

# Diary in a Double Bind: The Literary Refuge of Hōjō Tamio

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## Abstract

Hōjō Tamio (1914-1937) is arguably the only Japanese short story writer who has won significant critical acclaim as well as popularity among contemporary readers while being diagnosed with Hansen's disease. Up until today, he has been noted as a powerful chronicler of the lives of the patients, and a stronghold of literary history surrounding the disease. Celebrated literary figures, especially Kawabata Yasunari, who helped publish Hōjō's works, were also eager to sustain his reputation in this vein. But did he wish for such a role? Through analyzing his diary entries written between 1934-1937, this paper aims to shed a light on an aspect of Hojo's persona, which to some extent has been overlooked: a troubled, angry young writer who was more than occasionally doubtful about the authenticity of his own fame, and who was seriously irritated by the authorities suffocating his freedom of expression. While the diary is crucial to understand Hōjō's thoughts, it also gives rise to a double bind situation, where he could only express his discontent and wrath under the condition that no other person is allowed to access his manifest.

Keywords: Hōjō Tamio, diary, Hansen's disease, "leprosy literature", Kawabata Yasunari

## I. Introduction

Hōjō Tamio (北條民雄, 1914-1937) is arguably the only Japanese short story writer who has won significant critical acclaim and popularity among contemporary readers while being diagnosed with Hansen's disease. On top of the tragic fact that his fame was short-lived because of his curtailed life of mere 23 years, it also appears that Hōjō himself was not exactly content with his own fame, since he knew that his success was more than partly reinforced by the very fact that he suffered from the fatal disease.

For a young and aspiring writer like Hōjō, this doubtlessly must have been a distressing dilemma. While rewriting his life through fiction served simultaneously as means to deconstruct his spiritual pain and to strengthen his identity as a writer, it also constantly reminded him that it was for his inescapable pain that readers admired him, and his existence will most likely lose its value if he were to be delivered from the disease. In other words, Hōjō was in a double bind situation where, although he knew what the problem was, he was in no position to solve it. The readers expected him to write about leprosy, and it was, at least at the early point of his career, the only way to keep his fame growing.

The only place he could seek refuge from such situation was his diary. It was the only text he could

produce without being worried about what the world expects from him, or to be more precise, the only place he could openly refute such expectations. This paper, therefore, aims to interpret Hōjō's diary as his "literary refuge," where he could manifest his anger towards the world: namely the men of literature outside the hospital, the staff members of the hospital, and his fellow patients. His anger and contempt could not be shared with the rest of the world, except for the few friends he really trusted, and naturally had to be hidden.<sup>1</sup>

It must be well noted that a diary written by a patient of Hansen's disease prior to the Second World War is, in itself, astonishingly rare. The editors of Hōjō's diary do not hesitate to evaluate its survival "almost miraculous" (Hōjō 2004: 1). Needless to say, this fact adds to the value of this diary; but it is equally important to bear in mind that this is a diary of a writer. Many writers have kept diaries that granted the posterity an opportunity to better comprehend his/her views on literature. By looking at Hōjō's diary, then, we would not only be able to acquire a better understanding of him as a human being, but would be able to have a clearer view of what it was like to be considered a leading figure of the so-called "leprosy literature" movement, while the disease was precisely the reason of his struggle as a human being. It is for this reason that Hōjō's diary could be considered a key material to assess not only his works but the nature of "leprosy literature" as a whole.

## II. A young writer's diary

Thanks to the discovery of the drug Promin, leprosy became curable in Japan, as it did in many other countries, after the Second World War. But when Hōjō, then 19 years old, was diagnosed with leprosy in 1933, it basically meant his life was over. Leprosy Prevention Law enforced in 1931 allowed the police to send patients to leprosariums, or leprosy colonies by force, and virtually every prefecture in Japan competed to realize a leprosy-free community, in a movement so-called *muraiken undo* (無癩県運動)<sup>2</sup>. Hōjō quickly became a nuisance to his family. He was a newly-wed, but had to divorce his wife. After thinking about taking his own life several times, he decided to hospitalize himself<sup>3</sup>.

To his pleasant surprise, many of his fellow patients at Zensei Hospital, located in Tama area of Tokyo, were fond of literature. An intramural magazine of verse and prose, *Yamazakura* (山桜), was edited and published by volunteers since 1919. Even one of the doctors at the hospital, Igarashi Masa (五十嵐正), was a moderately successful poet of waka. As a typical literary enthusiast, or *bungaku seinen* (文学青年), Hōjō joined the group and started to contribute stories and essays for the magazine. It was also around this time that he started making diary entries in a notebook:<sup>4</sup>

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1 This paper largely draws from the presentation "Is This What I Wished For? : Hōjō Tamio's Diary as a Literary Refuge," presented at the conference AAS-in-Asia 2016, on June 26, 2016, at Doshisha University, as a part of the panel session "The Conformed/Deviated Self in Diaries of Modern Japan: The Diversity and Contradiction of Self-expression."

2 A detailed history of policies regarding leprosy, compiled by Japan Law Foundation in 2005, is available online at the website of Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/topics/bukyoku/kenkou/hansen/kanren/4a.html>

3 The life of Hōjō is well chronicled in Kazumori 2015.

4 All translations of the diary entries are my own. While most of his diary entries are available in a single volume (Hōjō 1980), some of the entries are lost, or manipulated for different reasons. For details, see Arai 2011, esp. chapter 3.

これだけの苦しみを受け、これだけの人間的な悲しみを味わされながら、このまま一生を無意味に過されるものか！

With all this suffering and human sorrow, how could I live my life in vain!

July 21, 1934 (Hojo 1980: 147)

Many of the earlier entries, like the one above, display his sense of duty to become a successful writer. By successful he meant a writer who is able to convey his messages to a wider audience. He was never satisfied with the limited scope of *Yamazakura*, which only aimed to share the talents of patients within the leprosy community, as he cuttingly remarked in the following entry:

この雰囲気の内では文学など糞喰えだ。だからこそ、こうこの院内の文学が断れ断れなんだろう。そして本気でやっているものは詩か歌の世界に遁れて、創作（小説の）世界に戦おうとする熱意は消失してしまっている。

In this kind of atmosphere, literature should be fed to dogs! That is why literature at the hospital is so detached. And decent enthusiasts take refuge to the world of verse; they have lost the passion to struggle in the world of fiction (novel).

August 27, 1934 (Hojo 1980: 154)

Hōjō had larger ambitions. In August, he wrote to Kawabata Yasunari (川端康成, 1899-1972), who, in his late thirties at the time, was already a prominent figure in the literary establishment. Kawabata wrote back in October and gave his word that he will take a look at Hōjō's work once it is completed.

Naturally, Hōjō was ecstatic. However, Kawabata's words also put him under such a pressure that he was not able to write for a while. It was in May of the following year that he finally completed the story "Maki Rojin" (間木老人, Old Maki) and sent it to his mentor-to-be.

Kawabata promptly replied, saying "Maki Rojin" is more than satisfactory, and he will make sure that it gets published on one of the magazines he had connections with. It is not surprising that Hōjō was strongly encouraged:

自分としては丸切り自信もなにもなかったのに、先生は立派なものだと誉めて下さった。[中略] 自分は書こう。断じて書こう。「文学と斬死する」[後略]

I had no confidence in that work, but Sensei [Kawabata] said it was decent... I shall write. I shall definitely write... I shall die in my battle with literature...

May 29, 1935 (Hojo 1980: 186)

Up until this point, to summarize, Hōjō's diary could be considered as a typical diary of a young writer. Although his circumstances are different from most of the writers his age, his frustration with fellow

literary enthusiasts at the hospital, for example, could be replaced with that of a young writer unsatisfied with lukewarm passion of other writers in any group of similar nature.

From this point on, however, more entries are directly connected with the fact that he is deprived of both health and freedom. It was not rare that his sense of loss resulted in cantankerous reproach against his fellow patients. For example, in the following entry from June, he wishes his roommate to die, just because he moves the table a little:

ここまで書くと、U君が眠れぬのだらう机の向きを更えた。自分はローソクの光りが洩れては済まぬと思い、わざわざ本を高く積んで光りをふせいでいるのに、ことさらに向きを更えとは！  
なんて共同生活は嫌なものなんだらう。どうしてあの野郎はあんなに意地悪なんだらう。貴様なんか一日も早く、くたばっちまえ！！

As I write this, U- moved the table, probably because he couldn't sleep. I have been careful not to disturb him; I am stacking books to cover the candlelight. But he moves the table, as if he has something to say! Oh, how I loathe to live with strangers. How come this guy is so mean? Just die, bastard, die yesterday!

June 10, 1935 (Hojo 1980: 193)

This seemingly uncontrollable fit of anger could also partly be explained by the fact that during this time Hōjō was in the midst of a financial crisis. He has been unable to pay the hospital fee for the last two months. But of course, this wasn't the only reason for his nervous breakdown; as a writer, his biggest concern was always that pertaining to literature:

先ず第一に僕達の生活に社会性がないということ。従ってそこから生れ出る作品に社会性がない。社会は僕達の作品を必要とするだらうか？ よし必要とするにしても、どういう意味に於てであらうか。僕は考える。先ず、第一に「癩」ということの特異さが彼らの興味を惹くだらう。

Most importantly, our lives here have no sociality. Therefore, our works, written in such an environment, also lack sociality. Does society even need our works? Even if it did, on what terms? This is what I think: people will be interested because of the peculiarity of “leprosy,” before anything else.

July 4, 1935 (Hojo 1980: 206)

The accuracy of his insight should be well noted. Even before his story was published, he already knew that, to some extent, his “market value” as a writer depended on the fact that he suffered from leprosy.

### III. A diary of a disillusioned writer

Shortly after the last entry, he ceases to keep the diary for a while. The reason is unclear, but probably he was fiercely working on his manuscripts. During this gap, in October, his story “Maki Rojin” was

published in the magazine *Bungakukai* (文学界). This meant his career as a professional writer has finally set sail. But if we take a look at the entry written in December, where he resumes the diary, it is clear that he is not exactly happy:

「間木老人」が発表された喜びも、その他先生から戴いたお手紙の数々の中に記されてあった喜びも、束の間の喜びに過ぎぬ。時間が経って平常な気持ちに還れば、またしても病気の重苦しさがどっと我が身を包んでしまう。小説を書く、有名になる、生き抜く、苦悶の生涯。—美しいことである、立派なことである。だがしかしふふんと嘲笑したいのが今の自分の本心である。見るがよい、重病室の重症者達を！ あの人達が自分の先輩なのだ。やがて自分もあなり果てて行くのは定り切っている事実なのだ。軽症、ふん、生が死を約束するように、軽症は重症を約束する。葉書をポストに入れてから新聞を見に行き、例のように文芸欄を展げて見るが、文壇なんて、なんという幸福な連中ばかりなんだろう。何しろあの人達の体は腐って行かないのだからなあ。今の俺にとって、それは確かに一つの驚異だ。俺の体が少しずつ腐って行くのに、あの人達はちっとも腐らないのだ。

The joy of publishing “Maki Rojin”, and the joys I found in the many letters from Sensei [Kawabata], are all ephemeral. Once I am my usual self again, I am crushed by the heaviness of my gruesome illness. Write stories. Become famous. Live. Live a life full of pain. How beautiful. How wonderful. But look at those patients in the critical condition ward! They are my seniors. I know exactly how I am going to end up. As death precedes life, critical condition precedes mild case. Today I mailed a postcard, got the paper, and opened the literature section. These men of literature are such a happy bunch. I mean, they are not going to rot. This is really amazing for me. While I rot away, these people do not.

December 20, 1935 (Hojo 1980: 223)

Here we see that Hōjō has cut himself off from the literary establishment, to which he has no doubt longed to belong. And it is due to his physical condition that Hōjō could not sympathize with his fellow writers. This is obviously because he feels that what one writes is inseparable from the world one lives in. Since he lives in the world of illness, and since his act of writing is so closely connected to his will to live, he assumes that there is no way that he can associate himself with healthy writers. It must also be noted that we can sense a feeling of contempt in this entry. Hōjō, at least to some extent, ranked himself above the other writers precisely because he was ill.

Hōjō’s arrogance and hatred we see in the entry above may have been caused by the fact that he had just finished writing the story “Inochi no Shoya” (いのちの初夜, The First Night of Life), which would become his best-known work. In January 1936, the story was published in *Bungakuukai*, and in the next month, Hōjō was awarded the “Bungakukai Prize.” Hōjō visited the publisher to receive the award, and also made a stop at Kamakura to meet Kawabata in person.

However, all of these events are not recorded in his diary. This could be partly because he was in fact busy, being offered several spots on different magazines for stories and essays. But again, he was also

mentally unstable. In June, he left the hospital and wandered around Tokyo, Kobe, and Osaka, planning to commit suicide somewhere on the road. Even a literary prize or a personal encounter with Kawabata was not enough to turn his spirits around.

Towards the end of 1936, and during 1937, the diary tells us that Hōjō was mostly irate with the situation surrounding him. And this time, his anger was pointed towards the authorities that are taking his freedom away, rather than his healthy colleagues outside the colony.

改造社からの依頼の原稿三十枚が昨夜書き上がったので、今朝検閲に出した。どう考えて見ても検閲は腹立たしい。[中略] 根は可愛い男なので憎めないのだけれども、××としての彼を見ると××を覚える。我々の原稿を検閲することに彼は××を満足させているのだ。検閲官であることに××を覚えるとは、××の男であろう。

I have finished my thirty pages for Kaizōsha, so I have passed them over to the censorship office. No matter how you look at it, the idea of censorship irritates me... He is a lovable character at heart, but makes me \*\*\* if I look at him as a \*\*\*. By censoring our works, he feels \*\*\*. What kind of a \*\*\* man would \*\*\* working at the censorship office?<sup>5</sup>

September 4, 1936 (Hojo 1980: 253)

Leprosy Prevention Law allowed the managers of colonies to enforce censorship on every correspondence to and from the facilities. Letters and mails had to be sent off after being handed into the office, and received letters were opened and read before they were handed to the patients. Works of fiction were no exception. In fact, they were scrutinized with the utmost attention, since these could easily affect people's impression of the disease and the hospital.

In Hōjō's case, for example, stories "Seishun no Tenkei-byōsha tachi" (青春の天刑病者達, The Young Patients of the Karmic Disease) and "Rai wo Yamu Seinen tachi" (癩を病む青年達, The Youths Suffering Leprosy) were banned from publication. This was probably because the former contains depictions of "maximum security cell," a room designated for patients with mental illness or violent behavior, which is no different from, or even crueler, than a prison cell (Miyasaka 2006). This kind of cellblock did exist in the colony at Gunma prefecture, but not in Zensei Hospital where Hōjō lived. The latter work is incomplete, but since it mentions how abortion was enforced on female patients who were pregnant, the censorship office might have asked Hōjō to stop writing, unless he was willing to change the synopsis.

We can see Hōjō's final utterance of contempt from the end of March to the beginning of April:

なんという屈辱であろう。あの事務員の上田の顔が浮んで来る。いっそ叩き殺して俺も死んでしまおうか？ 四月号は東條耿一の名前で買って貰った。こんなことを考えるともう仕事も手につかぬ。事務所も何も焼き払ってしまいたくなる。ああ原稿は検閲を受けねばならんのだ。

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<sup>5</sup> The proper nouns and some harsh words have been expunged from Hōjō 1980.



What a disgrace. I keep on seeing Ueda's face, that clerk. Should I beat him to death, and take my own life too? I asked Tōjō to buy the April issue [of the magazine] in his name. I can't work like this. I would love to burn the office down, and everything else with it. Oh, but my manuscript must be checked by them.

March 27, 1937 (Hojo 1980: 276)

原稿を書けば検閲を考えて苦しまねばならず、手紙を書けば向うへ着いているかどうか心配せねばならず、雑誌に作品が載れば雑誌を買うのに気をもまねばならぬ。なんということだ、なんということだ。

When I write a manuscript I must be annoyed by censorship. When I write a letter I must worry if it is really delivered. Once my work is published in a magazine, I must wonder how I can buy that magazine. Oh dear, oh dear.

April 2, 1937 (Hojo 1980: 276)

創元社からも川端さんからも返事なし。果して向うに着いているのかどうか疑わしい。そう考えると腹が立って来て仕事をやめてしまう。事務所を呪ひたくなる。この原稿だって武藤、永井、林の輩に見せなくちゃならぬのだ。俺が全身をぶち込んだ作を、彼等はまるで卑俗な品物のように取扱うのだ。そして勝手に赤線など引いて返すのだ。しかもあの頭脳低劣なる、文学のブの字も判らぬ連中なのだ。ああ屈辱の日々よ。

Nothing so far from Sogensha [the publisher] and Kawabata-san. Did they really get my manuscript? Such a thought maddens me, and I stop working. This manuscript too should be shared with people such as Mutō, Nagai, and Hayashi. To them, my work, the fruit of my painstaking effort, is nothing more than a vulgar object. They would draw red lines all over it. And these people are mere imbeciles, who have no idea whatsoever what literature is all about. Ah, my days of disgrace.

April 3, 1937 (Hojo 1980: 277)<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps his anger towards censorship was inflated by the overall zeitgeist as well. With the heightening of nationalism, censorship was enforced all the more tightly against anti-nationalist sentiments, especially those sympathetic to socialist ideas (Maki 2014). From Hōjō's point of view, it would have seemed that he was trapped inside a twofold prison. He had to deal with two sets of censorship, while battling a serious illness that was not in the least caused by his own actions.

All these emotions aside, however, he was able to publish several stories and essays the same year. Nonetheless, his health quickly deteriorated from fall, and this time he never recovered. On December 5, he died from tuberculosis.

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<sup>6</sup> For entries of March 27, April 2, and April 3, 1937, parts of the entries censored in Hōjō 1980 are restored here by consulting Hōjō 2004.

## IV. Discussion

In the previous sections, we have considered ten diary entries of Hōjō that spans a little shy of 33 months. While it is impossible to suggest that we have taken a thorough view of his life at the hospital, I believe that we have a fair amount of material to suggest what function his diary has fulfilled, and to what extent his diary is unique.

To begin with, what is a diary? Generally speaking, we should all be able to agree that diary is a log of one's life, written in, or at one point intended to be written in, a daily basis. Moreover, it seems to go without saying that diary is, as the verb "keeping" implies, usually kept private. According to Nishikawa (1999), however, this is not always true, especially in early modern Japan, where diaries typically assumed a readership, and had both the private and public aspects. As Fujiwara (2015) discusses with the case of a diary kept by merchant intellectual Tsuruya Ariyo (鶴舎有節, 1808-1871), diaries could become a valuable asset to the posterity, or to those who belonged to the same community with the author.

On top of this, we must not overlook the fact that Hōjō was a writer, and he kept a diary as one. A number of his earlier entries, such as those written on July 21, 1934, and May 29, 1935, convey the straightforward image of Hōjō as a young, aspiring writer. It is not hard to imagine that he too assumed future readership, for many celebrated Japanese writers kept diaries, and their death usually lifted the barrier of privacy. Some of these diaries, like *Danchōtei Nichijō* (断腸亭日乗) of the prominent writer Nagai Kafū (永井荷風, 1879-1959), are highly praised for their quality as chronicles, not to mention the added value that they offer a glimpse of their private lives to the reader (Seidensticker 1965).

We must also take into consideration that Hōjō might have been eager to write in his diary what he could not write in his works: his distress caused by the hospital staff, his dissatisfaction with his fellow patients, and his disapproval of the writers outside the colony. The possibility of the diary made public after his death may have encouraged him further to be honest with his feelings, or perhaps even to be more biting than necessary.

Susan Burns argues how the "leprosy literature" was used to affirm the "state's attempt to make illness into identity," by "assuring both sufferers and the healthy that the leprosarium was a benevolent institution that offered care, community, and the possibility of a meaningful life" (2004: 206). It is almost obvious from the entries of December 20, 1935, and those written between the end of March and the beginning of April 1937, that Hōjō was well aware of this "attempt" of the authorities. In return of his fame, he was expected to play a role of a chronicler at the leprosarium, and a role of a representative writer in the newly invented genre of "leprosy literature." But how could he be as proud as the healthy authors outside the colony while he had to be careful not to offend the censorship office with every sentence he creates?

In his unfinished essay "Keijitsu Zakki" (頃日雑記, Notes of Recent Days), Hōjō concisely states that he does not wish to participate in the development of so-called "leprosy literature." It was about human beings in general, their lives, and the world they live in, that Hōjō wished to probe into (Hōjō 1980: 122-128). The disease was merely a means, and not the goal. But Hōjō knew that his works were widely read not because of their literary finesse per se, but rather because they depicted the grim and often gruesome lives of patients in the colony. By looking at his diary entries, we are able to see the side of his character



that was usually hidden: a troubled, angry young writer who was more than occasionally doubtful about the authenticity of his own fame, and vexed with the authority that suffocates his freedom of expression.

But there, of course, was a limit. With censorship rampant, there was no guarantee that his diary will be kept safe at all times. It was within the rights of the hospital staff to go through his belongings if necessary, and they could have easily disposed of his diary once he is gone. And even with the diary safely kept, it goes without saying that the diary was in a double bind situation, just as Hōjō himself. He could only expose his wrath and discontent in a private space that was for nobody else to see. In other words, in the only free realm of expression he had at his disposal, he constantly had to remind himself how he was deprived of freedom.

## V. Conclusion

Zensei Hospital, like many other similar institutes, was different from ordinary hospitals on many levels. The biggest of these differences was that it existed to quarantine the patients, rather than to cure them. It was in a way a pure embodiment of Jeremy Bentham's notion of the panopticon, where all the persons accommodated were under constant surveillance. Moreover, patients were victims of eugenics, and were deemed to be a hindrance to the Japanese civilization. As Michel Foucault pointed out in his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), the authorities manipulated scientific studies to strengthen their control over patients. But patients of Hansen's disease have done nothing wrong; they were punished for something that was beyond their control. All in all, it is no exaggeration that Japanese policies towards the patients are retrospectively compared to those of Nazi Germany towards the Jewish, Polish, and other victims of the Holocaust, at least in the eyes of the patients (Takada 1999).

Hōjō has identified himself as a young, talented, and enthusiastic writer, and his diary was of course used to reinforce this identity. However, the diary was perhaps more valuable to him as a space of refuge. It was only in his diary that he could unleash his anger towards the authorities, and his dissatisfaction towards the literary establishment that has recently welcomed him. Although his anger and dissatisfaction were important parts of his self, he was not allowed to express them freely, since he was always under the scrutiny of the hospital staff. He was in no position to publicly denounce men of literature outside the walls, especially without risking isolation. Thus his true self had to be deviated to some extent if he wished to exercise his freedom, or at least what was left of it. Moreover, given the circumstances, it was obvious that his diary could come under censorship at any moment. This is why his diary was a refuge, rather than a sanctuary, because there was nothing to guarantee his freedom of expression, or safety of what he has written in it.

The only reason we can still access his diary today is because Kawabata has volunteered to preserve the diary upon death of Hōjō. Virtually, none of the diaries written before the Second World War by patients of such institutes survive. Ironically or not, it was Hōjō's cursed fame that saved his diary in the end.

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