

A Note to an Old Friend, or Two

Akutagawa Ryūnosuke

On July 24, 1927, Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1892–1927) left behind a suicide note that he titled “Aru kyūyū e okuru shuki” (A note to a certain old friend). This decision is striking, for it acknowledges the work’s status *as* a work. With this title, the note declares its status as a discrete text that can be neatly referred to, if not packaged and published under this name. It invites publication, reading, interpretation, and criticism.

For over a century, readers and critics have acquiesced. Notwithstanding the objections of some of Akutagawa’s closest family and friends, the entire text was read aloud by Kume Masao, fellow writer and good friend of Akutagawa’s, in a press conference the night of his death and then published in *Tokyo nichichi shinbun* the following day.¹ After being published in Akutagawa’s collected works in 1968, it regularly appears in his complete works, either in a section of his letters for those organized by genre or seemingly aptly placed at the end for those that are arranged chronologically.

Just three days after his suicide, the first English-language translation appeared in the *Japan Times*. Unlike later heavily abridged, rather loose versions, this one is fairly complete and accurate, although it also omits several of what were presumably the more unfamiliar western texts and authors (an especially ironic situation considering their appearance in the original Japanese).² Students of Japanese of a certain generation might remember their own first encounter with excerpts of this text as a reading and translation exercise in Howard Hibbett and Gen Itasaka’s *Modern Japanese: A Basic Reader*.³

No version elides its most famed phrase—“a vague sense of anxiety” (*bonnyari shita fuan*). Early in the first paragraph, after describing the inability of those who

commit suicide and those who write about it to capture the complex motives behind any suicide, Akutagawa offers an explanation (of sorts) for his own:

But, in my case at least, it is just out of a vague sense of anxiety.

Ga, sukunakutomo boku no baai wa tada bonyari shita fuan de aru.

Without any sense of irony, critics have claimed that “he made clear his motives for suicide” and list the causes of Akutagawa’s “vague sense of anxiety,” including his fear of going insane like his biological mother, pangs over his affair with a married woman, his adoptive brother’s suicide and financial debts, bodily and mental illness, or fellow writer and friend Uno Kōji’s recent confinement in a mental asylum. With its vague gesture to a vague emotion, the phrase has offered a malleable and convenient catch-all that can describe any societal or personal crises, from unemployment to the plight of the graying society in the new millennium.⁴

In this chapter, I read this text against and alongside a host of other works left behind by Akutagawa that have been largely overshadowed by the fame of this note and its soundbite. Their tangled publication and distribution histories suggest a deeply entangled relationship between bodies of literature and bodies of artists, between the corpus and the corpse. Seeking out Akutagawa’s many other “last” writings, versions often marked and marred by censorship, is not intended to discover some urtext that might better explain his suicide in retrospect. It instead serves to remind us of the ways that texts were also working prospectively for the living author who depicts the dead self. If they reveal the precarious nature of the hunt for textual clues in the wake of a suicide, they also suggest our ethical responsibilities as readers to undertake that hunt nonetheless.

INTENDED AND UNEXPECTED AUDIENCES

Akutagawa was fully aware that his note would be made public eventually and even tacitly approves its future publication. In its final lines, he asks only to “please manage somehow not to publish this letter for some years after my death. There is a chance that I will commit suicide so that it appears that I died from sickness [*byōshi*].” Here he suggests that the need to keep the note private (at least temporarily) stems from its capacity to reveal suicide as the true cause of death. But from whom does he hope to hide this note and his unnatural death? Who are its forbidden readers? Its desired ones? And who desires to read this?

Needless to say, we were not the intended readers of this text. Its title clearly designates a limited readership of one. Its “certain old friend” is both specific and unspecified, suggesting that we readers are invited to imagine ourselves as intimates, while just as easily suggesting that we are trespassers. If we are reading it, we must be the addressee. To think otherwise is to raise the ugly specter that we are unethically reading another’s mail—and in a sense, we are. The note was meant

for his friend the writer Kume Masao. The designated audience for this text is not, however, as simple as it first appears. The call out to “a certain old friend” is filled with ambivalence, simultaneously an assertion of a highly circumscribed, closed circle of address and an admission, and even declaration, of the text’s status as an open publication.

In the note, Akutagawa acknowledges that the readership for this work will reach far beyond its anonymous solo recipient, and he appears torn between contradictory desires to reveal to, and conceal various things from, his multiple audiences. He writes, “The final thing that I thought out was how to commit suicide in a clever way so as to avoid detection by my family members. After several months of preparation, I attained a certain degree of confidence. (It would not do for me to write about the particulars of this for the benefit of those who are close to me. And even if I were to write about them here, it would not constitute the legal crime of aiding and abetting suicide.)”

His paramount concern before suicide is avoiding detection by his nearest and dearest in order not to be deterred. It is not that he plans to conceal the act from them *after* he is dead. In fact, in another section of the note, he is adamant about his desire “to commit suicide in a way that ensures my corpse would not be seen by anyone other than my family members.” His family is to be the privileged post-facto witness to his bodily remains.

For a wider audience, the note is to offer an account of “the long course toward suicide.” Even at the risk of hurting his family, he asserts his “duty [*gimu*] to write about everything honestly.” This entails close attention to the embodied experience of planning for death. While he includes a brief if spirited moral defense of suicide (citing the Agon Sutra) and a legal defense of the “ridiculously named crime” of aiding and abetting suicide, the bulk of his text addresses his method first and foremost with a lengthy debate on the merits and demerits of various options.⁵

Even as he desires to disclose the specifics of his chosen method, Akutagawa also feels compelled to conceal the “particulars” here. He implicitly contrasts two kinds of future readers: “those who are close to me,” or more literally “those who are favorably disposed toward me” (*kōi o motte iru hito-bito*), and those antagonists who would read this text with a legalistic bent in an effort to suss out criminal blame. Although he scorns these crime-sniffing detectives, Akutagawa is not dismissive of the rubber-necking desires of his friendly readers and instead regretfully calls attention to his omissions. By anticipating both kinds of readers, Akutagawa suggests two alternate positions of identification for any future reader of the text: antagonist or intimate.

The title “A Note to a Certain Old Friend” simultaneously invites and refutes intimacy. It is marked by an act of self-censorship—the elision of the recipient’s name, a coy non-reference that reveals the expectation of a broader readership from whom the friend’s name must be kept secret. At the same time, the title also points out we are not that “certain” old friend Akutagawa had in mind. And yet by

leaving the addressee anonymous, Akutagawa leaves open the possibility that any of us may occupy this position.

When reading the body of the letter, the balance tilts toward invitation. The “certain old friend” of the title quickly disappears in favor of a direct address to an anonymous “you” as early as the note’s third line: “In this last letter that I send to you.” “You” (*kimi*) appears frequently in this short missive, a total of nine times. We readers can easily collapse ourselves with this “you.” “In human-interest stories of the newspapers, [we] can discover any number of motives for suicide—poverty, sickness, or mental anguish.” We “cannot but help to label [Akutagawa] Inhuman”⁶ when reading that compared to his dying wish “to depict suicide as concretely as possible,” “such things as pity toward my family are nothing.”

But not everything in the letter suggests that we later readers, too, might imagine ourselves to be the designated reader-recipient. In the postscript, there is one shared private past memory that would apparently foreclose that possibility, a recollection of debating “Empedocles on Etna” under the bodhi tree twenty years earlier. This would seem to close off the circle of address. But Japanese scholars speculate that even this reference is not to Kume at all and instead refers to another of his classmates from the First Higher School, the philosopher Tsunetō Kyō.⁷ In 1949, Tsunetō seems to have staked out his own claims for this privileged designation by publishing a book called *Kyūyū Akutagawa* (Old friend Akutagawa).

Anyone can occupy the designated reader’s position by virtue of this slippery “you” and the nature of the epistolary form, which highlights a reader’s sense of proximity to the author as well as the author’s proximity to the subject of narration. As Samuel Richardson, the eighteenth-century English pioneer of the genre, famously noted, “*Much more* lively and affecting ... must be the style of those who write in the height of a *present* distress, the mind tortured by the pangs of uncertainty ... than the dry, narrative unanimated style of a person relating difficulties and danger surmounted.”⁸ Any reader can become the addressee of this emotionally charged missive. As Akutagawa himself acknowledges early in the note, it does not particularly matter who this “you” is: “It wouldn’t really matter if I didn’t convey my motives for committing suicide *to you in particular*” (emphasis mine, *toku ni kimi ni tsutaezu to mo ii*).

Although we are a privileged reader allowed into the inner circle of “old friends,” we are also positioned as a potentially hostile one whose skepticism must be dispelled time and again. The majority of the direct addresses in the letter are moments when Akutagawa imagines the reaction of this skeptical reader-recipient. He wonders if “you will not be able to believe these words of mine,” if “you will find these words of mine strange,” or if “you will laugh at the contradiction that I love the beauty of nature but am planning to commit suicide.” The repeating pattern of “you will likely ...” (*kimi wa ... arō*), which appears five times, anticipates a less-than-friendly reader response. Perhaps it suggests an effort to preemptively dismiss such reactions, but it can just as easily have the opposite

effect of engendering such skepticism. Who, after all, is in a better position to forgive or to criticize than a close friend?

With this highly ambivalent and splintered audience in place, Akutagawa multiplies the designated readership for this text. What I would stress here is that as much as these direct addresses elicit multivalent responses from his readers, they also suggest how the author himself was reading his own suicide note. Like the reader, the author hovers between the poles of intimate and antagonist, insider and outsider. That Akutagawa is doubling as a skeptical reader is particularly obvious when he aligns himself with the “you” in the letter, writing, “You probably think these words of mine a bit odd. *Even I too* now detect the oddness of my words” (emphasis mine).

His choice of title also signals that he is as much the audience for this text as any other person. Although commonly translated as “A Note,” the specific word that Akutagawa uses here is instead “memo” (*shuki*). Whereas a “letter” (*tegami*) suggests a communication addressed to another person, a memo is something one might write for oneself.⁹ Tellingly, Akutagawa uses both words to characterize this work; he calls it a letter at two points in the body of the text while calling it a memo in the title and postscript. The title, which literally translates as “a memo sent to a certain old friend,” straddles the two poles, suggesting that the work is simultaneously an inward-directed communication and an externally directed one. Akutagawa repeatedly gauges the future reception of the note and of his own imminent suicide. In so doing, he himself becomes the audience for both. If we are positioned as a skeptical insider here, then Akutagawa is placed as a critical outside observer of his own missive and of his own suicide.

READING A CORPUS AND VIEWING A CORPSE

The spectacle of his corpse looms large in Akutagawa’s imaginings throughout the letter. In a series of striking passages, he recounts his lengthy deliberations over his chosen method in lovingly gruesome detail. One by one, he tackles each component: method, locale, and choice of companion. He exhibits a keen awareness of the fact that each element of his suicide will be evaluated after he is dead, leading him to weigh each choice one by one with that specter in mind. This results in a constant tension between the embodied perspective of one who is about to commit suicide and the disembodied perspective of one who is left behind in its aftermath.

When considering what method to employ, his first concern is a very bodily one: “how to die without pain.” But the best choice for this—death by hanging—is foreclosed to him because “when I imagined my hanging figure, albeit an extravagance to do so, I felt an aesthetic revulsion.” In a characteristically ironic and detached moment here, Akutagawa acknowledges this “extravagance” only to allow himself another one, a parenthetical remark in which he recalls a lover with whom he “suddenly fell out of love because her penmanship was poor.” Aesthetics and

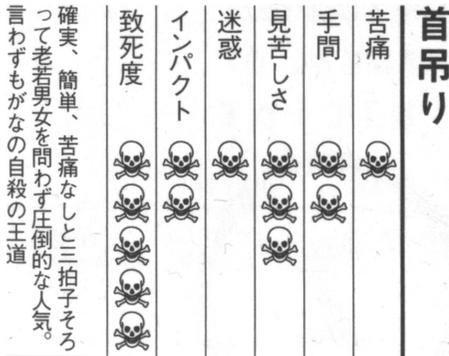


FIGURE 20. Skull-and-bones ratings chart for suicide modus operandi in *The Complete Manual of Suicide*. From right to left: Hanging. Pain (1 out of 5 skulls), Time/Effort (2), Unsightliness (3), Inconvenience (4), Impact (5), Likelihood of Death (5). An ideal mixture that is reliable, simple, and painless, it is overwhelmingly popular among men and women of all ages. Your express ticket to suicide. Tsurumi Wataru (1993), *Kanzen jisatsu manyuaru*, Tokyo: Ōta Shuppan, 56. Courtesy Ōta Shuppan.

style are paramount. It is no coincidence that Akutagawa links forms of writing and forms of suicide in this suicide note that debates the proper aesthetic for both things. He rejects some methods (drowning, gun, and knife) as impracticable, but more often he rejects ones (hanging, throwing himself in front of a train or auto, and jumping from a building) that “impart an aesthetic revulsion” (*bi-teki kenō o ataeru*). Ultimately, death by overdose proves to be his method of choice because it suits practical and aesthetic requirements (although he notes that it requires that he take pains to acquire the necessary drugs and pharmaceutical knowledge).

Akutagawa’s deliberations of method share an uncanny resemblance to the bestselling 1993 *The Complete Manual of Suicide* by Tsurumi Wataru. As discussed in chapter 3, this how-to book offers chapter-by-chapter descriptions of suicidal methods, such as hanging, leaping, and gassing. Each method includes statistics and anecdotes, as well as a ratings chart that grades it in terms of various categories using a skull-and-crossbones symbol (fig. 20)—for example, in the case of “Leaping in Front of a Train,” pain (medium), time/effort (minimal), unsightliness (extremely high), inconvenience to others (also extremely high), impact (fairly high), and finally, likelihood of death (guaranteed).¹⁰ The inclusion of aesthetic criteria such as “unsightliness” (*migurushisa*) and “impact” (*inpakuto*) suggests a preoccupation with the reception of suicide on the part of the would-be suicide. This was an interest clearly shared by Akutagawa in his own deliberations. When he rejects those methods that rate very high on these scales, he invokes this same criterion, noting that such methods were “without a doubt unsightly” (*yahari migurushii no ni sōinai*).

For each method, Akutagawa also debates the “time/effort” and “inconvenience” involved, noting, for example, the high degree of effort required for overdosing and weighing the “convenience” (*bengi*) of dying alone against the hassle of coordinating the timing with a female partner who might otherwise serve as a “most useful springboard.” In terms of location, worrying that property values will be adversely affected if he commits suicide in the family home, he “felt jealous of

the bourgeoisie who have the luxury of owning a villa ... and in truth felt keenly inconvenienced [*jijitsu-jyō shimijimi fuben o kanjita*];” although he concludes, “There was no possible way to avoid this inconvenience [*fuben*].”¹¹

Although he wants to delimit the audience who will view his bodily corpse and restrict it to his family members only, the letter, paradoxically, affords any number of future readers a glimpse at this corpse in textual form, arrayed in any number of tortured and reposeful poses. Akutagawa may have been attempting the impossible here, acting as a spectator and chronicler of his own death. But in figuring his body at such length with such lavish attention to its appearance in the aftermath, he also offers it up as a spectacle for a broader audience. The text becomes the proxy by which we, and he, can “see” the suicide either retrospectively or prospectively. Writing and reading enable an act of time travel whereby both readers and writers can be positioned both before and after the suicide, inside and outside the body of a suicide.

It is a privileged insider’s view of suicide that Akutagawa claims to offer his readers. The note’s first line declares his intent to compose a work that is unparalleled in the history of writing about suicide: “No one yet has ever written the psychology of a person who commits suicide himself just as it is [*ari no mama*]. ... In this last letter that I send to you, I am hoping to clearly convey this psychology.” Here Akutagawa invokes the rhetoric of sincerity and transparency that Edward Fowler identifies as the heart of the contemporary genre of *shi-shōsetsu* (autobiographical “I-novel” fiction); its “whole raison d’être rests on the powerful illusion of its textual transparency—its sincerity—which lets the reader view the author’s experience ‘unmediated’ by forms, shapes, structures, or other ‘trappings’ of fiction.”¹²

The final paragraph of Akutagawa’s note comes closest to fulfilling this promise of offering a fully immersed point of view that collapses writer and reader and lets us see through his “last eyes” (*matsugo no me*):

Because we humans are human-beasts, we have an animal-like fear of death. The so-called will-to-live is really just another name for animal strength. I too am nothing more than a human-beast. But with my loss of appetite, it seems I am gradually losing my animal strength. Where I now reside is a world of sick nerves that flow clear like ice. Last night when talking with a prostitute about her wages (!) I felt deeply how pitiful we humans who “live only for the sake of living” are. If only we could contentedly enter into an eternal sleep of our own volition, we would certainly be at peace, if not happy. But I have doubts as to when I will be able to commit suicide bravely. It is just that nature, for me at this point, is all the more beautiful than ever before. The contradiction that I love the beauty of nature but am planning to commit suicide will likely make you laugh. And yet nature is beautiful precisely because it is reflected in these eyes of my final days. More than anyone, I have seen, loved, and also understood. For that alone, even in the midst of my considerable pain, I am more or less satisfied.

I quote this passage at length because it is often excerpted in a way that privileges this final glimpse of the world through his dying eyes, a vision of “a world of sick nerves that flow clear like ice” and of “nature . . . all the more beautiful than ever before . . . because it is reflected in these eyes of my final days.” In his acceptance speech for the 1968 Nobel Prize for Literature, Kawabata Yasunari famously excerpted just this portion of the note when citing his own earlier 1933 essay about Akutagawa that he titled “Matsugo no me” (Eyes in their last extremity).¹³

While it is true that Akutagawa emplaces us in an embodied point of view that sees nature’s beauty crystallized, the passage is far from uninterrupted reverie in the natural world. Even here, Akutagawa allows himself to reflect on the irony of his “talking with a prostitute about her wages (!)” just the previous night. If his proximity to death is what enables him access to visions of unparalleled beauty, he is not yet entirely proximate. He toggles between a state of readiness and resistance to death with many declarations beginning with conjunctions that qualify or contradict his previous point: “But” (*shikashi*, appearing twice), “If only” (*moshi*), “It is just that” (*tada*), “And yet” (*keredomo*). Moreover, it is not altogether clear if we outside readers, too, have access to this world. As he himself indicates, “Nature is beautiful precisely because it is reflected in *my* final eyes” (emphasis mine). His use of a simile to describe “where [he] now resides” as “a world of sick nerves that flow clear like ice” suggests his own remove from the experience with metaphorical language trying to bridge that gap. In the letter’s final lines when he bids Kume not to publish it immediately, Akutagawa becomes again removed from any pre-death reverie, returning to his preoccupation with the remains he leaves behind: his letter and his corpse.

If Akutagawa repeatedly anticipates a spectator for his corpse, he also readily anticipates a reader for his corpus, including this text. Perhaps this *is* “the psychology of a person who commits suicide himself just as it is”: a highly self-conscious preoccupation with one’s bodily and textual remains. But this hyperawareness of the bodies that will be left behind heightens a sense of remove that is far from any embodied, unmediated *ari no mama* (“just as it is”). The sense that Akutagawa was seeing and depicting his suicide through the lens of literature, philosophy, and history rather than as an immediate bodily experience was, in fact, critiqued by some of his contemporaries. One, the writer Chikamatsu Shūkō, noted that his “death was out of shared sympathies with ancient philosophers and literary men” and was an “all-too-bookish death” (*amari ni shokubutsu-teki na shi de aru*); critic Nakamura Shin’ichirō likened it to the dramatic suicide of Petronius who purposely delayed his death by staunching his slit wrists so he could write and entertain until the very end.¹⁴

It was likely not just his suicide that was being accused of being “literary, all too literary” (*bungei-teki na, amari ni bungei-teki*)—to borrow the title of Akutagawa’s own 1927 essay—but his suicide note as well. The note repeatedly dwells on its

own status as a written text that will remain behind, one that is designed to join the ranks of, and even surpass, illustrious texts on suicide from the western canon. In a series of intertextual allusions, Akutagawa cites examples from foreign literature and philosophy that come close to fulfilling the promise of unmediated, direct access to the interiority of a suicidal mind but miss the mark. After dismissing the superficial explanations of suicidal motives offered in newspapers, he points to an unnamed short story by the French symbolist author Henri Régner (1864–1936) that succeeds in depicting a suicide only insofar as it points out that “most [suicides] probably don’t understand for what reason they commit suicide.”¹⁵ While the German philosopher Philipp Mainländer (1841–76) “skillfully depicts the long course toward suicide in abstract terms,” Akutagawa “wants to write of the same thing much more concretely.” In a final postscript, he contrasts himself with Empedocles, the ancient Greek philosopher and statesman whose biography reveals to him just “how ancient is the desire to make oneself into a god.” Unlike Empedocles, who was “widely regarded as sharing this tendency with modern artists,” in the letter’s final line, Akutagawa resists such temptation and instead makes himself “out to be a mere lowly man.”¹⁶

Significantly, these models often not just wrote about suicide but also attempted or committed suicide themselves. According to Greek legend, Empedocles leaped into the crater of Mount Etna to prove that he was an immortal god. His death is one of the most often dramatized accounts of suicide in ancient Greek history. Matthew Arnold’s 1852 “Empedocles on Etna” offers an example of a dramatic poem that stages an encounter between the despairing Empedocles when “one of his moods is on him” and two friends, a physician and a harp-playing poet, who in an echo of Papageno conspire to soothe him through music and song. Although at first successful, “How his brow lighten’d as the music rose!” when “Alone!— / On this charr’d, blacken’d, melancholy waste, / Crown’d by the awful peak, Etna’s great mouth, / Round which the sullen vapour rolls—alone,” Empedocles chooses suicide.¹⁷ This is the poem that Akutagawa recalls debating heatedly with his “old friend” twenty years earlier in the postscript to the note.

As if sifting through foreign examples for potential models, Akutagawa also cites other western writers who attempted suicide. When debating whether to die alone or with a partner, he notes that the French playwright Jean Racine (1639–99) “tried to drown himself in the Seine River with Molière and Boileau.” He writes that the German writer Heinrich von Kleist (1777–1811) “had solicited his (male) friends any number of times to be his companion in death before he committed suicide.” Although Akutagawa does not specify the fate of either author, Racine lived until fifty-nine and became well known for depicting “death and suicide, in particular in his tragic plays,” while Kleist killed himself at age thirty-four in a platonic love suicide with a terminally ill woman who had become his confidante, and their farewell letters along with an account of their final night together became part of the literary canon.¹⁸

Above all these examples, the German poet and philosopher Philipp Mainländer, who committed suicide at age thirty-four, just one year younger than Akutagawa, stands out as the most important to Akutagawa. References to his writings bracket the text. Early on in the note, Akutagawa depicts himself as an avid reader in the years and moments leading up to his suicide: “For the past two years I have thought of nothing but death. It is during this time that I read Mainländer with my usual fervor.” Though Akutagawa does not mention any specific titles, he was most likely referring to Mainländer’s magnum opus *Die Philosophie der Erlösung* (The philosophy of redemption, 1886), which has been said to offer “perhaps the most radical system of pessimism known to philosophical literature.”¹⁹ After completing his lengthy disquisition on suicidal method that makes up the bulk of his note, Akutagawa then writes, “I calmly completed all these preparations and now there is only death to play with. From now on, my heart is very close to the words of Mainländer [*taitei Mainrenderu no kotoba ni chikai*].”

What does Akutagawa seek in these many suicidal authors and texts? And what does he find? He inserts himself into this illustrious genealogy of writers even as he sets himself apart. Importantly, he characterizes himself as both writer and reader in the moments before suicide. As an intimate reader of Mainländer, he discovers an affinity that transcends the half century and oceans that divide them. This is precisely the kind of reader he seeks for his own suicide note, but one that he fears will elude him and his text. He worries, “Perhaps you will be unable to believe my words ... unless you are a person who is close to me and who has shared circumstances close to my own [*boku ni chikai hito-bito no boku ni chikai kyōgū ni inai kagiri*] over the past ten years.” His desire for proximity, a closeness between writer and reader, is palpable here.

Perhaps there is a more macabre connection with his invocation of these specific writers and texts. In the case of both Empedocles and Mainländer, art fails to save the artist. The poem “Empedocles on Etna” stages the failed intervention of two friends to stop the philosopher from committing suicide by playing him the poem-songs that he no longer himself produces. For Empedocles, neither composing nor listening to music offers salvation. The example of Mainländer in particular offers an example that gruesomely implicates art in an artist’s suicide; he died by hanging, using a pile of advance copies of his magnum opus as a platform. For Mainländer, the artistic product even aids and abets the suicide with a piece of writing literally offering the writer a steppingstone for suicide.

The fact that Akutagawa is declaring himself an intimate reader-critic of these many suicidal authors and texts in a note that itself self-consciously tackles the “right” methods for writing and committing suicide suggests the significant degree to which acts of writing and reading are implicated in the act of suicide. But what kind of relationship between writing/reading and dying is being asserted here?

Akutagawa’s own references to the failure of art to sustain the suicidal artist may lead us to conclude, as many commentators have, that Akutagawa was defeated as

a writer in the end. This interpretation was most famously advanced by Miyamoto Kenji in his seminal 1929 essay “Haiboku no bungaku: Akutagawa Ryūnosuke-shi no bungaku ni tsuite” (Literature of defeat: Regarding the literature of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke). The Marxist literary critic depicts Akutagawa as an artist who succumbed to literary history, his suicide marking the death knell for petty-bourgeois aestheticism that indulged in self-referential autobiographical works rather than socially and politically engaged literature.²⁰ For many critics, Akutagawa’s last writings offered de facto evidence of an impending literary and literal death. Writing in 1969, Nakamura Mitsuo summed up the conventional view of him as an artist who “in his last years sacrificed himself” to a literary ideal: “Akutagawa, after fully displaying his talents as a precocious narrative writer, was confronted by the crisis in which he himself came to deny his own former works. *Haguruma* (Cogwheels), *Aru ahō no isshō* (The life of a certain fool) and other works of his later years, are the painful monuments of a writer who, with no gift or desire of writing ‘I’ novels, came to surrender himself to the ‘I’ novel as the ideal literary form of the age.”²¹

In the same year, Yoshida Sei’ichi characterized these two posthumously published works (alongside a third titled “Anchū mondō” [Dialogue in darkness]) as “a record of the bitter defeat of his life,” echoing Akutagawa’s contemporary Satō Haruo who had seen in these works a “last-ditch effort [*hisshi na doryoku*] to infuse them with life.”²² For these critics, it was as if Akutagawa poured his life into his final works before capitulating to the death that lay before him.

Some of Akutagawa’s own last writings certainly encourage these interpretations, especially their final lines which present the poignant image of a failed writer. “Aru ahō no isshō” (A fool’s life) ends with section 51, “Haiboku” (Defeat), which eerily anticipates his subsequent suicide by drug overdose: “The hand taking up the pen began to tremble, and before long he was even drooling. The only time his head ever cleared was after a sleep induced by eight-tenths of a gram of Veronal, and even then it never lasted more than thirty minutes or an hour. He barely made it through each day in the gloom, leaning as it were upon a chipped and narrow sword.”²³

His other most famous posthumously published story, “Haguruma” (Cogwheels) ends with a plaintive cry: “—I don’t have the strength to keep writing this. To go on living with this feeling is painful beyond description. Isn’t there someone kind enough to strangle me in my sleep?”²⁴

In these final lines, Akutagawa stages the failed attempt at writing as cure. Yet rather than assuming a simple causality between acts of writing (or the failure to write) and suicide, we need to recall several things. First, Akutagawa is continuing to write here, even if he is writing about the inability to write. Second, interpreting these last works as a death knell—for a literary trend or a literary man—is a necessarily retrospective reading afforded only by the gift of hindsight. Third, these few works were not the only things that Akutagawa was writing in his final days and months, as discussed in greater detail in the next section. Finally, rather than subscribing to a teleological view of his literary creations as inevitably leading to

his literal self-destruction or as an epic battle between life and death, art and life, writing and death, we should recall his own depiction of himself as a writer and reader in a state of suspension until the very end.

As Akutagawa writes in the penultimate paragraph of “A Note to a Certain Old Friend,” after completing his preparations for suicide, “I am now only playing with death [*ima wa tada shi to asonde iru*]. From now on, my heart is very close to the words of Mainländer.” For Akutagawa, aesthetic creation and appreciation is predicated on this state of being in-between, of lingering in an interminable moment that delays the suicide in the not-too-distant offing. This is not any attempt to claim that he was some masterful Author who somehow managed to be inside and outside the texts that he reads and writes, before and after the life and death that he depicts. If Akutagawa is not a victim of these many texts, neither is he their master. Instead, he offers a highly self-conscious staging of that struggle.

Rather than the image of one who is toying with death from some position on high, the figure of the author that emerges here is one in a state of suspension. He is between life and death, between writing and reading. He immerses himself in death, playing with it as it plays on him, changing how he sees natural beauty. He plays with texts, reading and writing *about* reading and writing them, but is also lost in/with them. The author is not only outside the text but inside it as well; to quote Roland Barthes, “Lost in the middle of the text (not *behind* it like a god of machinery) there is always the other, the author.”²⁵ I would add that authors are not necessarily limited to the role of creator but can also be readers lost amid the texts of their own and others’ creation.

With its dizzying array of intertextual allusions, Akutagawa ties his works to other bodies of writing and to other authorial bodies. He also includes a series of self-referential clues that create a tangled web of texts that he himself wrote. In the following section, I analyze the “Note” alongside and against Akutagawa’s many other “last” works that implicate the authorial body but defy any linear, literal reading.

A CERTAIN OLD FRIEND AND A CERTAIN FOOL

In “A Note to a Certain Old Friend,” Akutagawa explicitly references his semiautobiographical short story “Aru ahō no isshō” (A fool’s life) as if the two pieces work together to create a complete picture of his suicide. He writes:

I have the duty to write about everything honestly. (I have dissected the vague anxiety I feel toward my future. I believe I have fulfilled this for the most part in my ‘Fool’s Life.’)

Boku wa nanigotomo shōjiki ni kakanakereba naranu gimu o motte iru. (Boku wa boku no shōrai ni taisuru bonyari shita fuan mo kaibō shita. Sore wa boku no ‘Ahō no isshō’ no naka ni daitai wa tsukushite iru tsumori de aru.)

Together, the two works promise to make for two halves of a neat whole that will strip bare the writer for the reader. This promise was echoed in his prefatory note to the story addressed to Kume, which ended with a highly self-conscious invitation to “go ahead and strip off the skin of this urbane sophisticate and laugh away at the fool in this manuscript who is me.”²⁶ His use of the analogy of autopsy in both these pieces is provocative. If the story invites the reader to conduct a metaphorical autopsy on the writer through the act of reading, by “peeling off my skin” (*boku no hada o hagsaasureba*), the note acknowledges writing as the means by which an author might conduct his own postmortem or “dissection” (*kaibō*).

While the note is focused on the “concrete” preparations leading to suicide, the story is designed to tackle the more elusive motives behind it. And yet in the very next sentence, Akutagawa admits that his account in the note is less than “everything” since he “intentionally left out the effect of societal factors” citing his “doubts as to whether societal conditions are ever fully understood by the one who lives amid them.” Despite Akutagawa’s suggestion that the two works be read as companion pieces, he also repeatedly points to the elisions within them and the gaps that exist between them.

Given the explicit reference to the story in the note, the note would seem to contain the story neatly within it. The dates of composition would also seem to support this, as would their titles. The story is dated June 1927 and the note in July, the month of Akutagawa’s suicide. This would seem to suggest that Akutagawa finished writing this last story and then wrote his suicide note just before dying. With their echoing titles that both begin with “A Certain” (*Aru*)—“*Aru ahō no isshō*” and “*Aru kyūyū e okuru shuki*”—the two works make for a neat sequential pair.²⁷

Oddly, though, in the note, the story is referred to without this echoing title. Akutagawa calls it only “my ‘Fool’s Life’” (*boku no ‘Ahō no isshō*). His choice of short-hand title here may be just that, an abbreviation. But it also suggests the possibility that the story’s title, at least, was not finalized until after the note’s own completion and choice of title. Based on extant draft manuscripts, it is clear that Akutagawa revised the story’s title at least two other times, initially titling it “*Kare no yume—Jiden-teki na esukisū*” (His dream—A biographical *esquisse*), the French word for sketch, or alternatively “myth” (*shinwa*).²⁸ In contrast, in the story itself, Akutagawa refers to the story with its complete title in its second to last section that begins with this line: “Once he finished writing ‘The Life of a Certain Fool’ he happened to see a stuffed swan in a secondhand shop.”²⁹ Here the title appears in full despite the fact that this is a text that we are still reading and that he is still writing.

The temporality of writing, reading, and dying is anything but clear. Just as texts seem to contain another, each text spills out of that container, sometimes exceeding even its own bounds. In “A Fool’s Life,” the protagonist is even depicted as having “finished writing” the very text that we hold in our hands and that continues on for two more sections. No text, writer, or reader sits entirely outside the other; instead, all are hopelessly entangled. Or rather, there is a move to be both

inside and outside the text, and even inside and outside the bounds of mortality itself. Death itself offers no finality. To wit, the chapter title “Death” repeats itself twice in the story, first appearing in section 44 and then again in 48, still three chapters shy of the story’s end.³⁰ Moreover, this second excerpt opens with death only to negate that death: “48. Death: He did not die with her.”

In the aftermath of Akutagawa’s suicide, clues are sought in his “last writings” as if they could illuminate the end. The desire to read the end into endings is particularly pervasive. The final lines of “Cogwheels” and “A Fool’s Life”—a plaintive cry for “someone kind enough to strangle me in my sleep” or the forlorn image of a drug-addled writer with pen in hand, “leaning upon a chipped and narrow sword”—are particularly seductive in this respect. They seemingly offer us a glimpse of what Jean Améry has called “the situation before the leap.”³¹ But rather than a prospective glimpse at an imminent suicide, this act of looking is always necessarily retrospective for readers. We trace and sift through the clues with the benefit of hindsight. This can obscure as much as it reveals by encouraging a selective accounting of only those “last” works that accord with the larger desired explanation.

As Seiji Lippit points out, this reading considerably flattens the diversity of his late productions to accord with an overarching narrative of defeat: “Rather than representing any simple sense of defeat or an uncritical conversion to the I-novel, Akutagawa’s output in the final months of his life was an active exploration of different avenues of literary expression and different modes of representation,” ranging from the autobiographical to satirical, and including experimental film scenarios, literary criticism, aphorisms, and poetry.³² Yet it is his manuscripts marking self-death that draw the most attention posthumously. Beongcheon Yu, for example, calls “Cogwheels” a “sepulchral piece,” while Donald Keene writes, “After reading ‘Cogwheels’ we can only marvel that Akutagawa did not kill himself sooner.”³³ Even when scholars do acknowledge the gap in time between his writing this story and his eventual death, the timing of its composition is linked to yet another earlier suicide attempt by Akutagawa with close family friend Hiramatsu Masuko.³⁴

If we read a text with the knowledge that it was written in the final days, weeks, or even months of the writer’s life, we read it one way: retrospectively as marking the last words of this suicidal author.³⁵ The end of writing leads seamlessly to the end of life. But even the writing of a suicide note can never coincide with the end. And in the note, we should recall that Akutagawa is figured not just as a frustrated writer but as a reader until the very end. Or more accurately, he is figured as both a writing-reader and a reading-writer. He is a dissatisfied reader (of newspapers, Régnier, and even his beloved Mainländer) who must turn to writing in order to satisfy his perceived need for a text that would capture the psychology of a suicide “just as it is.” But in the very end of the note, in a postscript no less, he is again a reader-critic, this time of the Empedocles poem that itself depicts the attempts to delay a suicide with art. By their nature, postscripts always delay the end of writing

(and reading). This one even moves back in time, marking a return to his naive youth. It forestalls the end of the text and the end of the life, even as it anticipates it. Reading and writing may be preparatory, but they are also dilatory.

Many of Akutagawa's late writings include similarly recursive moments that rush forward only to circle back. The note addressed to Kume Masao that Akutagawa attached as a preface to his story "A Fool's Life" is dated June 20, 1927, over a month prior to his suicide. If this goodbye note is a bit premature, his goodbye in the note itself also occurs prematurely: in line 7 of this ten-line note, he says "And so it is goodbye" (*De wa sayōnara*).

It is folly to privilege any one of Akutagawa's texts as "The End" as if one could offer *the* final utterance, the final punctuation mark of the author's life and works. Perhaps it is no coincidence that his posthumously published stories end with ellipses ("Three windows" and "Dream"), with a rhetorical question ("Cogwheels"), and with clauses that indicate continuative actions ("A Fool's Life" with *-nagara*). The undated "Dialogue in darkness" ends not with an ending, but with a beginning: "Akutagawa Ryūnosuke! Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, lay your roots down firmly in the ground. You are a reed blown about by the wind. The weather may change any time. Just brace yourself. For your own sake. And for the sake of your children. Do not flatter yourself unduly. Yet avoid becoming sycophantic too. From this point on, you start again [*Kore kara omae wa yarinaosu noda*]."³⁶ It is also no coincidence that in the aftermath of Akutagawa's suicide, literary scholars have not stressed this work that ends with a call for renewal and rebirth.³⁷

In reading Akutagawa's last works, perhaps we should take a cue from his own writings that defy easy linearity and causality. In an earlier story from September 1925 titled "Shigo" (After death), the protagonist dreams of the impossible conversations he might have in the aftermath of his own death. To his wife, who he is distressed to find has already remarried, he complains about his inability to sever his worldly ties: "Even though I'm dead, do you think I can just up and die off? [*Sore jya shindatte shinikireru mono ka.*]" Akutagawa's many posthumous texts with their complex intertextualities and temporalities defy any labeling of "post." Like the proverbial snake eating its own tail, each threatens to swallow itself and the many other tales that proliferate in its wake. And all texts are revealed to have the potential of becoming what are aptly called "ghostly works" in Japanese: *maboroshi no sakuhin*.

TANGLED TEXTUAL REMAINS AND A PRECARIOUS PUBLICATION HISTORY

In his notes to Kume, Akutagawa entrusted posthumous publication plans to his friend. He bid him to bide his time in the case of the note but left "A Fool's Life" "to [him] to decide when and where to publish this manuscript—or whether to publish it at all." This would seem to leave the two companion texts that purport to explain his suicide exclusively in the hands of this certain, dear old friend.

And yet Kume was not the original recipient. Nor was “A Note to a Certain Old Friend” the only suicide note Akutagawa left behind.

Akutagawa left behind no fewer than ten suicide notes: the two to Kume, one to his three children, two to his wife, Fumiko, one note to his artist friend Oana Ryūichi, at least one to his other close writer-friend Kikuchi Kan, and an unspecified number of others to relatives. The notes to Oana and Kikuchi were written earlier than any other of these texts, in the spring of 1927, with Kikuchi’s dated April 16, and Oana’s believed to have been written around the same time.³⁸ With the exception of the note to Oana, these others were left for his family to discover at his deathbed, alongside a copy of the Bible that lay open next to his body.³⁹ The notes to his wife and children were discovered in his yukata sleeve when the family doctor was attempting to revive him. Each contains detailed instructions providing for its distribution, or alternatively, its destruction.

One note addressed to his wife bids its own destruction in a postscript that ironically still remains even though the body of the letter has never been recovered: “P.S. At the time of my death, show this note to the three of them. Once you have fulfilled this condition, do not forget to commit it to flames.”⁴⁰ In the other note to his wife, a numbered list with six items in total, Akutagawa included the following provision for distributing or destroying yet another note: “4. Consult with Dr. Shimojima about whether to call it a suicide [*jisatsu*] or a death from illness [*byōsatsu*]. If you decide upon suicide, then give Kikuchi the suicide note titled ‘To Kikuchi.’ If not, incinerate it. As for the other note (‘To Fumiko’), read it over and without fail try to follow [my] dying wishes as much as possible.” This second note to Fumiko included a provision for its own destruction as well. Item 6 bid her to “Immediately destroy this note.” (*Roku, Kono isho o tadachi ni shōki se yo.*)⁴¹

Akutagawa’s clear and repeated instructions for destroying notes might seem to suggest that they included something scandalous. The second note to his wife remains extant in its entirety, however, and the only secret it reveals is that his was a self-willed death. It indicated both that “any resuscitation attempts are absolutely forbidden” and that the family should temporarily obfuscate the cause of death by “announcing to any visitors that he had ‘suffered heatstroke’ out of fear that it will otherwise stir up the wider public” and especially to protect his best friend Oana Ryūichi.⁴² Like the note to Kume, any text that would reveal the real cause of death is to be withheld. While the letters are marked by suicide, his corpse may not be.

Needless to say, his injunctions to destroy the notes were willfully disregarded in the wake of his suicide. “A Note to a Certain Old Friend” was swiftly published in the next day’s morning edition of national newspapers. The shorter note to Kume continues to serve as the prologue to “A Fool’s Life” to this day (alongside the detailed footnotes that Akutagawa feared would be added to identify the story’s real-life counterparts). His other notes to Kume, Oana, Kikuchi, his wife, and his children appear lined up neatly in his complete works in a section for wills and testaments (*Isho*).⁴³ The handwritten copies of four of these

notes—those to his wife and his children and the one to Kikuchi, long thought to have been destroyed as per his demand—were rediscovered in the family home by Akutagawa's granddaughter Teruko during her 2008 spring cleaning. They have since been bequeathed to the Nihon Kindai Bungakukan and were republished in their entirety in 2009.

The likely explanation for why only “A Note to a Certain Old Friend” and not one of the others was chosen for immediate publicization is its highbrow literary qualities that obscure its rawer autobiographical details. Some editors cite the many revisions made by Akutagawa on the handwritten manuscript as if to attest to his self-awareness of it as a literary creation.⁴⁴ Oana somewhat bitterly likened this note to “one's Sunday finest clothing” (*akiraka ni yosoyuki no mono*).⁴⁵ In contrast, the note addressed “To my children” contains heart-wrenching fatherly advice bidding his three surviving children to “think of Oana Ryūichi as your father and follow his instructions” (item 3), to “take compassion on your mother” (6), and a final reminder that “Your father loves you” (8). Above all else, he warns them to “avoid becoming high-strung like your father” (7), reminding them to “never forget that life is a battle unto the death” (1) and that “If you get worn out by this battle, commit suicide like your father. But, unlike your father, avoid causing others any unhappiness” (4).⁴⁶

One curious exception was the note to Oana, whose publication was delayed for twenty-four years until 1951 when Oana rediscovered it among his papers. Like “A Note to a Certain Old Friend,” this one also appears to have been designed for both private and public consumption. It adopts a more literary form than the other notes to his family members and friends with their numbered and bullet-point provisions that are concerned with practicalities like dispersing keepsakes, returning and retrieving borrowed items, and instructions about his gravestone etching.⁴⁷ According to Oana, he chose to deliberately self-censor this note right afterward so as not to stir up a fuss over the adulterous affair that Akutagawa identifies as a key source of his anguish in its opening lines: “We humans do not easily go about committing suicide because of one single incident. I commit suicide in order to settle the final accounts of my past. And yet, what stands out as a significant incident among these is the fact that I committed the crime [of adultery] with the wife of Mr. Hide when I was 29 years old.”⁴⁸

Despite his language of criminality here, Akutagawa firmly resists a confessional tone in other parts of the note. He asserts that he “does not feel any remorse over having committed this crime” but does “regret only that [his] life suffered negative consequences because of [his] choice of partner,” a woman with “excessive egoism and animal instincts” whose “relentless pursuit constantly caused [him] trouble.” He ends the note with a postscript that returns to his extramarital affairs in a tone of ironic self-deprecation: “I feel deep gratitude for the goddesses—(I use the plural here, but only in the sense that there was more than one. I'm not that much of a Don Juan.)—who, even if they loved me, did not torment me.”

Although the bulk of this note deals with this “troublesome” affair, some sections touch on other contributing causes that include his obligations as an adopted son, husband, and father, as well as his fears over being the son of a madwoman. He writes:

Naturally, I do not want to die. But living is too painful. People may laugh at this fool [ahō] who commits suicide despite having a father, mother, wife, and children. But, if I were all alone, perhaps I would not commit suicide. As an adopted son, I never once in my life said anything that was even remotely selfish. (Or perhaps I should say instead that I couldn’t do so. I regret also this “filial attitude” toward my adoptive parents. But this too was something I could do nothing about.) Committing suicide now may be the single selfish thing I’ve done in my whole life. Like all youths, there was a time when I had lots of dreams. But when I look back now, perhaps I was just the child of a madwoman after all. At this point in time, I feel only hatred toward all things, myself included of course.

What is notably different about this note to Oana is that Akutagawa identifies himself primarily as a husband, lover, son, and father rather than as a literary man. His sole mention of his artworks is confined to the lyric poetry he wrote subsequent to his disastrous affair in order to sublimate his romantic feelings for other women. The only literature he mentions reading is August Strindberg’s autobiographical *Confessions of a Fool* while in China, which causes him to “laugh bitterly realizing that he too wrote about lying to his lovers.” Even his affinity with another author here is framed in terms of similarities between their personal lives rather than their shared occupations as literary men.

Given its focus on the more mundane causes of suicide, it is not all that surprising that this note was not immediately published, whether out of a concern for sculpting a desirable posthumous image of their dead artist friend or out of libel considerations (even when it was published in 1951, the name of the cuckolded husband was blanked out to read Mr. □). But perhaps we should not be too quick to try to divide things along the lines of private versus public, familial versus occupational identities, or mundane versus literary concerns. After all, in the final postscript, Akutagawa compares himself to Don Juan, the fictional womanizer par excellence. Significantly, in what appears to be a deliberate echo of his story, he characterizes himself in this note as both a “fool” (ahō) of a husband, son, and father who commits suicide despite his many familial ties, and as an author who is a “fool” (*chijin*) confessing his extramarital affairs in the autobiographical mode.

Another much more prosaic reason helps explain the delay. Akutagawa wrote so very many suicide notes during the course of his life that it was hard to keep track of them all. In his memoir *Futatsu no e* (Two drawings), Oana recounts how he initially thought (and mistakenly reported) that he had returned this note to Akutagawa upon his request in 1927, only to rediscover it among his papers when writing up an essay on “In a Grove” after Kurosawa’s film adaptation *Rashōmon*

was released in 1950. (Oana also mentions in passing that he had incinerated at least one other note that mentioned the name of their mutual friend, the writer and critic Nanbu Shūtarō, after his death in 1936, presumably because it was libelous.)⁴⁹ So prolific was Akutagawa's production of suicide notes and so frequent was his dispersal and retrieval of these notes—sometimes asking for one back before giving another, sometimes returning an earlier one—that Oana claimed not to be sure how many versions he received over the years or how many were in his possession at any one time. He describes how beleaguered Akutagawa's wife was at her husband's propensity to write suicide notes ad nauseam: "His wife had to busily keep her eye on each and every corner of his study for Akutagawa was always writing suicide notes. It seems that since her husband left them scattered here and there, the maids would end up reading them while cleaning the room. He would always be sticking them in the leaves of books or hiding them behind furniture or something. She said it was a real pain."

The sheer number of notes published or suppressed, distributed, delayed, or destroyed illustrates just how precarious textual remains are in the wake of their author's death. As "writings left behind" (*isho*, 遺書), suicide notes may be the author's last word, but they are bequeathed and beholden to a reader, and sometimes also to a publisher. Their posthumous fate depends on the sometimes deliberate and sometimes haphazard ways that these readers read, receive, and circulate these texts. Even in the case of such a heavily scripted and planned death as Akutagawa's, dictating one's own literary legacy was a tricky proposition.

In yet another work titled "Isho" that Akutagawa had written back in 1916, his narrator acknowledges the tenuous nature of writing and distributing one's last word:

My reasons for writing this note are extremely complicated. I myself don't clearly know why I write this note. ... But I couldn't not write this note. Something inside me demands that I do so. Or rather something inside me rejects it, but my anxiety toward that something compels me to write. At any rate, I decided to write this note. I have no idea whether I can finish writing it, or even if I do manage to finish it if I'll have the courage to preserve it until the time comes.⁵⁰

Despite the title and the repetition of the phrase in the above passage, "this note [*kono isho*]" does not appear in the wills and testaments section of his complete works alongside the many other *isho* that Akutagawa left behind. Instead, it appears in the section of his "unfinished fictional works [*Miteikō: Shōsetsu*]." In the afterword to the volume in which this work appears, critic Yoshida Sei'ichi notes his discomfort with publishing such "unfinished manuscripts," especially "in the case of an author who hated half-done works as much as Akutagawa." He nonetheless concludes by suggesting that their value lies in their incompleteness: "And yet, unlike his finished works, they allow us to perceive the motives held deep in his heart and the raw, naked face of the dead."⁵¹



FIGURE 21. Oana Ryūichi's sketch of Akutagawa's "death face" (*shinigao*). Cover image for Oana Ryūichi (1956), *Futatsu no e: Akutagawa Ryūnosuke no kaisō*, Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha.

Instead, I would suggest that what it offers is akin to a death mask: an impression taken in the immediate aftermath of death. It, too, purports to capture the face of the dead. Like this sketch drawn by Oana that serves as the cover image of his memoir (fig. 21), it offers a proxy for the deceased. It may seem to reveal to those left behind a privileged glimpse of their dead in this final moment, but it is an approximation, and a highly mediated one at that. Perhaps it was the delayed recognition of this that caused Oana to retitile the subheading of his memoir *Futatsu no e* (Two drawings). Initially published in December 1932 with the subtitle "The true face [*shinsō*, 真相] of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's suicide," the 1956 republication more modestly claimed to be a "Reminiscence" (*kaisō*, 回想). Writings left behind are as malleable as our memories. Akutagawa's "face" comes in the forms of texts and images that are as sculpted as the plastic medium of the death mask.

FACING THE DEAD

In an essay titled "Autobiography as De-Facement," literary critic Paul de Man analyzes two literary genres that offer the false promise of unmasking the author: autobiography and epitaphs. He writes that "autobiography always looks slightly disreputable and self-indulgent" because it "seems to belong to a simpler mode of referentiality." Here, he points out how autobiography purports to collapse life

and art, or the author's corporeal and textual bodies. The epitaph, on the other hand, "presents an imaginary or dead person as speaking" and thus risks becoming a "tender fiction of the voice-from-beyond-the-grave."⁵² If the former risks eliding the gap between the physical body of the author and their textual creations, the latter risks eliding the temporal gap between the dead and the living. The dangers of these genres are twofold, resembling the challenges involved when a living author offers a textualized version of the dead self. They point to the physical and temporal limitations inherent in the project of writing in the face and wake of death.

When we ourselves turn to read and to write, we, too, face these limitations. I suggest that we need to resist the temptation to offer only retrospective, selective readings colored by hindsight from the safe outside position of a reader, and to instead consider how these texts offered authors an embodied experience of writing and reading their own death. I make a case for close readings that insist on proximity to the texts (and their specific production and distribution histories) and on proximity to the authorial body, even at the risk of getting our hands dirty in this mess of bodies. This is especially important in the case of an author like Akutagawa, who so insistently entwined textual and corporeal bodies. But it is crucial not to collapse all distinctions between these things. Here, we might take our cue from Akutagawa by recalling that he drew an important distinction between the two-dimensional textual body and the flesh-and-blood authorial one. He may have promised to offer the readers of his manuscript a full view of the author stripped bare, but he also denied anyone other than his family members even a glimpse of his actual corpse.

After an author's death, the act of reading can come to resemble a postmortem. It seems to offer a means to dissect the bodily remains by proxy and raises the perennial question of how to interpret the relationship between bodies of works and bodies of authors (*sakka-ron*). The importance of the reader in construing this relationship cannot be underestimated, nor can the work of canonization—the ways that certain texts come to circulate in certain, often highly redacted, forms at the expense of others. Especially in the case of suicide, there emerges a desire for a palatable and coherent narrative about a death that is often anything but neat or palatable.