose himself to the public (*OSZ* 14:62).

in 1952. Tamura was created under the American Occupation, and at a time, in 1948, just after pre-publication censorship by SCAP had been lifted. That Tamura was guilty, in his role as a synecdoche for the Japanese military, of crimes, the sin of which besmirched his very person and resisted all attempts to expiate it. By 1952, however, the Occupation was packing up to leave and the general sense of the nation was undergoing a transformation from guilt for the war to a sense of victimhood stemming from Japan's position as the only nation to have suffered an atomic bombing.<sup>27</sup> In this context, the insanity claim provides, however marginally, a veneer of insulation from the tacit admission of guilt required under Japan's foreign occupiers. The play of multiple signifieds that inheres in the *kaifuku* compound further reinforces this shielding effect: if Tamura is not insane, then his actions are not necessarily deserving of excoriation. His role as synecdoche functions, rather, as one that proclaims the broader role of the soldier who was forced into an untenable situation in service of his country. The clear, positive emphasis is on the latter half of this statement.

The shift in Tamura's culpability might be seen as but the first step on a seven-decade journey to the Abe Cabinet slogan of "Retake Japan". Muto cautions that if "something has been lost," then "[i]t is the essence of the Empire of Japan" (5). It might be prudent for the Abe government to consider the warning Ōoka provides through Tamura: one cannot hide from the responsibility of war. Even allowing for a reconsideration of Tamura as synecdoche, *Fires on the Plain* is a work whose "principle objective is to emphasize the folly of war" (Suzuki, *Ōoka Shōhei ron* 62). The slippage of *kaifuku* signifieds that allows Tamura's insanity to apparently evaporate into the haze of Japanese post-war amnesia for responsibility also simultaneously calls the reader back to the constructed role of that insanity. Tamura needed what it provided as a way to cope with what the war had wrought on his psyche.<sup>28</sup> In other words, it was War that made Tamura do what he did, and it was War that left him broken and suffering six years later when he undertook to write *Fires on the Plain*.

The slippage of signifieds in *kaifuku* problematize Tamura's insanity, but that same slippage, that same lack of a transcendental signified mean that it is ever present as a trace. Ōoka's message is that the consequences of war are severe, and the repercussions for those involved are deep, long-lived, and so undesirable that they can lead to fantasies to protect the individual from the traumatizing experience. With knowledge of Tamura's deployment of insanity, we are primed to recognize that Abe's Retaking Japan may very well lead the nation's people back to the same hell inhabited by Ōoka's protagonist. Tamura's cogent observation that "[o]f those humans who do know not war, half are children" (*OSZ* 3:127) echoes particularly poignantly here for it is the young who will fight, the young who will inhabit that hell. As *Fires on the Plain* makes clear, it is a hell from which recovery is but a chimera and against which no claim of insanity can protect.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> I provide an explication of the ideological transformation that one witnesses in the various iterations of *Fires on the Plain* ("Ideological" 401–21), including a consideration of the mental state of the protagonist, in the context of this shift from victimizer to victim consciousness. Muto examines this same transformation from the perspective of the war crimes trials (9–10). Tomoyuki Sasaki articulates how this notion of victimhood is one of three pillars supporting rightists' call for constitutional revision (3).

<sup>28</sup> The same might easily be said of Ōoka. Indeed, numerous works treating *Fires on the Plain* address the psychologically cathartic role writing the novel had for the author.

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