Panel 9: Meiji Prose (October 13: 3:00 p.m. - 4:50 p.m.)

Anri Yasuda, University of Southern California
"Mori Ogai and the Search for Modern Japanese Literary Space: Linguistic Dislocation in His Early Works"

Abstract: Vita Sexualis, Mori Ogai’s semi-parodic but largely autobiographical 1910 novel, depicts the author’s linguistic coming of age as well as his sexual one. The story describes the discomfort the author had felt in adjusting to Tokyo and its dialect upon moving to the capital from his provincial home as a young boy. This paper analyzes how Ogai’s subsequent aesthetic and linguistic philosophies, especially as expressed in the earlier years of his literary career, might be analyzed in light of his experiences of linguistic dislocation as described in such retrospective works as Vita Sexualis. As a fiery newcomer to the literary scene, Ogai—who was simultaneously building a career as an Army doctor and bureaucrat—debated against established critics in defending aesthetic ideals over realism as the goal of literary writing. He also argued against the genbun’itchi movement that sought to unify written Japanese with the colloquial speech styles of Tokyo. He wrote his first creative fictions, a trilogy of stories set in Germany (1890), in a resolutely elegant and traditional gabun style prose. His widely praised 1902 translation of Hans Christian Andersen’s novel Improvisatoren set in Italy was also written in gabun. Although Ogai would later fully adopt the colloquial genbun’itchi style, the search for literary spaces not determined by his immediate surroundings would remain a lifelong theme in his oeuvre. This paper on Ogai’s initial resistance to genbun’itchi and the works he produced during this phase thus also hopes to illuminate his later creative and conceptual directions.

Massimiliano Tomasi, Western Washington University
“Diaries of Conversion: God, Self, and the Dilemma of Faith in Modern Japanese Literature”

Abstract: Several Meiji and Taishō writers were influenced by Christianity. The idea of an absolute God and of an independent and free self often overlapped with these writers’ search for answers to the meaning of human existence and the purpose of life. Many of them were baptized and embraced the Christian faith in their youth. However, as they strove to rationalize the internal conflicts surrounding the construction of the modern self, they became unable to address their predicaments within the framework of orthodox Christianity and later renounced their faith. Scholars have downplayed the strictly theological inquiry that drove these young intellectuals, characterizing their religious experience as ephemeral and essentially marginal to the development of modern Japanese literature. Yet these writers’ religious discourse provides unequivocal evidence that the question of selfhood and its relationship to God and the universe remained at the center of their concerns, informing their narrative at every stage of their lives. This paper provides a chronotopic analysis of the diaries and memoirs of a wide range of modern authors, including Shimazaki Tōson, Kunikida Doppo, Masamune Hakuchō, Kinoshita Naoe and Arishima Takeo. The paper highlights the historical and evangelical setting, the artistic representation of faith, and the rhetoric of contrition that is common to all of these texts, unveiling the existence of a spiritual continuum across the Meiji and Taishō years that will shed further light on the role of Christianity in the development of modern Japanese literature and the construction of the modern self.

Takako Nakai, Nagaya University
““A Living God”: Hearn’s Hidden Message of Love”

Abstract: Usually described as an independent story, the tsunami tale in part 3 of the “A Living God” story in Lafcadio Hearn’s “Gleanings in Buddha-Fields” (1897) is more likely intended to further the concept of a soul being detachable from the body, and is part of hidden message of love to Elizabeth Bisland embedded within many parts of the book. To support this interpretation, this paper carefully examines “Gleanings in Buddha-Fields”, Hearn’s other published works in Japan and the letters he wrote to Bisland. In “Gleanings in Buddha-Fields”, particularly in the story “A Living God”, we see Hearn introduce and support the concept of a detachable soul. Also, he suggests he too has a detachable soul, which is his subtle way of demonstrating to Bisland his love for her, despite being half a world away. A better understanding of Heran’s heart, mind and motivation in writing this book will help scholars appreciate this book and others, and hopefully increase the readership of this unique writer in history. This will give this scholar and others a key examination of “A Living God” of unlocking other mysteries in many of Hearn’s other literary works.

Matthew Fraleigh, Brandeis University
“Gion in Early Meiji: Narushima Ryūhoku’s "A Glimpse Of Kyoto's Cats" (1874)"

Abstract: In 1874, Narushima Ryūhoku (1837-1884) published the first two installments of New Chronicles of Yanagibashi, his best-selling account of the Yanagibashi geisha district. These two kanbun texts, which Ryūhoku had actually completed in 1860 and 1871, humorously document the particular customs of one local site while also satirizing broader social and cultural transformations that took place over the course of the Edo-Meiji transition. Yet in the same year that these two works were first widely disseminated, Ryūhoku was resident in Kyoto, completing a manuscript entitled Keibyō ippan (A glimpse of Kyoto’s cats). Written in a similar form of kanbun, Keibyō ippan is framed as a Kyoto counterpart to the Yanagibashi chronicles: documenting the distinctive customs of Gion and other Kyoto entertainment districts while surveying the city as a whole, devoting attention to transformations underway in the wake of the Meiji Restoration, and using the pleasure quarters as a lens to compare Kyoto and Tokyo. This paper examines Keibyō ippan in light of earlier kanbun texts concerning the pleasure quarters, looking at its distinctive scope and style as well as its textual lineage. In particular, I focus on the narrative persona employed in Keibyō ippan, considering how Ryūhoku’s emerging role as a journalist shaped the text’s structure and how his status as a former vassal of the deposed shogunate figured in his treatment of the former capital. In addition to the various published editions of Keibyō ippan, I consider an original manuscript of the text held by Kyoto Prefectural Library.