

Varia

Shimazaki Tōson's *Shinsei* [New Life]: Shaping Self and Other through Letters

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ABSTRACT: *Shinsei* recounts the relationship between a middle-aged widower with four children, Kishimoto Sutekichi, and his young niece who helps with the house chores, Setsuko. After getting Setsuko pregnant, Kishimoto flees to France; there, he spends three years and receives numerous unwanted letters from Setsuko. These letters are inserted in the text of the novel as indirect quotations, and Kishimoto refuses to answer them, instead learning them by heart by reading and rereading them. Setsuko's letter-writing continues after Kishimoto's return to Japan, when their affair is reignited, albeit under slightly different terms. This time, Setsuko's epistles are quoted in full, and Kishimoto writes back, too. As a result, their discourses temporarily engage in true dialogue, and even start sharing a common vocabulary. Nevertheless, soon enough the meaning they attach to words and the contexts they place them in start to differ, until finally they completely contradict each other.

This paper analyses the function of letters in Shimazaki Tōson's autobiographical novel, focusing on the way they are used to throw into relief the process through which Setsuko and Kishimoto continuously redefine the borders of Self and Other, via language as a less-than-transparent medium. The discussion will be placed in the context of 20th century Japanese realistic writing, in order to question the notion of *shi-shōsetsu* (I-novel, or personal prose) as a sincere account of the author's reality.

KEYWORDS: Shimazaki Tōson, *Shinsei*, letters, Self, Other, language, reality, *shi-shōsetsu*

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1. Introduction: letters and books, letters in books

The poet Jean Paul compared books with thick letters to friends; indeed, both are forms of written communication meant to transmit a message that, for various reasons (physical or psychological) cannot be conveyed directly. The writers of books, just like the writers of letters, put time and effort into organising their narrative: recounting events, giving expression to their inner feelings and current or future predicaments. They do this away, in time and space, from their prospective readers, while trying to imagine their reactions and meet or, on the contrary, purposefully frustrate, their communicative needs.

As far as books are concerned, it is usually assumed, at least in the modern world, that their addressees will be numerous, and also, for the most part, unknown to the “sender”. This is, of course, not always true, as writers might have a rather clear image of their intended readers. In some cases, it is even more than a mere image: for example, the precursor of the Japanese *shi-shōsetsu* (I-novel, or personal prose) was referred to as *bundan kōyū roku* (record of friendly exchanges in the literary circles) or *yūjin/ tomodachi shōsetsu* (friendship novel), for one very obvious reason: often published in *dōjinshi* (closed circuit hobby magazines), such works were about the author’s friends, contained ambiguous references that only those friends could decode, and were written in response to, or expecting a response from, the same friends.

On the other hand, letters, in their modern form (i.e., sent in envelopes, via a national postal system), are customarily a means of direct and private correspondence between two individuals, who are usually acquainted with each other—more often than not, quite intimately. Needless to say, the letter *par excellence* is the love letter. In love letters, the addressers commonly assumed that their message would only be read by a specific audience (of one), and laid their heart bare on the page(s), in a way that was often impossible in conversation. As such, it is no wonder that letters came to be considered windows into one’s heart, vehicles of one’s true intentions, sincere and seemingly unmediated accounts of one’s reality, and have made their way into many works of modern Western literature, starting with the epistolary novel of the 17th and 18th century. It is worth mentioning here that epistolary novels do not stop at creating veridical worlds around letters only, but often go on to include similar media, such as diary entries, notes, newspaper clippings, i.e., pieces of writing that can exist outside the realm of literature, while having some literary merit or ambitions, too.

Letters, notes, and diary fragments are also used as threads in the texture of modern Japanese literature. Nevertheless, one might argue that, in autobiographical prose, they fulfill a function slightly different from that of their Western counterparts. In the Japanese case, novels that drew on personal, purportedly extra-textual material were shaped by the specific conditions prevalent in the literary coterie of the time when such literature was most popular, peaking around the Taishō period (1912–1926). Such conditions appeared at the

intersection of the authors' efforts to achieve modern, realistic prose, the readers' appetite for intimate details about the writers' lives, and the diversification of media formats and styles (newspapers, literary newspapers, magazines, reader contribution magazines, etc.) after the Sino-Japanese (1894–95) and Russo-Japanese Wars (1904–05).

To briefly go over some of the factors that led to the creation of these specific conditions, let me first refer to Kōno Kensuke's article "The Politics of Letter-writing: War and the Modern Postal System"¹. Discussing Kunikida Doppo's reportages² from the Sino-Japanese War, Kōno notes that battlefield correspondence quite naturally morphed into letters addressed to a "younger brother". Of course, as they were published in a newspaper (*Kokumin Shinbun*), their audience was larger than that: the epistolary form was a "performance", a way of fomenting what Anderson³ calls an "imagined community" of shared feeling and thought. This type of letter writing was generally encouraged at the time, and messages from soldiers on the Sino-Japanese front were subsequently published in various newspapers; the "dear younger brother" thus became any brother; it extended, as *Kokumin Shinbun's* editorial staff put it, from "family", to "friends", to "people from one's hometown" to, finally "all the people from one's country"⁴.

On the other hand, in the early 1900s, the letters, diaries, and unpublished manuscripts and notes belonging to well-known literati were rediscovered, or rather re-imagined, as writings of special interest to the general audience. The first collected works of Kitamura Tōkoku (1868–1894) and Higuchi Ichiyō (1872–1896), published posthumously in 1894 (Meiji 27) and 1897 (Meiji 30), respectively, had consisted exclusively of their literary production (prose, poetry, drama). On the other hand, *Tōkoku's Collected Works (Tōkoku Zenshū)*, which came out in 1902 (Meiji 35) contained a chapter entitled "Collection of Random Thoughts" (*Manroku Tekishū*), made up of diary entries, memos, and letters; similarly, the first volume of *Ichiyō's Collected Works (Ichiyō Zenshū, 1912)*⁵ contained her diary, together with a letter-writing manual⁶ complete with examples written by Ichiyō herself. Thus, formerly private writings became public after the death of their authors, giving birth to scores of new and

¹ 「手紙をめぐるポリチックスー戦争と近代郵便制度一」. In 『現代詩手帖42』, 1999.06.

² Later republished as *Letters to My Dear Brother*, 『愛弟通信』. 左久良書房, 1908.

³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. N.Y.: Verso Publishers, 1983.

⁴ 「一編の通信を本紙に寄せれば、直に本紙に掲載されて家族も読むべく、朋友も読むべく、郷里の人も読むべく、そうして又た一般国民も読むべし」 ("If you send us a piece of correspondence, we will publish it right away, and then your family will read it, your friends will read it, the people in your hometown will read it, the entire nation will read it."), quoted in Kōno's paper.

⁵ 『一葉全集 前編 日記及書簡文範』. Tokyo: 博文館, 1912.

⁶ Previously published as 『通俗書簡文』. Tokyo: 博文館, 1896.

unplanned readers, who were eager to know the “truth” about people they had previously only been able to become acquainted with through their literary production⁷. In a nutshell, letters and diaries were re-invented as literary genres, and exploited the scandalous potential of the private becoming public while building a sense of intimacy between writer and reader by giving the latter the illusion of being privy to knowledge about the former. In the following decades, more and more magazines and newspapers started offering their readers correspondence columns⁸, or even having letter writing as one of the genres that contributions could be sent in for monthly “creative writing” contests⁹, spreading these formats as means of public self-expression.

Nevertheless, just like private correspondence¹⁰, such letters were not a gender-free construction. In the case of the war correspondence published in newspapers such as *Kokumin Shinbun*, and in readers’ contributions to magazines such as *Bunshō Sekai* or *Bunshō Kurabu*, we are dealing, almost exclusively, with male communities, whose purpose for communication is to either participate in the imagination of a “nation”, or, later on, to educate themselves in order to become members of a cultured elite who can read and write proficiently.

On the other hand, as Nakayama Hiroaki discusses in his paper¹¹, the epistolary genre was also encouraged in many of the women’s magazines of the Taishō period, starting with the famous “Blue Stocking” (*Seitō*)¹², and including “Virgin Soil” (*Shojochi*)¹³, a short-lived

⁷ Sasao Kayo discusses the role the publication of Ichiyō’s diary played in the discovery of a means of writing a gendered inner world (内面), connecting her analysis to contemporary naturalistic discourses. See “Ichiyō’s ‘Diary’ and Ichiyō’s Image” (「一葉『日記』と〈一葉〉」). In 『結ばれる一葉メディアと作家イメージ』, Tokyo: 双文社, 2012.

⁸ For example, the readers’ correspondence column 「読者通信欄」, in the magazine 「文章倶楽部」 (1916–1929).

⁹ The magazine 「文章世界」 (1906–1922) received contributions for the following categories: critical writing (論文), prose (散文), correspondence (書翰), long poems (長詩), short prose (短文), *tanka*, *haiku*, and novels (小説).

¹⁰ In her 『通俗書簡文』, Ichiyō points out that the messages women send to men are held to different standards, cautioning against the dangers of appearing overfamiliar. These standards were still in place at the beginning of the 20th century, as shown by Nakarai Tōsui and Baba Kochō’s comments about Ichiyō’s letter-writing; they both point out that her letters included fragments that could be interpreted as revealing a “serious” (凡ならぬ) or “extraordinary” (普通以外) relationship between herself and the addressees. For more details about women and letter-writing, refer to Seki Reiko’s 「手紙のジェンダー、手紙のセクシュアリティ—彼女たちの言の葉—」(『現代詩手帖』1999.6) and Minemura Shiduko’s 「〈安全な場所〉の崩壊—「ゆく雲」における手紙の意味—」(『女子大國文』2004.6).

¹¹ “The Message of *New Life*, in Letters and *Tanka*” (『新生』のメッセージ—手紙と短歌—). In 『媒』, 1991.07.

¹² 『青鞜』, 1911–1916.

¹³ 『処女地』, 1922–1923.

paper Tōson funded himself. As both Nakayama and Nagabuchi Tomoe¹⁴ point out, by the 1910s it was a common assumption, which Tōson himself shared, that letters were among the most appropriate ways for women to express their intimate feelings, which they had (presumably) long suppressed. In epistolary form, it was believed, women could finally be themselves, freely, directly, and without resorting to any fabrication¹⁵. In other words, the feminine self needed an addressee (be it imagined or real), in relation/ dialogue with which to be defined, redefined, and performed.

It might be relevant to mention here that, in his discussion of Chikamatsu Shūkō's novels¹⁶, Yamaguchi Tadayoshi identifies the first two decades of the 20th century as the “season of the epistolary novel” in Japan, listing 124 examples of such works written between 1902 and 1919. Yamaguchi identifies as the reasons behind the popularity of the genre the spread of the *genbun itchi* (unified written and spoken) style which had become, by the turn of the century, the main style taught in national language classes. In addition, the editorial strategies of several magazines, which encouraged letter contributions, and the requirements of naturalistic/ realistic prose, also placed emphasis on “being natural” and using “genuine, unadorned material” to breathe life into one's writing. While a cursory look at Yamaguchi's list also reveals names such as Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, or Izumi Kyōka, in whose case the letter-form is a narrative tool for building fictional worlds, the names making up the bulk of the list do, indeed, belong to naturalist and Shirakaba school writers, who, as Yamaguchi notes, use the epistolary style to convey (the impression of) unmediated reality.

Finally, it is worth noting that realistic works famously based on actual events, such as Tayama Katai's *Futon* ([The Quilt], 1907) or Arishima Takeo's *Aru Onna* ([A Certain Woman], 1919) were also published during the “season of the epistolary novel”. With their skillful use of letters from the female characters, as well as other elements, some internal to the work, some external, such novels came to be appreciated for faithfully representing reality. Shimazaki Tōson's *Shinsei* ([New Life]) employs a similar strategy, inserting in the text,

¹⁴ “Truthfulness and Falsehood in the Letters from *New Life*” (『『新生』にみる手紙の虚実』). In 『女の手紙』, Tokyo: 双文社, 2004.

¹⁵ In the first issue of “Virgin Soil”, the editor (Tōson) writes (「読者へ」): 「長い世紀の間の沈黙に慣らされたわたしたちが、どうしてさうにはかに自己を言ひあらはすことが出来ませう (略) 創刊号は御覧のごとく大部分を手紙の読み物にあてました。手紙の形式は自由で好ましいものですから、先ず一度手紙から出発することになりました。」(How can we, after silence has been imposed on us for centuries and centuries, finally express ourselves? (...)) As you can see, we have published many letters in the first issue of this magazine. They are preferable, because their form is free, so we've decided to start with letters.)

¹⁶ “Interpretive Possibilities of *Midway* and *Letter to an Unknown Woman*, in the Vein of the Modern Epistolary Novel” (『『途中』・『見ぬ女の手紙』の可能性—近代書簡体小説の水脈の中で—』). In 『『私』を語る小説の誕生—近松秋江・志賀直哉の出版期』, Tokyo: 翰林書房, 2011.

in different ways, the letters written and sent by the female character, Setsuko. In the next sections of this paper I will analyse the different functions of Setsuko's epistolary discourse in the first and second volume of the novel, looking at the ways it affects the main male character, Kishimoto Sutekichi, and his "confession", but also at how it reflects back on Setsuko's own life choices, in order to finally discuss the role played by these letters (their form, content and language) in undermining the notions of "sincerity", "truthfulness", and "self" in the *shi-shōsetsu*.

2. Kishimoto Sutekichi's confession as Shimazaki Tōson's I-novel

Published in installments in the newspaper *Tokyo Asahi* between 1918 and 1919, *New Life* (*Shinsei*) is Shimazaki Tōson's fifth novel, after *The Broken Commandment* (*Hakai*, 1906), *Spring* (*Haru*, 1908), and *The Family* (*Ie*, 1911); it was completed in close succession to *When the Cherries Ripen* (*Sakura no mi no juku suru toki*), which appeared in installments in the magazine *Bunshō Kurabu* between 1914 and 1918. The main character in *New Life*, Kishimoto Sutekichi, is also among the central figures in *Spring* and *When the Cherries Ripen*—the former being an account of his youth, while the latter recounts his adolescence. Both *Spring* and *When the Cherries Ripen* turn to a long-gone past, retrieving and retelling it through the lens of a different age (both human and historical), sometimes with regret, sometimes with nostalgia, always with a certain feeling of distance and a critical eye on the changing of times and generations. On the other hand, *New Life* comes closest, structurally, to the personal and confessional model embodied in the *shi-shōsetsu*¹⁷, focusing on Kishimoto Sutekichi, the author's alter ego, without overtly establishing any significant distance, temporal or psychological, between the narrated events and the narration itself.

Upon publication, it caused quite the sensation in the literary circles, due to its scandalous content and the similarities between the main character and Tōson himself. Indeed, it later prompted the narrator in Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's *The Life of a Fool* (*Aru aho no issshō*)¹⁸ to exclaim that "he had never encountered such a cunning hypocrite like that novel's protagonist." *Shinsei* is the story of a middle-aged writer, who, after the death of his wife, lives with two of his four children and his niece, Setsuko, who is helping him with the house chores, and with whom he is having a physical relationship. Lonely and depressed, Kishimoto feels trapped in his life when Setsuko comes to him with the confession that she

¹⁷ For a discussion of *New Life* as Tōson's first actual *shi-shōsetsu* (its special type of "subjective realism", its confessional quality and the focus on the character's quest for a "true self"), see Kangwoo Wongyoung's "From Naturalism to *shi-shōsetsu*: Shimazaki Tōson's *Shinsei*" (姜宇源庸「自然主義から私小説へ—島崎藤村『新生』論」). In 『私小説研究 第6号』, 2005.

¹⁸ In 『改造』, 1927.10.

is with child—his child. Kishimoto's solution to this problem is to flee to France. He shows very little sympathy to Setsuko, whom he does not love, and is mainly tortured by feelings of shame and guilt, wanting to hide himself from everything and everyone. After three years in France, where the advent of First World War has made it impossible for him to study and write, Kishimoto returns to Japan. In Tokyo, he lives with Setsuko and her family for a while, noticing the effects the affair, the pregnancy, and childbirth, have had on her body and mind. Little by little, he becomes close to her again, deciding to help her become more independent. Eventually their affair is reignited, and grows into love—a love that is, nevertheless, doomed. To redeem it (and himself), Kishimoto decides to write and publish an extensive “confession”, *zangeroku*. The installments start appearing in the newspaper, and Kishimoto follows up with new ones, in which he describes the impact his public confession has had on the family life, i.e., how his brother breaks off all relations with him and eventually sends Setsuko to Taiwan to live with their family there after reading the first several chapters.

In Tōson's other autobiographical novels, reality was indeed a source of inspiration, but the connection between the fictional characters and their real life models was often incomplete, relying heavily on external sources: while an initiated few could infer the correspondences between “reality” and “work”, or draw the right conclusions by referring to connected articles in newspapers and magazines, the novels did not require an autobiographical reading, and could also be interpreted within a more general frame, as love stories, Bildungsroman, or social realism novels. On the other hand, *Shinsei* is written and published as a truthful account of the author's life, including as proof of its truthfulness quotations from the novel *When the Cherries Ripen*, or from the collection of essays/ travel pieces *To the Sea (Umi he)*, which Tōson was actually writing and publishing at the time. Also, the events described in the novel span a period of almost seven years, and, along the way, literature actually catches up with life, in the end becoming intertwined beyond separation: Kishimoto's confession, made public in the form of a newspaper novel, shapes the course of his life and Setsuko's; the new developments are added to the written confession, making up the next installments to be published in the newspaper, further changing the character's life.

3. Letters in *New Life*: Setsuko's side of the story

As samples of written communication that can exist in the “real” world, outside the framework of fictional writing, the letters, postcards, and other messages quoted directly or embedded in *Shinsei*'s text are, at first glance, meant to be yet another narrative method supporting the truthfulness of the narrated events. *Shinsei* abounds in such “realistic” pieces of writing: there are postcards from friends, fan letters, *omiai* letters; the very difficult letters Kishimoto has to write to his brother, and his brother's responses; the childish, clumsy letters from his sons; and last, but definitely not least, the letters exchanged between him

and Setsuko—although “exchange” is probably not the right word, since it is Setsuko who does most of the writing, with fifty-six letters in the two volumes, fifty-four of which are addressed to Kishimoto, while only nine out of Kishimoto’s twenty-three letters quoted in *Shinsei* are addressed to his niece.

The role writing (of letters, but also of novels) plays in the relationship between Kishimoto and Setsuko has attracted several researchers’ attention, leading them to diverse, and even conflicting conclusions. Iwami Teruyo¹⁹ sees Setsuko’s words as mimicking Kishimoto’s, and Setsuko herself as his “mirror”, or alter ego. Similarly, Chida Hiroyuki²⁰ interprets *New Life* as the story of a middle-aged man overcoming a creative crisis, re-taking control of both his pen and his penis by taking away the power to give life, literally and metaphorically, from Setsuko, who, as a result, becomes a text he can re-write as he pleases. On the other hand, Nakayama and Nagabuchi, mentioned above, take a more constructive view of Setsuko’s identity formation processes described in *Shinsei*, and discover, in her letters and poems embedded in the novel’s texture, the power to engage the Other in dialogue, or even question the discourse of this very Other. Last but not least, Michael Bourdaghs’ “Suicide and Birth in the I-novel”²¹ analyses Kishimoto’s relationship with Setsuko (including his self-exile to France and her forced exile to Taiwan) as the process through which the former regains not only his masculinity and creative power (“pen and penis”, as Chida put it), but also the national and ethnic body of a “Japanese man” of the metropole. On the other hand, both Setsuko’s body and her body of writing are relegated to populating colonial and literary peripheries. According to Bourdaghs, the autobiography Hasegawa Komako (Setsuko’s model) published in 1937 in *Fujin Kōron*²² exemplifies the emergence of women’s writing as more than an “immanent trope” in the I-novel; it is, in a sense, an instance of the empire writing back.

These are all very insightful approaches to Tōson’s work, which nevertheless fall short of fully examining the discursive dynamics at work in the mutually (re)defining contours of Kishimoto’s and Setsuko’s identities. My paper aims to fill this gap, by analysing the content of the letters, as well as their narrative function in the economy of the novel, in order to shed light on the way they destabilise the notions of “truth”, “self”, and “true self”, and implicitly that of *shi-shōsetsu* from within.

The novel begins by quoting from, and referring to two different types of letters that

¹⁹ “Setsuko as Text: Sexuality in *New Life*” (「節子というテキスト—『新生』のセクシュアリティー—). In 『日本近代文学』, 1995.10.

²⁰ “Gender/ the Politics of ‘Writing’: Masculinity in *New Life*” (「性／く書く」ことの政治学—『新生』における男性性の戦略—). In 『日本近代文学』, 1994.10.

²¹ In *The Dawn that Never Comes: Shimazaki Tōson and Japanese Nationalism*. NY: Columbia University Press, 2003.

²² Part 1 appeared in May, and part 2 in June 1937.

Kishimoto has received. The first one is from a friend in Nakano:

“Dear Kishimoto, I wanted to write you a letter about what I’ve been doing and thinking recently. But, to be honest, there is nothing to write about. I may as well keep quiet. It’s probably natural that I should feel inclined to keep quiet, since we’ve known each other so well, for so long” (...)

This was written in the form of a letter, without really being one. As he read it, Kishimoto was touched, first and foremost, with the life his friend, a middle-aged man, was describing; he was touched by his confession. (...)

In the evening, the birds singing in the trees, here and there, fall quiet one by one, until no merry chirping can be heard anymore; that’s exactly what was happening now around Kishimoto. Even this friend who had written to him: after moving to his new house in Nakano, news from him became scarcer, until finally he drowned in complete silence.²³

The friend’s letter is one that attempts to put silence into words; it is, on the one hand about superfluous communication between kindred souls, while on the other hand, about the regret that such communication has become unnecessary. It echoes Kishimoto’s subsequent lamentations about how his life has been engulfed by the silence of death/ deadly silence replacing the heart-to-heart conversation and correspondence of his younger days, and also anticipates his position as a quiet receiver and reader of confessional letters.

The second case of epistolary communication mentioned in the novel is that between Kishimoto and an unknown “young man” with whom he shares a love for the willows on the banks of the Kanda River. The young man is, we are led to believe, an admirer of the writer Kishimoto, who has seen him walk along the river, and also knows details about his life and work from magazines and newspapers; they begin a long correspondence, based mainly on the young man’s confessions about his “youthful melancholy”, and “forlorn moods”, through which Kishimoto will get to know him, too, without ever meeting face to face.

The letter from the Nakano friend is embedded in full, but the letters from the young man are indirectly quoted in the text: “He wrote that, no matter how blue the sea sparkled in the sun, the willows on the riverbank seemed more peaceful to him”, “He said in his letter that he wanted to meet Kishimoto.” The former comes from a man in total control of words, at the same time no longer needing them for communication, and also no longer needing an addressee; the latter come from a man who is just learning who he is, through the very words that he needs to address to an Other. While rereading his friend’s letter, Kishimoto turns it into a reflection about himself; while remembering the young man’s words, Kishimoto tries to imagine what the man himself might have thought and felt. As such, the way the two types of correspondence are present in the narrative (indirect versus direct quotation of the

²³ All translations from *Shinsei* are mine, I.H., unless otherwise stated.

letters) hints at two different ways of constructing the relationship between Self and Other via language; they also foreshadow, in reverse order, the stages the communication between Kishimoto and Setsuko will go through. Let us now take a closer look at the interaction between the main male and female characters of *Shinsei*.

In the first volume, before Kishimoto's departure to France, even though the two live under the same roof, Setsuko rarely talks to Kishimoto directly; she speaks with her eyes, or conveys her message by addressing a third party:

"Back then, I wasn't getting much sleep..."

"I can imagine", Setsuko's eyes said.

"Thinking back, now it's much easier. We only have to be patient a little bit longer."

"Once Shige starts going to school...", said Setsuko, looking at the old housekeeper.

On the other hand, the scene where Setsuko tells Kishimoto about her pregnancy does contain her direct words—but not at the crucial moment of the confession, where they are instead indirectly reported by the narrator:

One evening, Setsuko came near Kishimoto. All of a sudden, she told him, with a voice that sounded full of sadness:

"Uncle, you must have guessed already what is wrong with me."

It was around the New Year, and Setsuko had just turned 21. The children were playing with their friends across the street. The old housekeeper had gone over to bring them back home, and was probably chatting with the neighbour. There was nobody else downstairs.

In a very small voice, she announced to Kishimoto that she was going to be a mother.

This type of narrative intervention, later on employed with regard to Setsuko's letters, is the main reason why many critics have considered Kishimoto the archetype of the male writer appropriating the female voice. Indeed, Setsuko's responses are not recorded when Kishimoto announces that he would leave for France, nor when he asks her to take care of his children in his absence, in spite of her being one of the main actors in these scenes. This shows Kishimoto's decisions as unilateral, and his discourse as monological. Furthermore, as seen in the quotations below, Setsuko's weak attempts at adding her own input to the common narrative are either disregarded, or forcibly reinterpreted and integrated into Kishimoto's self-centred dilemma, without being allowed to contribute to it (be it minimise or exaggerate it, question it or change its premises) in any way:

"Uncle, you must be very happy about this", she said in a voice filled with loneliness.

Setsuko's words, which seemed to imply that she was glad he was going abroad, made him feel, with

renewed strength, the depth of his guilt. As if he was only saving himself. As if he was running away, letting her fend for herself.

“Whether I’m happy or not... what do you know about that?”, he thought, but didn’t say it out loud, instead leaving the room and his niece behind.

Now that she wasn’t afraid of her uncle anymore, Setsuko’s eyes didn’t only express hatred. Sometimes they smiled; the smile moved across the poor niece’s face together with the dark shadow that appeared from time to time.

“How strange things are!”

She would try to tell her uncle about the restlessness in her heart, but both her hatred and her smile would only cause him to feel cornered by guilt.

When sharing the same physical space, Kishimoto can, and often does, choose to leave the conversation, or to slip past/ over the words of the Other; thus, Setsuko’s questions or comments, which attempt to engage him in dialogue, fall on deaf ears, and she is deprived of the chance to organise any discourse of the Self, to which the response of an Other would be indispensable. In short, up until Kishimoto’s departure, Setsuko’s voice does not reach him, and does not reach the reader either, as it is either filtered, or altogether obliterated, by the narrator, who focuses on Kishimoto’s monological identity crisis.

Once Kishimoto actually leaves, letters are used by Setsuko as a way to bridge the physical and psychological distance between herself and her uncle. The first letter she sends, and those that follow while Kishimoto is abroad, are indirectly quoted in the novel, with Setsuko’s sentences punctuated by reporting verbs:

Four or five days after he arrived in Kobe, Kishimoto received a letter from Setsuko. It was in response to the letter he had written her, but she hadn’t written only about the children and domestic matters; the letter also had a very personal side. (...) A strange change of heart could be read between the lines. (...) He read the letter over and over again. She said he needn’t feel like he should apologise to her—he needn’t feel sorry for her. She wrote that, thinking back of all the things that had happened, she was surprised herself of what had become of her.

In her letter she had written all these small details, which were almost painful to Kishimoto. Her account also stood proof of her delicately feminine personality. He tried to picture in his mind the moment when the pregnant Setsuko would have to face her mother, arriving to Tokyo from the countryside. He was able to imagine in detail even the frantic beating of her small heart, or the cool attitude with which she tried to mask it.

Here, the narrator also notes that these are painful, shameful letters, reopening wounds

that Kishimoto would rather let time and oblivion heal, but which Setsuko needs to put into words, finally in possession of the freedom to express herself without the addressee leaving the room or turning her words around. Simultaneously, the physical absence of the sender eases Kishimoto's own feelings of guilt, and, in return, gives him the mental allowance to "picture" and "imagine" Setsuko's predicament, finally taking the first step towards understanding the Other.

For Setsuko, the letters are a way of creating a certain intimacy with Kishimoto, of sharing with him all the things she could not tell him directly. She fashions herself as his "surrogate" wife, sending him news about herself, the house, the children, etc. She also builds an illusion of two-way communication between them, by writing in reply to the travel pieces and essays he is regularly sending to Japanese newspapers.

She wrote and asked why he started his letters with "Dear Setsuko", when it would be more than enough to say "My dear". (...) She wrote that, when she heard he was going to go away, she had so many things she wanted to tell him, but couldn't.

At the beginning of one of the essays he sent to be published in a Japanese newspaper, Kishimoto quoted an old poem about traveling, which best expressed his own feelings as a traveler. In her next letter, Setsuko mentioned that old poem, and copied another one by the same author, which was meant to express her own feelings.

Thus, physical distance and the unavoidable time lag, as well as the practice of writing letters itself (more structured, and also unhindered by the interlocutor's interventions) affords Setsuko the chance to tentatively construct an image of an ideal self, in conversation with an ideal Kishimoto, by quoting both his words, and the words of relevant others.

For Kishimoto, Setsuko's letters are an unwanted ordeal, which he cannot stop from coming. And even though he does not want to dwell on the incident, or lay his eyes on the letters, he not only reads, but also rereads them, before burning or tearing them in an attempt to make them cease to exist. He does not succeed in reducing them to nothingness; in the second volume, there are several episodes where Kishimoto asks Setsuko to explain what she had meant by some of her letters. In a nutshell, without meaning to, he has ended up learning them by heart, and the fact that they are integrated in the novel's texture without quotation marks can be interpreted as a sign that he has internalised them, making them his own. As mentioned before, one might consider this an instance of female discourse being appropriated and integrated into the male one, but I argue that here the female discourse has instead succeeded in slowly but surely shaping the male one. Setsuko's letters "plant a doubt in his heart"; they make him wonder "What is the matter with her? Why does she keep sending me these?", as if Setsuko was there to answer his questions"—in other words, he is no longer

engrossed in his own dilemma, he has had his imagination stimulated by the words of the Other, and is now ready to imagine the possibility of dialogue. Kishimoto has now lived abroad as a foreigner, which means he experienced being stared at as Setsuko was during and after her pregnancy, but also not being in control of language; he has also experienced the “war of another”, on the home front together with the mothers, daughters and wives of the soldiers. This has perhaps prepared him to understand and internalise women’s, and especially Setsuko’s position²⁴.

It is also worth noting here that the actual communication between the two is jump-started by a silent interlude from Setsuko, after which Kishimoto finally begins to hear the voice “calling to him from outside his heart’s closed doors”, a fact that fills him with “anxiety and pity that could not be put into words.” Kishimoto’s three-year long silence has given Setsuko the chance to invent him as the ideal addressee of her letters; finally, it is her silence that makes him forget his own words, allowing hers to penetrate within the closed doors of his heart. Soon after, his decision to return to Japan is made, and, as one of the reasons behind it, the impossibility to fit in is given:

Someone like him, who would spend all of his time buried in books, never interacting with any of the local women, could never find his place among unknown people. As one fellow traveler had told him, the most natural way [into a community] is via the women. But he had felt too guilty for that, and what had happened with Setsuko had left wounds that were too deep.

Quoting the words of a “fellow traveler” who emphasises the role of women as partners and central members of the community, Kishimoto indirectly hints that he has been attaching an exaggerated negative meaning to the Setsuko incident, allowing it to cause him “an untrusting heart”, “disillusionment”, “guilt”, “a deep wound”. From this point onward, he is willing to reconsider their relationship, and his future relationships with women in general.

Back in Japan, Kishimoto at first tries to keep his distance from Setsuko, but is slowly attracted to her. Soon, the words she had kept addressing him during his stay in France start resonating, and the two become intimate again, restarting their correspondence.

Kishimoto’s spirit, tortured by guilt during the last three years, was calling out his poor niece. (...) He wrote a letter, one that Setsuko could read to her mother too; but in the same envelope, he put another letter, in which he revealed everything he had not told her before.

²⁴ About the role of Kishimoto’s experience in France during the First World War, I have previously written in more detail in “The War of Another: Shimazaki Tōson’s *Shinsei*” (「他人の戦争—島崎藤村『新生』論—). In 『島崎藤村研究』, 2010.09.

“I smiled, from the bottom of my heart—even though, all these years, I had become someone who had forgotten how to smile. I said I will tell you everything. That time has finally come. (...) Please accept the feelings I have kept inside all these years, and my heart’s smile.”

Setsuko’s first letter in this volume is written in reply to two of Kishimoto’s messages: first, it answers his questions about all the “strange letters” she had sent him during his stay in France; second, it completes his declaration of love with a confirmation of her own feelings for him. Here, it is Kishimoto’s words that are not directly reproduced, his actual confession remaining a mystery, while Setsuko’s discourse is embedded in the text as is, for the first time.

After the two confess their mutual love, vowing to belong to each other as *kono yo naranu fūfu*, “husband and wife in spirit/ that do not belong to this world”, their secret *sōsaku*, “creation” continues for a while, doubled by Kishimoto’s efforts to help Setsuko become, on the one hand more independent, but on the other hand, a woman matching more closely his tastes and expectations. He buys her clothes, books, a desk, a rosary; he inculcates new ideas and hobbies, and even tells her what kind of makeup to wear. Most importantly, he hires her as his secretary, and she writes after his dictation. Sharing the same words, the discourses of Kishimoto and Setsuko start to resonate in harmony, echoing and completing each other for a while. Nevertheless, soon this harmony is broken, and, while the words still echo each other, Setsuko is in fact reinterpreting and recontextualising Kishimoto’s discourse.

He had fled as a way of punishing himself. He expected to suffer, and, from the moment he had left Japan, he had been praying to redeem his sin through suffering, if possible.

“How much pain did my truth-loving heart endure because of that mistake? (...) This might indeed seem unfortunate, if you think that my sin is the opposite of truthfulness; but that’s not necessarily so. My deepest wish is to turn that sin into something bright, and I will do my best to make it come true.”

Kishimoto talks about punishment and suffering, about washing sin with sin, seeing in their renewed bond something as wrong as their pre-France relationship; on the other hand, for Setsuko, yearning for truth and sinning are not opposites, and the mistake is just a way for her to come out into the light. Thus, while often relying on the same vocabulary (spring, breaking free and coming into the light, following one’s heart, overcoming sinfulness and sadness to finally find happiness), Kishimoto’s and Setsuko’s feelings slowly start to diverge, until finally they contradict each other completely²⁵.

²⁵ In “Truthfulness and Falsehood in the Letters from *New Life*” (see 14) Nagabuchi discusses the contradiction between their discourses, linking it to Kishimoto’s unreliability as a narrator.

"Is there anyone welcoming a spring happier than ours?" Right before the end of the year, Kishimoto received this short letter from Setsuko. But the happy spring she said the two of them were welcoming—for Kishimoto, it was yet to come.

*She couldn't possibly want to be with him. (...)
She wrote "In my heart, I will always be with you."*

Reading her letter, he thought Setsuko was finally making the first steps on her true path, that she was leaving behind, following her own heart, the situation which had kept her prisoner for so long (...)

"It is not my heart's desire, but I will follow yours. Dear Sutekichi, I start my long journey, leaving you with the joy of knowing that I can trust you with my body and soul."

While Setsuko repeatedly writes that she cannot be sad again, that they are the happiest people on earth, Kishimoto only sees themselves as tied by a dark and "barren passion", which can never "see the light of day"; he says they cannot desire to be together, but her letter clearly disagrees. Here, the direct quotations from Setsuko's letters and messages, juxtaposed with Kishimoto's indirectly quoted thoughts, serve to make her discourse stand out as independent, and emphasise the growing gap between herself and her uncle's perception/construction of reality.

4. Conclusions

In the beginning of the novel, we are told that Setsuko likes reading difficult books, as opposed to her sister, who is eager to take up more feminine endeavours, such as embroidery or ikebana. At some point, Setsuko also remarks that her friends are envious of her when they hear she lives with her writer-uncle. These episodes hint at the fact that Setsuko might be tempted to follow in her uncle's footsteps, and we can assume that, as a young girl, she had read his books, and taken his advice on literary matters; later on, her letters include quotations from his published reportages and references to recommended readings. Thus, it is by consciously and subconsciously borrowing from his novels and travel pieces that Setsuko starts shaping her own Self—or the extimate (intimately exterior) ego, as Lacan²⁶ would put it—made up of the projected desires and fantasies of the Other, and expressed through the language of the Other. At the same time, while trying to anticipate Kishimoto's responses, Setsuko does not merely parrot his words, but uses this newly learned language creatively,

²⁶ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (ed. Jacques-Alain Miller). N.Y: Norton, 1997. Also see Jacques-Alain Miller's seminar "L'Eximité", 1985.

pouring it into the epistolary (feminine) mold, that is to say, adapting it to her need to fill in an absence while constructing an ideal addressee.

In turn, by reading and rereading Setsuko's letters while in France, Kishimoto learns them by heart and slowly allows himself to be changed by their power. In other words, Setsuko reuses Kishimoto's discourse to build new personas for him and for herself; she thinks up a whole relationship between them, and eventually imposes this reality on Kishimoto, turning him around. Nevertheless, Kishimoto is not a passive actor, either. In the first volume of *Shinsei*, he changes the medium of Setsuko's discourse, merging her letters with the text of the novel. This is, on the one hand, justified by the fact that Kishimoto has allegedly destroyed said letters; on the other hand, as a narrative technique, we might say that the indirect quotation makes visible the process through which Kishimoto himself is (re)learning the language of the Other, while appropriating it.

In the second volume, after love is confessed and accepted, Kishimoto teaches Setsuko independence, and her letters start to stand by themselves within the narrator's discourse. Some of his teachings stick to her, and she starts sharing his vocabulary—but she does not do so indiscriminately. She changes meanings and contexts, making the language of the Other again her own, so that in the last part of the novel the two seem to finally become able of playing distinct tunes. The story ends with Setsuko being sent to Taiwan; still, while Kishimoto/ the narrator claims she is doing so of her own will, her final letter contradicts this assumption, allowing the reader one last glance into her parallel reality, and casting doubts on Kishimoto's righteous delusion that breaking off their relationship was what she desired, too.

The epistolary exchanges between the characters make visible both the process of acquiring a language for self-expression, and the process through which expression is used to perform, and ultimately create, this very Self as an extension of the desires of the Other. At the same time, placing side by side messages that contradict each other, sometimes even without their addresser's and addressee's knowledge, demonstrates that language is far less transparent than the writers of realistic fiction of the time hoped it would be. Setsuko's and Kishimoto's confessions are misconstrued or reinterpreted by the receiver, and often by the sender him- or herself, and constantly made to fit new contexts. In the end, the colliding discourses of Setsuko and Kishimoto illustrate the distance between Tōson's novel *Shinsei* and the characters' confessions, through the interplay of the ever-changing contours of Self and Other, impossible to capture even in a type of autobiographical prose that claims to represent personal realities in an unmediated manner. Thus, by blurring the boundaries between Self and Other on the one hand, and by suggesting the discursive qualities of "reality" on the other, we might say *Shinsei* succeeds in undermining the very possibility of *shi-shōsetsu* as a sincere account of the reality of the Self.