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Shirakaba Esotericism: Art and the Self for Yanagi Muneyoshi and Mushanokōji Saneatsu

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Introduction

During its fourteen-year run, the *Shirakaba* 白樺 (White birch, 1910–1923) journal was widely read among Japanese writers and launched the careers of several well-known authors, including Shiga Naoya 志賀直哉 (1883–1971), Arishima Takeo 有島武郎 (1878–1923), and Mushanokōji Saneatsu 武者小路実篤 (1885–1976). The journal has been the subject of numerous monographs and appears prominently in literary histories of the period.[1] This article offers a new perspective on *Shirakaba* in the early 1910s. By considering the role of esotericism in the writing of its two most prolific contributors, I re-examine the aesthetics of the Shirakaba-ha 白樺派 (White Birch Group) and its place in both Japanese literary history and the history of scientific and religious discourse.

First, what was *Shirakaba* and how has it been historicized? In part, *Shirakaba* was an art magazine. Three to five printed reproductions of artwork appeared in each issue of the journal, and special editions on specific artists included up to twenty. Especially early in its run, the work of European Impressionists and Post-Impressionists like Cezanne, Rodin, and Van Gogh appeared most frequently alongside analysis of the artists and their work, making the journal one of the earliest and most accessible sources of information on art trends in Europe at the time. The sheer amount of art in its pages as well as the extensive commentary—including translations of European sources and analysis by Shirakaba-ha members and guests—left a serious mark on artistic discourse and practice in Taishō period Japan.[2] But this aspect of the journal should be understood in conjunction with its monthly publication of fiction and literary criticism.[3] These two sides were inextricably linked because, to the Shirakaba-ha,

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both visual art and literature shared a common goal: the pursuit of the "self."[4]

In their critical writing, the group praised the Post-Impressionists alongside writers like Tolstoy and Strindberg for prioritizing their "selves" over all else.[5] For example, early in the journal's run, Mushanokōji Saneatsu, one of the group's most vocal members, wrote, "I am someone who will always champion art that is for the self (*jiko no tame* 自己の為). I demand art that does not turn its back on the interests or hobbies of the self, or on the demands of the spirit (*seishin no yōkyū* 精神の要求)…. A person who betrays the self to meet the demands of the day is ignoring individuality (*kosei* 個性) and character (*jinkaku* 人格). Such a person has no soul."[6] This type of statement repeats and permutates in the writing of Mushanokōji and his fellow members.[7] At one level, Mushanokōji simply means that artists should prioritize their own desires and impulses over external influences. But the "self" also frequently takes on a more abstract meaning. Mushanokōji insists over the years that great art must follow the "demands" (*yōkyū* 要求) of the self and "enliven" (*ikasu* 活かす) the self. The question of how exactly Shirakaba-ha writers defined the self, to what degree they succeeded or failed in expressing it, and how these efforts fit into a broader genealogy of the self in Japanese literature and intellectual history have been common topics in previous scholarship.[8]

My goal in this article is to show that the Shirakaba-ha's worldview was in fact rooted in the philosophical foundations of esotericism, and that understanding these foundations can help to decode the group's view of what the "self" was to begin with, as well as how it was connected to art. *Shirakaba* did not only publish art criticism and fiction. It also regularly included pieces on topics such as heterodox Christian theology, clairvoyance, hypnotism, Henri Bergson's (1859–1941) anti-Darwinian philosophy of vitalism, and forms of religious mysticism. The member who penned many of these articles was Yanagi Muneyoshi 柳宗悦 (1889–1961), and his importance to the journal is easy to see.[9] He published a greater volume of text in the first years of *Shirakaba* than any other member except Mushanokōji.[10] His careful, academic writing on philosophy, theology, and science laid the philosophical foundations of the journal in its early years and gave it a scholarly legitimacy. In these contributions, Yanagi develops a concept of the self based on a specific theory of knowledge. He argues that instead of relying on the empiricism of science or the dogmatic faith of religion, the modern subject should strive for non-rational, intuitive knowledge of reality. Only the great

geniuses of past and present—ranging from Jesus and the Buddha to Nietzsche and Rodin—were capable of this type of knowledge. Yanagi's concept of an ingenious "self" capable of intuiting and expressing elevated knowledge is part of the global discursive history of esotericism, and it is this specific, esoteric idea of the self that informs the Shirakaba-ha's theory of art.

To define what I mean by esotericism in the context of *Shirakaba*, it is helpful to first consider how the group viewed religion. Almost all of Yanagi's writing in the early years of *Shirakaba* deals in some way with religion, and he was not alone among his peers in this interest. Many scholars have explored the influence of religion on modern Japanese literature, including the impact of Christian theology on concepts of selfhood, love, and morality beginning in the Meiji period.[11] Another topic of interest has been the religious beliefs of individual authors. The Shirakaba-ha's engagement with Christianity and its impact on their work has been well studied.[12] Several group members expressed some level of interest in Christianity, generally before the launch of the journal in 1910. Some, like Arishima Takeo 有島武郎, confessed faith for a time before publicly rejecting Christianity, while others, like Mushanokōji and Yanagi, wrote of interest in the Bible but never expressed faith or affiliation with the Church.

I do not want to understate the impact of specific Christian institutions and theologies on Japanese intellectual history or on the personal lives of various authors. However, Christianity was also understood more expansively in the late Meiji period. Alongside the denominational Protestantism that initially took root among Japanese intellectuals in the 1880s through the efforts of Western proselytizers, discourse on religion had grown to also include universalistic accounts of the divine articulated within the new field of religious studies, the Unitarian Church, and modernizing Buddhist sects.[13] Biblical criticism and liberal theology, which I discuss below in the context of Yanagi's writing, had recast Jesus as a gifted moral philosopher rather than the son of God. Many Japanese intellectuals, including Yanagi and Mushanokōji, were primarily interested in Christianity not as a question of faith or denominational affiliation, but as a repository of ethical and philosophical insight, or as one account of religious experience among many.[14]

This shift in the perception of religion parallels the emergence of modern esotericism. I use the term "esotericism" as it has been theorized within the field of esotericism studies in the last two decades.[15] Scholars

in the field originally focused on Western movements like Gnosticism, alchemy, astrology, occultism, Spiritualism, and New Age thought, although recent work also covers ideas and practices beyond the West.[16] One characteristic shared by esoteric movements is that they are seen as "incompatible with normative concepts of religion, rationality and science."[17] Esotericism is positioned outside the bounds of institutional forms of religion, even as it shares an interest with religion in the divine or the spiritual. For example, the séances and Ouija boards of the Spiritualism boom of the nineteenth century were scorned by the Church and were not considered "religious" by practitioners, but Spiritualism's popularity was possible because of the shift in perceptions of how the supernatural should be understood, from being necessarily tied to institutional authority to being rooted instead in individual choice and discovery.[18] This relates to another key characteristic of esotericism, a specific understanding of knowledge.[19] Esoteric movements tend to share a belief in "unique access to knowledge, an emphasis on special capacities or organs for obtaining knowledge, as well as claims to knowledge that is superior, higher, or possesses special qualities such as enabling salvation and personal illumination."[20] The "uniqueness" and "superiority" of esoteric knowledge rests in its supposed ability to circumvent the limitations of empiricism, jumping beyond the five senses and rational deduction to directly grasp greater truths that are otherwise hidden.

The writing of Yanagi and Mushanokōji introduced below shares these assumptions with esotericism. Both reject religious dogma and faith but do not embrace empiricism or positivism. Instead, they see all religion and science as pointing towards a universal truth that can only be known by special individuals. Outside of esotericism studies, this type of position between the two poles of religion and science has also been studied within a growing body of scholarship that complicates the narrative of secularization as the inevitable "disenchantment of the world."[21] Science, empiricism, materialism, and atheism did certainly shape the intellectual history of modern Japan and the rest of the globe. However, rather than simply eliminating other types of belief, disenchanting or secularizing forces ran parallel to, and frequently stimulated, new ideas about reality and knowledge that were neither traditionally religious nor materialistic.[22] Both religion and science served as sources of ideas open to fluid, syncretic reinterpretation and adaptation. In this form, both religion and science undergird the worldview presented in early *Shirakaba*.

In this article, I begin by considering several of Yanagi's publications

in *Shirakaba* from 1910 to 1913. In these pieces, Yanagi first reframes Jesus as an idealized genius extracted from Christian dogma, while also theorizing the modern artistic genius as equivalent to the religious genius of the past. Yanagi's interests then shift to paranormal research as the missing link between science and religion, and finally to vitalism as a philosophical model that allocates a special role to life within a "scientific" model of reality. At each step, certain aspects of religion are repurposed within metaphysics and epistemology defined against religion, but which also explicitly reject materialism and empiricism. Next, I examine how these basic premises bolstered Yanagi's and Mushanokōji's early theories of the self and art. Both argued that the great artists of the world, especially the European Post-Impressionists, wielded the same level of "authority" and "value" as the religious prophets of the past. The geniuses of religion and art are depicted as reaching beyond empirical knowledge to channel the deeper "vitality" or "will" pervading not only the natural world but also the deep reaches of the self. Yanagi and Mushanokōji link themselves to this lineage of genius, sometimes ambiguously and sometimes more directly. To close, I return to the question of where *Shirakaba* overlaps and where it diverges from esotericism by comparing specific arguments made by Yanagi and Mushanokōji to "discursive strategies" common among esoteric movements.

Religion, Science, and Esotericism in Yanagi Muneyoshi's Aesthetics

Yanagi Muneyoshi was the son of a rear admiral of the Japanese Imperial Navy.[23] He attended Gakushūin High School (*Gakushūin kōtōka* 学習院高等科, predecessor of the current Gakushūin University), where he met and began collaborating with Shiga Naoya and Mushanokōji Saneatsu, who were several years older than Yanagi. Gakushūin was an elite institution catering to Japan's aristocratic youth. Around half of the fifteen founding members of *Shirakaba* were aristocrats, including Mushanokōji. Yanagi's family was wealthy, and his father likely would have been ennobled if he had lived longer, but Yanagi himself was a commoner. During his time at Gakushūin, Yanagi was attracted to the work of Tolstoy, Emerson, Thoreau, Maeterlinck, and Whitman. Outside of class, Yanagi attended church services given by the Christian reformer Uchimura Kanzō 内村鑑三 (1861–1930) and expressed interest in the Bible, but was never baptized.[24] Out of the core Shirakaba-ha members Yanagi was perhaps the most committed to his studies, becoming proficient in both English and

German and proceeding to Tokyo Imperial University to study psychology after graduating from Gakushūin in 1910, the same year that *Shirakaba* was launched.

There is a large body of scholarship on Yanagi.[25] My analysis here shares some of this work's central concerns but also attempts to expand on it. Yanagi's leadership of the *mingei* 民芸 (folk-crafts) movement from 1925 has received the bulk of scholarly attention, with his early writing in *Shirakaba* primarily considered for its relation to this later work.[26] For example, the three main works in English on Yanagi argue that in his *Shirakaba* pieces he is looking for something "more than logic," "a transcendent, mystic realm of natural and universal truth," and "a spiritual alternative to 'dry' science."[27] This same impulse is then tracked forward to Yanagi's later theorization of *mingei* aesthetics. I hope to contribute to this scholarship a more detailed look at what exactly the "mystical" or "spiritual" elements in Yanagi's early work refer to, while contextualizing them within *Shirakaba* rather than *mingei*.

In the three articles I examine here, Yanagi introduces very different currents in contemporaneous Western thought. He begins with modern Christian theology, moves to the occult, and then to Bergsonian vitalism. It is fair to say that, in part, Yanagi plays the role of introducer and translator of these varied schools of Western thought. However, he also consistently adds his own interpretation, claiming that each disparate source points towards a singular, universal truth. Yanagi cannibalizes the premises he agrees with from each source, and then repurposes them within a theory of art. Many scholars of Yanagi have debated whether his thought is unique or derivative.[28] I would argue that accounting for his role as an exegete, especially his consistent analytical orientation towards aesthetics, allows for a broader understanding of Yanagi's impact on Japanese intellectual history, while also avoiding the risk of moralization that haunts attempts to distinguish imitation from original.[29]

In his first publication in *Shirakaba*, "Kinsei ni okeru Kirisutokyō shingaku no tokushoku" 近世に於ける基督教神学の特色 (Characteristics of Christian theology in the modern age, June 1910), Yanagi introduces the European movement of "liberal theology" (*jiyū shingaku* 自由神学), especially its claim that Christianity should be approached subjectively rather than as objective truth, prioritizing "religious experience" (*shūkyōteki keiken* 宗教的経験) over historical accuracy.[30] This type of religious experience is defined negatively against the dogma (*kyōri* 教理) of organized religion, which restrains the individual from true appreciation

of the "essence" (*shinzui* 真髄) of religion. In summarizing the movement, Yanagi focuses less on a comprehensive overview than on this dialectical tension between the restriction of dogmas in the past and the liberating freedom of individual experiences in the present. This skepticism towards institutionally established beliefs is a key element of Yanagi's position.

After introducing the movement, Yanagi pivots towards art, as he does in every piece introduced here. Liberal theology, Yanagi claims, harmonizes with Impressionism. The paintings of Monet, the music of Wagner, the poetry of Ibsen, and the literature of Maupassant are examples of art that, like liberal theology, focuses on "subjective states (*shukanteki jōtai* 主観的状態) rather than objective truths (*kyakkanteki jijitsu* 客観的事実)."[31] Yanagi writes, "This same current of thought [of Impressionism] is flowing at the heart of theology. Those who rejoice in free theology base their faith not on objective dogmas, but on a foundation of experiences that are sensitive and real." [32] Both religious experiences and the experiences that inspire modern art rely neither on dogma nor on truth that can be established objectively, but on individual experience, a "subjective state" that is not concretely defined.

Yanagi closes this piece with another pivot in a surprising direction. He links liberal theology and modern art to the "future of psychology," which he describes as the scientific investigation of phenomena such as "telepathy, clairvoyance, Automatism," written in English without translation.[33] Yanagi claims that research into these topics will prove that "the region of true Religion and the region of a more complete Science are one."[34] This is a key point for Yanagi. Religion, science, and art ultimately seek the same universal truth. He concludes by connecting this idea to his starting point: "Within the rare genius (*kiyū taru tensai* 希有たる天才) of Jesus is an eternal authority. We must simply identify the new importance of his teachings as time passes. I believe that the day is nigh upon us when the true essence of religion, as delivered to us by new theology, will bring about a grand fusion of the developing fields of philosophy, science, and art. These should not conflict with one another but should instead find harmony."[35]

This article shows Yanagi's central concerns. First, he is interested in religion only if exegetical authority is transferred from the Church to the free individual, and if scripture is reframed as one source of insight among many. Jesus, removed from the institution of Christianity in this way, stands alongside Tolstoy and Maupassant in Yanagi's imagined echelon of "geniuses" striving to describe the same universal truths. Yanagi is not

interested in theology as an avenue towards Christian faith. It simply offers a convenient account of "religious experience" that Yanagi can extract and implant into a theory of a universalistic truth that only the select few can perceive. In other words, Christian theology is interpreted to support esoteric premises about a hidden reality accessible only through an extraordinary type of experience. This experience is restricted by dogma and enabled by genius. In the articles examined below, Yanagi interprets very different schools of thought as also pointing to this universal truth.

In the September and October 1910 editions of *Shirakaba*, Yanagi moves from theology to the occult. In "Atarashiki kagaku" 新しき科学 (New science), he provides an in-depth introduction to research into "spiritual phenomena" (*shinrei genshō* 心霊現象) hinted at in his previous article, which he says lie at the heart of "new science."

> The science of the past, which arose from *resistance*, has forgotten its calling and has laughingly dismissed all the strange facts of life as mere superstition. But the development of science entails the opening up of the mysteries of the universe. In this, science is not only science; it connects to the same areas as philosophy and religion. In the future it is likely that the foundations of people's faith will be formed by this kind of science.[36]

Yanagi lists the areas of research that he believes promise to uncover the "mysteries of the universe," as "telepathy, clairvoyance, and the existence of ghosts."[37] He later includes research into life after death, spirit photography, haunted houses, and "abnormal psychological functions" like hysteria and sleepwalking. For much of the piece, Yanagi introduces experiments on such phenomena being conducted in Europe, especially those of the British Society for Psychical Research, an organization founded in 1882 and committed to researching occult phenomena.[38] Yanagi contrasts this "new science" with the dogmatic commitment to materialism in the scientific establishment, which "confines all the workings of the spirit within the modality of the material."[39]

Research in line with Yanagi's "new science" was common in Japan as well.[40] Hypnotism, for example, gained popularity with the translation of Franz Mesmer's work in 1885, and was compared to the spiritual state achieved through Zen meditation in the 1880s and '90s.[41] From 1910, Fukurai Tomokichi 福来友吉 (1869–1952) performed experiments on clairvoyance and what he called "thoughtography" (*nensha* 念写), the supposed ability to alter photographic plates telepathically. Although Yanagi does not directly reference Fukurai, both studied psychology at

Tokyo Imperial University, with Yanagi enrolling in 1910, the same year that Fukurai began research on this topic.[42] The academic study of psychology in the early 1910s included this type of understanding of the mind, which is based on the premise of "occult causality," the idea that action in the universe is the result of hidden correspondences—in this case a mysterious connection between the mind and the physical world—rather than the observable chain of cause-and-effect of "instrumental causality."[43]

For Yanagi, this theory of mind is useful for supporting an esoteric theory of art. Yanagi says that out of all the types of psychical research, he is most interested in the connection between abnormal psychological states and genius. "Strange spiritual phenomena are only ever allowed to occur when one is in a state of hysteria or hypnosis resembling somnambulism. In this kind of state, all of one's attention is focused on a single point, which allows for the provocation of wondrous abnormal mental processes."[44] Yanagi then links these "mental processes" (*shinri sayō* 心理作用) to genius, offering examples of the "insane" (*kyōteki naru* 狂的なる) states of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Goethe, and Paul.[45] Their specific type of insanity allowed for a focused, meditative state of creativity similar to hypnosis.[46] In this way, psychical research gives Yanagi a different means to theorize what he described as "religious experience" in the previous article. Although the language and mechanics are different, the basic logic is the same. In both cases, the mind is able to connect to some special truth that is inaccessible to rational understanding. Not every mind is capable of this. It is only the great artist or prophet who can achieve these special "mental processes."

Yanagi's interest in the occult was short lived, perhaps due to the wave of criticism directed at Fukurai's methodology in the media and academy in 1911.[47] However, his interest in the potential for "scientific" movements to justify his epistemological and aesthetic beliefs led him in September 1913 to the work of French philosopher Henri Bergson. In "Seimei no mondai" 生命の問題 (The problem of life), Yanagi attempts a synthesis of his previous explorations into theology and "new science" under the umbrella theory of vitalism, which Yanagi renders as *seikiron* 生気論. Vitalism, now referred to in Japanese as *seimei shugi* 生命主義, was widely influential among Japanese intellectuals in the early Taishō period and had wide-reaching impacts in a variety of fields.[48] The writing of Henri Bergson was central to this movement in the 1910s, when a so-called "Bergson Boom" swept Japan with dozens of books and articles published

on the philosopher's work and life.[49] Yanagi draws on Bergson's ideas about "life" and the limits of empirical knowledge to flesh out his broader theory of the individual's ability to know and to create.

In "Seimei no mondai," Yanagi draws in particular on Bergson's *L'Évolution créatrice* (*Creative Evolution*, 1907).[50] Before 1913, translations and commentary on Bergson in Japan had focused more on his works that dealt directly with intuition and time. "Seimei no mondai" was part of the first wave of scholarship on *Creative Evolution*, which was translated in full in October 1913 as the first volume of the anthology *Gendai tetsugaku* 現代哲学 (Modern philosophy), a month after Yanagi's article appeared in *Shirakaba.*[51] In "Seimei no mondai," Yanagi addresses Bergson's claim that although chemical and physical processes are certainly part of biology, they cannot fully explain life. "Organisms are not limited to their material manifestation. Those that say life is made up of quantitative relationships and see life as a phenomenon governed by mathematical principles deserve to be scolded."[52] Unlike energy and mass in a physical system, life can guide and order its actions independently from external stimuli. Life is a separate order of existence, but one which functions together with the inorganic in a relationship of "codependence" (*sōgo izon* 相互依存).[53]

Yanagi compares this to a painter capturing nature. The painting itself unites subject (the painter's feelings and impressions) and object (the scene itself) as a "correlated entity" (*sōkanteki sonzai* 相関的存在). This proves that "life" is special in its ability to give meaning to the inorganic world around it. "When painting, the painter discovers himself within the object, while the object comes to life within the painter's heart. When the codependent relationship of the two reaches its ultimate depth, both find themselves in *the world of singular meaning* (*ikko no imi no sekai* 一個の意味の世界). All great art is ultimately an expression of this world of meaning."[54] In particular, the paintings of Van Gogh are evidence that mechanism can say nothing about the "activity of life" (*seimei no katsudō* 生命の活動), since a chemical analysis of paint and canvas would provide no help in understanding the value of the works.[55]

Yanagi's insistent return to art differentiates his position from Bergson's. At one point in *Creative Evolution*, Bergson does cite the "aesthetic faculty" in humans as evidence of "intuition," stating that the artist captures the "intention of life" by "placing himself into the interior of the object through a kind of sympathy and by breaking down, through

an effort of intuition, the barrier that space interposes between himself and the model."[56] However, for Bergson this comparison to the artist is made as a brief aside to support his broader epistemology. Yanagi, on the other hand, is interested in vitalism primarily as proof for his aesthetics.

In the closing of "Seimei no mondai," we see the basic impulse that motivates Yanagi in all of his articles examined here.

> No art is created from theory. Art begins with an intuition of life (*seimei no chokkan* 生命の直観). Theory (*gakusetsu* 学説) never gives birth to living vitality. Theories are abstract speculations that come from reflection and are thus terribly far removed from the true landscape of concrete vitality….
>
> Christianity's current loss of the vigor of its primitive years results from the sin of an abundance of theological theories. We love Christ, a man of vitality. But we do not love Christianity, a religion of theories. Indeed, the magnificent Christ was an embodiment of the unceasing activity of life, and during his time on earth, Christ never taught a single theory….
>
> We must love life, and we must trust in it. Belief in the infinitude of its power is our eternal joy and the hope of mankind.[57]

For Yanagi, both vitalism and liberal theology make the same argument. Jesus is one manifestation of the greater force of "life" that offers "eternal joy" for those who believe in it. "Life" is not the God of Christianity, but it is closer to religious accounts of the divine than to biological accounts of organisms. In turn, the modern artist is engaged in essentially the same work as Jesus, bringing this "life" into the world in the form of painting or parable.

Notably absent in the above citation is the occult, which Yanagi abandoned completely after "Atarashiki kagaku." After 1913, he also quickly abandoned vitalism. However, Yanagi has no issue jettisoning these schools of thought after embracing them with such vigor, since he believes they all gesture toward a singular truth. This truth is best accessed by the individual through intuition, rather than dogmatic reception of a single school or movement. With this understanding of Yanagi's basic premises about knowledge and reality in mind, I will move next to the Shirakaba-ha theory of self. So far, Yanagi has primarily spoken about subjectivity only in relation to his echelon of Western geniuses. His concept of selfhood in these pieces has relied on an imagined other. In the next section, I will briefly consider how Yanagi maps his own position vis-à-vis the Western genius, before moving to Mushanokōji. Mushanokōji relies on the same epistemological premises, but unlike Yanagi, he utilizes the idea of the esoteric subjectivity of the genius to

make direct claims about the value of his own work.

Hagiography of the Artist: Worshipping the Self in Europe and at Home

In the pieces above, Yanagi implicitly distinguishes between two types of "self": that of the genius who uses intuition to grasp some non-material aspect of reality, and that of the non-genius whose understanding is limited by commitment to either religious dogma or mainstream science. However, there is also a third implicit position. Yanagi is not claiming to be a genius on par with Jesus or Van Gogh himself, but he does claim he can sense its manifestation. Yanagi casts himself as someone who can discern the traces left on art by the esoteric insights of the genius.

Yanagi maps these different types of selfhood in "Kachi" 価値 (Value) published in *Shirakaba* in May 1912. In this piece, Yanagi argues that the character (*jinkaku* 人格) of a writer or speaker determines the "authority" (*ken'i* 権威) of their words. The words, "I am God," Yanagi claims, were given unlimited authority when they were said by Jesus, making those nearby kneel before him, but would be comical in the mouth of "someone without value."[58] Similarly, Rodin is someone whose personality enables him to make the claim that "nature is always perfect and beautiful and there is nothing ugly within it."[59] Yanagi gives no concrete criteria for discerning the "authority" of a statement. He only implies that the difference should be obvious, or is at least obvious to him.

Later in "Kachi" Yanagi imagines a future in which Japanese writers might also directly claim genius, saying, "If we, who have not entered into the depths of nature, were to use these words, they would merely be amusing. We yearn for the day when we will be able to boldly state, 'The Kingdom of God is within you,' or, 'Nature is always perfect and harmonious' like Tolstoy or Rodin."[60] Although the phrase "enter into the depths of nature" (*shizen no okusoko ni haitte* 自然の奥底に入つて) is ambiguous, in the context of Yanagi's other works it can be understood as a restatement of his theory that genius is equivalent to possessing esoteric knowledge. The difference between "Kachi" and Yanagi's previous works is how he supports this claim. Rather than citing European authorities, Yanagi positions himself as being able to directly perceive the unique quality within language and art imbued by the genius. Based on this ability, Yanagi can supposedly distinguish a layer of meaning in certain words that is otherwise hidden. This is true for literature as well. Yanagi goes on to argue that the Japanese Naturalists are simply imitating

decadent artists like Baudelaire, but doing so without any of the authority needed for true greatness. The reader must simply believe in Yanagi's ability to perceive the presence or absence of this "authority." Yanagi does not claim to be a genius capable of manifesting this quality himself. Yet by implying that he has the special ability to discern and understand the esoteric quality of genius and its manifestation in art, he claims a high ground of aesthetic judgment that is not open to rational debate.

In the remainder of this section, I will introduce several works published by Mushanokōji in the early years of *Shirakaba* that offer both a parallel and a counterpoint to the writing of Yanagi. In these pieces, Mushanokōji makes an argument that resembles Yanagi's but is presented using a very different type of rhetoric. In addition, Mushanokōji is much more willing to leverage his understanding of self and art to justify the value of his own work, especially in the last piece I introduce. "Rodan to jinsei" ロダンと人生 (Rodin and life, November 1910) provides an early example of both the similarity between Mushanokōji's and Yanagi's theory of genius, and the difference in their presentation of this theory.

In this piece, published in a special edition of *Shirakaba* devoted to Rodin, Mushanokōji writes, "To me, relying on Rodin is like relying on nature. Just as some people rely on God through Jesus, I rely on nature through Rodin. But I cannot approach Rodin in the same way that the Christian approaches Jesus. I wouldn't think about sacrificing myself for Rodin. Rather, I rely on him because I want to enliven myself to the utmost."[61] Here and throughout the piece, Mushanokōji relies on religion to define key concepts in his argument, such as the ability to "enliven oneself" (*jiga o ikasu* 自我を生かす), or "tasting life" (*sei o ajiwau* 生を味う) in the following citation:

> I say this: [Rodin] is someone who has tasted life most deeply. And he is someone who can express this truly.
>
> I think that those who have truly tasted life deeply become tinged in a religious hue (*shūkyōteki shikisai* 宗教的色彩). I think that those who have truly tasted life touch on something deep within life….
>
> I think that a new religion with vitality will be born in the near future. It will be a religion that guides people to resonate or perhaps harmonize with nature. And Rodin is one of the greatest prophets of that religion.[62]

For Mushanokōji, as for Yanagi, religion gives significance to an esoteric model of the self and its relationship with the external world. The reader can only imagine what it means to "taste life deeply," but this phrase is

juxtaposed with being "tinged in a religious hue," and then further connected to the image of "touching" an unknown "something" or "someone" (*nanimonoka* 何者か) within the "depths of life" (*sei no oku ni* 生の奥に), evoking a clear theological resonance. Mushanokōji is *not* saying that art can allow one to experience the Christian God as manifested in nature. In the work of Yanagi and Mushanokōji, religious content is cut away from direct claims about the metaphysical existence of God.

The careful use of religious language in this way is a key part of Mushanokōji's rhetoric. Without the religious imagery, the above theory of Rodin's greatness would lose much of its meaning. Mushanokōji shares this reliance on religious language with Yanagi, although in most respects the two writers' styles differ dramatically. In contrast to Yanagi's generally scholarly style and extensive citations, Mushanokōji relies on declamation, repetition, and a rapid, disorienting shift between topics. These are techniques meant to discourage critical thought. Mushanokōji makes sweeping claims in an authoritative tone, and rather than offering his logic or giving evidence, either repeats the claim or jumps to another that we are to take as explication, but which is in fact equally ambiguous. Crucial terms function as floating signifiers, devoid of concrete referent. These techniques differ from Yanagi's, but both ultimately rely on the reader's *belief* that there is some ineffable aspect of reality, and that Yanagi and Mushanokōji have some knowledge of it. Mushanokōji does not give a rational defense of his claims, instead encouraging the reader to embrace his premises based on his authoritative tone and a shared belief in the possibility of "something" existing in the depths of nature that only the genius can grasp.

This type of rhetoric appears clearly in "Jibun no tomodachi" 自分の友達 (My friends), published in September 1913 in the same issue as Yanagi's "Seimei no mondai." In "Jibun no tomodachi," Mushanokōji discusses his ideas of nature, "humankind" (jinrui 人類), and the self, as well as the difference between his beliefs and those of traditional religion. Mushanokōji opens by stating that he can only become friends with people who, like himself, are *jinruiteki* 人類的, a term he coins meaning "of humankind," or more literally perhaps "humankind-istic." This term is opaque, gaining meaning only through paradigmatic relationship with other terms, especially those with religious connotation. For example, Mushanokōji says, "Humankind has ordered me to do a certain job (*shigoto* 仕事)."[63] Spatially, humankind is positioned outside of the "self,"

but can be moved into or merged with: "Once the self directly sets foot into humankind, that person gains his purpose of self (*jiko no shimei* 自己の使命)."[64] These terms are otherwise undefined. What might it mean for the self to "have set foot into humankind" (*jinrui ni ashi o tsukkonda* 人類に足を突込んだ)? Without unpacking this statement, Mushanokōji goes on to equate being *jinruiteki* with various other characteristics that he views as positive. Being *jinruiteki* is equivalent to having love: "I am unable to love someone who is not *jinruiteki*, or in other words someone who does not have love."[65] Being *jinruiteki* is a virtue, like being "of nature" (*shizenteki* 自然的), individualistic (*kojinteki* 個人的), religious (*shūkyōteki* 宗教的), altruistic (*ta'aiteki* 他愛的), or an egoist (*egoisuto* エゴイスト).[66] Describing the ideal man, Mushanokōji says, "He feels the will (*ishi* 意志) of nature, of humanity, and of the individual within himself. He is of external powers (*tarikiteki* 他力的) and of internal powers (*jirikiteki* 自力的). He is instinctual and he is mindful. And with all of these in chaos or perhaps all fused, he enlivens his self truly."[67]

Mushanokōji deploys certain key phrases as the crux of his argument, but in lieu of giving a definition, he offers comparisons to a range of other undefined qualities. This ambiguity is a key part of Mushanokōji's rhetoric, which again is meant not to convince through logic but through the impression of deeper authority and knowledge. Comparison to religion carries much of the connotative weight. Being *jinruiteki* is the same as being "religious," and is also both *jirikiteki* and *tarikiteki*. *Jiriki* and *tariki* refer to the Buddhist debate over whether humans must rely on the "external powers" (*tariki*) of bodhisattvas for salvation or depend on their own "internal power" (*jiriki*) to achieve enlightenment. For Mushanokōji, the original religious connotation of the words is important, giving them an association with the mysterious or divine. But they are also cut away from Buddhism: Mushanokōji is certainly not envisioning bodhisattvas when he says *tarikiteki*. The term only signifies a nuance of something greater than humanity, but is otherwise empty.

Mushanokōji clearly separates his position from institutional religion later in the piece. While discussing how the various qualities of being *jinruiteki* might relate to one another, he says,

> Currently, we are unable to live with the whole as the whole. Instead, we live by unifying the whole according to one of its elements. Those who have truly grasped one of these keynotes (*kīnōto* キーノート) that unifies the whole are capable of enlivening us completely. But sometimes one requirement of a

> keynote is that it kills other instincts. (This is the case for sexual desire in Buddhism and Christianity.) At the very least, a keynote may not heed important instincts.[68]

Religions of the past were "enlivening" because they grasped one of the positive qualities or "keynotes" that Mushanokōji praises as being *jinruiteki*, but this came at the expense of squashing other keynotes. In the case of Buddhism and Christianity, it was the "instinct" of sexuality that was excluded. For Mushanokōji, this historical defect is corrected when a following generation finds a better way to "unify the whole" (*zentai o tōitsu saseru* 全体を統一させる).

As scholar Massimiliano Tomasi shows by drawing on diary entries and early works, a key reason for Mushanokōji's dissatisfaction with Christianity was its restriction of sexual urges.[69] But this was not the end of Mushanokōji's interest in Christianity. Although Mushanokōji rejected the religion as a personal creed of faith, he, like Yanagi, had great respect for Jesus as a type of genius. This takes its clearest form in Mushanokōji's later work *Yaso* 耶蘇 (Jesus), a long piece serialized from 1919 to 1920 in which the author dismisses the validity of the miracles while lauding Jesus for his greatness as a moral teacher in a manner reminiscent of the liberal theology introduced by Yanagi. Mushanokōji and Yanagi saw Jesus as one example among many of a genius who gained and expressed the esoteric knowledge accessible only to the individual intuition of the genius.

Mushanokōji goes beyond authoritative rhetoric to directly claim this type of genius for himself in the last piece I will consider here, "'Jibun no tame' oyobi sono ta ni tsuite" 「自分の為」及び其他について (Regarding "For myself," etc.), written in February 1912. In this article, Mushanokōji claims that the self is made up of various "desires" (*yokubō* 欲望). These include "desire as an individual," "desire as a social animal," "desire as a human," "desire as an animal," "desire as the earth," and "desire as the thing-in-itself" (*butsunyo to shite no yokubō* 物如としての欲望).[70] Mushanokōji's final "desire" is particularly vague, relying on the unusual term *butsunyo* 物如, translated here as "thing-in-itself." Mushanokōji likely took the term from Yanagi's "Kakumei no gaka" 革命の画家 (Revolutionary painters, January 1912), published a month earlier in *Shirakaba*, where it is used to gloss Kant's *Ding an sich*, usually translated in Japanese as *mono jitai* 物自体. *Nyo* 如 is a character that by itself is used in Buddhist contexts to mean "thusness" (Sk. *tathātā*) or the ultimate nature of things. Mushanokōji does not attempt to define this "desire as

the thing-in-itself," instead jumping to describe a harmony between the various desires, while again relying on both religious terms and contrast with institutional religion:

> We understand how to harmonize these desires better than Jesus or the Buddha, which is why we no longer see sexual desire as a sin. By "we" here I refer to the men of today including Whitman, Rodin, Maeterlinck, Verhaeren, Eucken, and Bergson, not to the *epigonen* of past ideas.[71] I refer to the people who have taken a step forward from past ideas….
>
> If I were moved by my social instincts, perhaps I would die for society. But I hate the idea of being forced to kill myself by society without also being moved to do so by my social instincts. Furthermore, whenever I am moved by the social instinct within me, I ask myself whether or not I should follow this instinct, posing the question to my individual instincts, my humanity instincts, my animal instincts, my earth instincts, and my instincts that come from the thing-in-itself. (I believe that I am able to pose questions to these instincts because I was born with the natural gifts of a man of religion. Tolstoy called this reason, but I think it is something deeper.) If these instincts forbid it, I do not follow my social instincts.
>
> I am not satisfied solely by giving myself over to my thing-in-itself instincts like the Buddha did. I also believe it is a shame to kill the animal instincts like Jesus did.[72]

Mushanokōji gives more concrete meaning to his terms here than usual, especially the "thing-in-itself instinct" (*butsunyo no honnō* 物如の本能). He is claiming that the ability to see or understand the "thing-in-itself" is a natural part of human nature, but he only defines this quality by connecting it to the Buddha. Mushanokōji draws implicitly on his reader's understanding of Buddhism, while at the same time depicting both Buddhist and Christian theories of self as flawed. He then positions his own understanding of the self as superior.

Critically, the ability to "pose questions" to the various instincts is something that is possible because Mushanokōji has the natural gifts, or more literally the "heavenly endowment" (*tenpu* 天賦), of a man of religion (*shūkyōka* 宗教家). This gift was called "reason" by Tolstoy, but Mushanokōji thinks it is something "deeper."[73] Mushanokōji claims that his knowledge of self is greater than that of Tolstoy, whose reliance on reason led him to Christian faith, whereas Mushanokōji's "instincts" have led him to a superior conclusion. Reason is unnecessary for Mushanokōji, who can communicate with his "instincts." At the same time, the one instinct that distinguishes Mushanokōji's theory of mind—the "thing-in-

itself instinct"—only carries meaning derived from religion. It is what made Jesus and the Buddha great, and is only accessible to a "man of religion."

For Yanagi and Mushanokōji, the geniuses of past and present have been gifted with the ability to perceive and experience an aspect of reality through "intuition" or the "thing-in-itself instinct" that neither reason nor institutional religion can fully grasp. Both, in different ways, reject rational argumentation, relying instead on comparison to religious ideas severed from their original context. Their claims about reality and about art must be taken on faith. It is a faith premised not on belief in the divine as articulated in religious texts, but on belief in the possibility of the individual attaining esoteric knowledge of what is otherwise inarticulable, and in Yanagi's and Mushanokōji's proximity to this knowledge.

Conclusion

Above, I defined esotericism as having two broad characteristics: the perception of being neither religion nor science, and the belief in superior knowledge of a higher reality. I would like to close by offering a slightly different theoretical model of esotericism, since it can shed light on how exactly Yanagi and Mushanokōji leveraged esoteric epistemology to justify their aesthetics. The scholar of religion Olav Hammer theorizes esotericism through a focus on rhetoric. He argues that there are three distinct "discursive strategies" or "persuasive mechanisms" used by the spokespeople of esoteric groups when defining their positions: appeals to tradition, appeals to science, and appeals to experience.[74]

An appeal to tradition traces the origin of an idea or movement back to a real or imagined lineage. For example, in the modern period, esoteric movements like the Theosophical Society claimed that their teachings originated in "Oriental" religious and philosophical traditions.[75] Connecting their movement to this lineage gave it a sense of antiquity while also drawing on the exoticization within Orientalist thought of a "mystical" Asia in contrast to the materialistic West.[76] At the same time, Theosophy, alongside many other esoteric movements, framed its own ideas as an evolution, fusion, or revelation of hidden currents within these traditions. Yanagi and Mushanokōji both make this type of appeal to tradition when theorizing the type of person capable of producing great art. To them, artists like Rodin were the latest heirs to a line of geniuses that extended back to Jesus and the Buddha. Rodin's insights were equal to those of the past prophets, but he and the other Post-Impressionists also

represented a new step forward in this tradition. In a mirrored reflection of their Orientalist contemporaries, Yanagi and Mushanokōji find a far-away, exoticized source of esoteric knowledge in the West rather than the East. But like Western esotericists, they link themselves to this tradition to bolster their own claims. Yanagi positions himself as an esoteric critic capable of discerning the "value" within the art of the genius that is hidden to others. Mushanokōji goes further, claiming to have the endowment of a "man of religion" greater than that of Jesus or Tolstoy.

The second discursive strategy common to esoteric movements is an appeal to science.[77] According to Hammer, esotericists tend to be less interested in the methodology of scientific inquiry—especially the requirement that results be verifiable, replicable, and provisional—than in selecting and interpreting scientific data in ways that support their beliefs.[78] In today's popular culture, one might think of how archeological evidence is interpreted to imply the existence of ancient aliens or Atlantis, or how quantum mechanics is used to argue for the existence of the soul. Esoteric appeals to science tend to assume that mainstream scientists have ignored certain data due to a materialistic bias, and that when interpreted correctly, this data can yield insight into the non-material realm. These premises serve as the foundation for Yanagi's arguments about the value of paranormal research and the "new science" of vitalism. Yanagi leverages science to give legitimacy to the broader metaphysics and aesthetics that are his main concern. Both religion and science contain scraps of greater truths according to him, but both are ultimately flawed models of reality and cannot be given absolute faith.

The third discursive strategy is an appeal to experience, especially descriptions in the first or third person of individual encounters with the divine or spiritual realm, or with a mystical absolute.[79] Spokespeople of esoteric movements rely on this type of narrative to convince readers that they have attained hidden or superior knowledge, and that their writing is an attempt to share it. This type of rhetoric is the most ambiguous in Yanagi's and Mushanokōji's writing, which is one important point that separates their position from esoteric movements. However, there are glimpses of esoteric appeals to experience in the pieces introduced above. Mushanokōji's theory of the various component "instincts" of the self relies on his readers simply accepting his description of the "thing-in-itself instinct," for example, along with his account of having "posed questions" to it. He is appealing to a narrative of his own unique experience of something hidden as justification of his argument. The same is true for

Yanagi's account of "value," which he depicts as being obviously perceivable by some (including himself) and not by others.

These three discursive strategies are all rooted in the basic tenets of esoteric thought described above, that although both religion and science might be useful in their own ways, they are ultimately flawed representations of a greater truth that is only knowable to a limited few. Yanagi and Mushanokōji adopt this fundamental premise of esotericism and its discursive strategies. However, the primary difference between their writing in the early years of *Shirakaba* and other esoteric texts lies in the fact that their primary focus is art. The vehicle that they propose for obtaining special knowledge is not the séance, clairvoyance, or meditation, but the novel, painting, and sculpture. This is what separates Yanagi's position from that of the psychical researcher Fukurai, for example, or Mushanokōji's from that of a group like the Theosophical Society. This difference helps explain what the *Shirakaba* scholar Honda Shūgo observed when he wrote, "Mushanokōji had a special awareness of himself as a type of savior. Indeed, I feel like he had the disposition of someone who could have founded his own religion."[80] Honda's impression is understandable, since Mushanokōji does compare himself to Jesus and the Buddha and refers to himself as a "man of religion" like them. But in response to Honda, I would say that neither Yanagi nor Mushanokōji saw the need to start a new religion because they believed that artistic geniuses could do the same work as religious prophets, but that artists could do it better. To them, art was the ultimate expression of esoteric insight.

This view can be found throughout *Shirakaba*'s fourteen-year run and beyond, for example in Mushanokōji's novels and in Yanagi's later writing on mysticism and Asian arts and crafts. I hope to explore this more fully elsewhere. Here, by focusing on *Shirakaba*'s early critical writing, I have attempted to suggest a new perspective both on the journal's contributions to debates about the value of literature and art in the 1910s, as well as the journal's embeddedness in the shifting discourse of science and religion.

NOTES

[1] For an early, field-defining monograph on the journal and a more recent comprehensive study, see Honda Shūgo 本多秋五, *"Shirakaba" ha no bungaku*

(Dai Nihon Yūbenkai Kōdansha, 1954); Shimizu Yasutsugu 清水康次, *"Shirakaba" ha no kenkyū: kosei to kyōmei no jidai* (Ōsaka Daigaku Shuppankai, 2023). For the one recent monograph on *Shirakaba* in English, see Maya Mortimer, *Meeting the Sensei: The Role of the Master in Shirakaba Writers* (Brill, 2000). For examples of analysis of the journal within broader literary histories, see Donald Keene, *Dawn to the West* (Henry Holt and Company, 1984), chap. 15; Tomi Suzuki, *Narrating the Self: Fictions of Japanese Modernity* (Stanford University Press, 1996), chap. 5; John Whittier Treat, *The Rise and Fall of Modern Japanese Literature* (University of Chicago Press, 2018), chap. 4.

[2] The Shirakaba-ha also held public exhibitions of original and reproduced artworks and attempted to establish a Shirakaba Art Museum. For more on the journal's impact on artistic discourse in Japan, see Erin Schoneveld, *Shirakaba and Japanese Modernism: Art Magazines, Artistic Collectives, and the Early Avant-Garde* (Brill, 2019).

[3] As Honda Shūgo observes, "Their constant discussion of artworks gave the literature of the Shirakaba-ha its distinct quality, unseen in previous literature. The members perhaps talked more about art in their daily conversations than about literature." Honda, *"Shirakaba" ha no bungaku*, 24.

[4] For analysis of the relationship between *Shirakaba* theories of visual art and literature, as well as the moral and political implications of this aesthetics, see Anri Yasuda, *Beauty Matters: Modern Japanese Literature and the Question of Aesthetics, 1890–1930* (Columbia University Press, 2024), 160–76; Mortimer, *Meeting the Sensei*, chap. 4.

[5] Previous scholarship has identified this focus on the self as the defining feature of the Shirakaba-ha's aesthetics. See, for example, Honda, *"Shirakaba" ha no bungaku*, 7–8; Shimizu, *"Shirakaba" ha no kenkyū*, 31–32; Suzuki, *Narrating the Self*, 53, 94–95. Writers refer to the "self" both with Japanese semantic equivalents like *jiko* 自己, *jibun* 自分, and *jiga* 自我, but also with related terms like "individuality" (*kosei* 個性), "character" (*jinkaku* 人格), and "personality" (*seikaku* 性格). The self is also used interchangeably with more abstract terms like "instinct" (*honnō* 本能), "will" (*ishi* 意志), and "humanity" (*jinrui* 人類).

[6] *Shirakaba* 2.11:141. All translations are my own. All quotations of works published in *Shirakaba* are taken from the following reprint of the journal: Shirakaba fukusei kankōkai 白樺複製刊行会, ed., *Shirakaba* (Rinsen Shoten, 1970–1972). Citations will be abbreviated "*Shirakaba* (volume number).(issue number):(page number)" followed by the month and year of publication if not specified. A digitized copy of this reprint is publicly accessible at https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100620693/Home.

[7] Examples of this kind of description of the "self" by Yanagi Muneyoshi and Mushanokōji Saneatsu will appear below, but it can also be found in abundance in the critical writing of other Shirakaba-ha members. For a few representative examples, see "Futatsu no michi" 二つの道 (Two roads, 1910) by Arishima Takeo 有島武郎 (*Shirakaba* 1.2:1–7 and 1.5:1–10); "Jiko hihyō to seikatsu to geijutsu" 自己批評と生活と芸術 (Self-criticism, life, and art, 1912) by Koizumi Magane 小泉鐵 (*Shirakaba* 3.7:8–32); "'Kono hito o miyo' o yomu" 「この人を見よ」を読む (Reading *Ecce Homo*, 1914) by Nagayo Yoshirō 長与善郎 (*Shirakaba* 5.1:84–98).

[8] Perhaps the most influential work on the "self" in Japanese literature has been Tomi Suzuki's *Narrating the Self: Fictions of Japanese Modernity* (Stanford University Press, 1996). Suzuki traces definitions of the self across modern Japanese history, exposing their entwinement in discourse on language, race, nationality, and the novel. She reads the Shirakaba-ha writers Mushanokōji and Shiga Naoya both to excavate their own definitions of the "self," and as examples of how critics retroactively defined their work as part of a genre called the "I-novel." For more recent studies that attempt to build on Suzuki's analysis by, respectively, applying a psychoanalytical understanding of "narcissism" to *Shirakaba*, and by calling for an extension of Suzuki's theory of "retroactive reading" to all types of identity, including selfhood, race, and nation, see Treat, *The Rise and Fall of Modern Japanese Literature*, chap. 4 and Richard Calichman, *Before Identity: The Question of Method in Japan Studies* (State University of New York Press, 2021), chap. 3. For the influence of the Shirakaba-ha's theory of self on the broader conception of the artist in Taishō Japan, see Pau Pitarch Fernandez, "Resonant Characters: Biographic Writing and Authorship in 1910s Japan," *Journal of Asian Humanities at Kyushu University* 11 (2026): 69–82.

[9] Yanagi's first name can also be read "Sōetsu," and in some later publications in English he uses this reading. However, in the two instances he signs his name using the Latin alphabet in *Shirakaba*, he writes "Y • M" and "M. Yanagi," implying that he did not use the alternate reading during the period discussed here. See Fukagaya Kazuo 深萱和男, ed., *Shirakaba sōmokuroku* (Rinsen Shoten, 1971), 16, 39.

[10] By my count, from the first issue through the end of 1912, Mushanokōji contributed a total of 645 pages and Yanagi contributed 358 pages. Four of the other most frequent contributors, Shiga Naoya and the three brothers Arishima Takeo, Arishima Ikuma—who used his birth name Mibuma in this period—and Satomi Ton, each contributed between 230 to 250 pages. Fukagaya, *Shirakaba sōmokuroku*, 1–26.

[11] See, for example, Kōjin Karatani, *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature* (Duke University Press, 1993), chap. 3; Massimiliano Tomasi, *The Dilemma of Faith in Modern Japanese Literature: Metaphors of Christianity* (Routledge, 2018), chap. 1; Suzuki, *Narrating the Self*, chap. 2. For a study of the impact on modern Japanese literature of Buddhism in particular, see Michihiro Ama, *The Awakening of Modern Japanese Fiction: Path Literature and an Interpretation of Buddhism* (State University of New York Press, 2021).

[12] As early as 1916, critics commented on what they perceived as a misunderstanding or perversion of Christianity among the group. See, for example, "Shizen shugi zenpa no chōryō" (1916) by Ikuta Chōkō 生田長江 (1882–1936) in Chiba Shunji 千葉俊二 and Tsubouchi Yūzō 坪内祐三, eds., *Nihon kindai bungaku hyōron sen "Meiji, Taishō hen"* (Iwanami Shoten, 2003), 249–61. For accounts of the relationship of individual Shirakaba-ha members with Christianity, see, for example, Honda, *"Shirakaba" ha no bungaku*, 143; Mark Williams, "Bridging the Divide: Writing Christian Faith (and Doubt) in Modern Japan," in *Handbook of Christianity in Japan*, ed. by Mark Mullins (Brill, 2003); Tomasi, *Dilemma of Faith*, chaps. 1, 6, 8; Mortimer, *Meeting the Sensei*, 20–21, 90–91; Paul Anderer, *Other Worlds: Arishima Takeo and the Bounds of Modern Japanese Fiction* (Columbia University Press, 1984), chap. 2.

[13] For genealogies of concepts of religion in Japan, see Jason Ānanda Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (University of Chicago Press, 2012); Jun'ichi Isomae, *Religious Discourse in Modern Japan: Religion, State, and Shinto* (Brill, 2014); Mitsutoshi Horii, *The Category of "Religion" in Contemporary Japan: Shūkyō and Temple Buddhism* (Springer, 2018). For a history of the Unitarian mission to Japan and its relation to Japanese Buddhism, see Michel Mohr, *Buddhism, Unitarianism, and the Meiji Competition for Universality* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2013). For histories of modern Buddhism, see James Mark Shields, *Critical Buddhism: Engaging with Modern Japanese Buddhist Thought* (Ashgate, 2011); Makoto Hayashi et al., eds., *Modern Buddhism in Japan* (Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, 2014); James Mark Shields, *Against Harmony: Progressive and Radical Buddhism in Modern Japan* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

[14] For two examples of recent scholarship that addresses the complexity of understandings of religion among Japanese writers in the early 1900s, see Pedro Thiago Ramos Bassoe, *Supernatural Japan: Izumi Kyōka and the Global Fantastic* (University of Michigan Press, 2026); Nicholas Albertson, "Supernatural Longing in Yamakawa Tomiko's Tanka," *Japanese Studies* 39.1 (2019): 43–56, https://doi.org/10.1080/10371397.2019.1588690.

[15] For a detailed summary of the field and its major theoretical debates, see Egil Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment: Scientific Naturalism and Esoteric*

Discourse, 1900-1939 (Brill, 2014), 417–46. Asprem follows Wouter Hanegraaff in dividing the history of the field into three generations. During the first generation, which extended to the 1990s, scholarship on esotericism frequently contained overtly "religionist" agendas, meaning writers were interested in defending the practices they studied, or were interested in asserting the universal nature of esoteric knowledge and experiences. Antoine Faivre is a representative voice of the second generation of esotericism scholarship beginning in the 1990s, which attempted to introduce more critical or neutral methodologies. The current generation, which gained momentum in the 2010s, distances itself from Faivre on the grounds that his work still retained aspects of a religionist agenda, and has instead attempted to bring its methodology more in line with the broader field of religious studies.

[16] For a recent collection of work that expands esotericism studies beyond the West and otherwise tests its methodological boundaries, see Egil Asprem and Julian Strube, eds., *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism* (Brill, 2021). For another recent overview of the field, see Justine M. Bakker and Aren Roukema, "10 Years of Correspondences; or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Esotericism Studies," *Correspondences* 10.2 (2022): 235–55.

[17] Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Bloomsbury, 2013), 13.

[18] For the history of Spiritualism in relation to changes in religion and psychology, see Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton University Press, 1999). For an account of the modern transformation of the "conditions of belief" in the transcendental, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007).

[19] Egil Asprem argues that although esotericism varies widely across time and space and should not be seen as a universal or ahistorical "form of thought" as some previous scholars held, it is still possible and fruitful to take a comparative approach and identify commonalities while also centering the specific histories and flows of ideas. See Egil Asprem, "Beyond the West: Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism," *Correspondences* 2.1 (2014): 3–33.

[20] Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment*, 422.

[21] In a speech in 1917, Max Weber (1864–1920) famously stated, "The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the '*disenchantment of the world*.'" For the context of this statement and analysis of the often overlooked complexity of Weber's thoughts on "enchantment," as well as an account of the broader history of science and philosophy of the early twentieth century that counters the traditional

secularization thesis, see Jason Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), chap. 10.

[22] For two intellectual histories that make this argument convincingly in the context of modern Europe, see Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment*; Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*.

[23] For more complete biographies of Yanagi during this time, see Mari Nakami, *In Pursuit of Composite Beauty: Yanagi Soetsu, His Aesthetics and Aspiration for Peace* (University of Tokyo Press, 2011), 19–37; Yūko Kikuchi, *Japanese Modernisation and Mingei Theory: Cultural Nationalism and Oriental Orientalism* (Routledge Curzon, 2004), 4–7.

[24] Satō Hikaru 佐藤光, *Yanagi Muneyoshi to Wiriamu Bureiku: kanryūsuru "kōtei no shisō"* (Tōkyō Daigaku Shuppankai, 2015), 118–19.

[25] For a summary of Yanagi scholarship in Japanese up to 2004, see Kikuchi, *Japanese Modernisation and Mingei Theory*, 2–4; 137–39. There have been several monographs and numerous articles on Yanagi published in Japanese since then. For example, Satō Hikaru offers an in-depth study of Yanagi's reception of William Blake and a genealogy of religious and mystical ideas that penetrate their work. Shimanuki Satoru offers a similar study of Yanagi's relationship to William Morris. See Satō, *Yanagi Muneyoshi to Wiriamu Bureiku*; Shimanuki Satoru 島貫悟, *Yanagi Muneyoshi to Wiriamu Morisu: kōgeiron ni miru shūkyōkan to shizenkan* (Tōhoku Daigaku Shuppankai, 2024). For recent critical readings of Yanagi's early philosophy relevant to the discussion here, see Adachi Eriko 足立恵理子, "Yanagi Muneyoshi ni okeru bi to shinpi shugi no ronri: 'ichi' no gainen kara miru mingeiron to bukkyō bigaku," *Bigaku* 72.1 (2021): 37–48; Adachi Eriko 足立恵理子, "Bi to seikatsu no musubitsuki: Takayama Chogyū to Yanagi Muneyoshi ni okeru 'zettai' no tsuikyū," *Bigaku* 74.1 (2023): 37–48.

[26] The term *mingei* is a contraction of *minshū no kōgei* 民衆の工芸, which means "crafts of the people" and is translated by Yanagi as "folk-crafts." It refers to handcrafted goods including pottery, textiles, and furniture. Yanagi provided the theoretical engine for the movement, developing an aesthetics that identified the beauty of *mingei* not only in formal features like simplicity and functionality, but also in the ability of the craftsman to achieve a state of experience he describes as "intuition" (*chokkan* 直観) or "selflessness" (*muga* 無我).

[27] Nakami, *In Pursuit of Composite Beauty*, 23; Kim Brandt, *Kingdom of Beauty: Mingei and the Politics of Folk Art in Imperial Japan* (Duke University Press, 2007), 22; Kikuchi, *Japanese Modernisation and Mingei Theory*, 5.

[28] Kikuchi devotes a large portion of her analysis to showing Yanagi's debt to his sources, while Nakami's second book on Yanagi is largely a defense of his intellectual contributions and uniqueness in response to critiques like that of Kikuchi. See Kikuchi, *Japanese Modernisation and Mingei Theory*; Nakami Mari 中見真里, *Yanagi Muneyoshi: "fukugō no bi" no shisō* (Iwanami Shoten, 2013).

[29] Michael Lucken traces the history of debates around originality and mimesis in modern Japanese art and culture, arguing that this dialectic itself is rooted in the European Romantic concept of selfhood and creativity, and in the colonialist depiction of the non-West as derivative. See Michael Lucken, *Imitation and Creativity in Japanese Arts: From Kishida Ryūsei to Miyazaki Hayao* (Columbia University Press, 2016), 9–74.

[30] *Shirakaba* 1.3:11–15.

[31] Ibid., 16–17.

[32] Ibid., 17.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid., 19. Yanagi cites this from *Man and the Universe* (1908) by Sir Oliver Lodge (1851–1940), a British physicist who wrote extensively on occult and spiritual phenomena. For more on Lodge and his position in the broader history of esotericism within the scientific community, see Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment*, 208.

[35] *Shirakaba* 1.3:19.

[36] *Shirakaba* 1.6:2. All emphasis within citations appears in the original unless otherwise noted.

[37] Ibid., 3. Yanagi uses the term *yōkai* 妖怪, which I have translated here as "ghosts" since he is referring to research being performed in Britain, but *yōkai* was actually a term popularized in the late nineteenth century in Japan to encompass various supernatural creatures from Japanese folklore. For more on the creation and evolution of this category, see Michael Dylan Foster, *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yokai* (University of California Press, 2009).

[38] For more on the history of the occult and its relation to science, see, for example, Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment*; Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*; Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (University of Chicago Press, 2004); Richard Noakes, *Physics and Psychics: The Occult and the Sciences in Modern Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[39] *Shirakaba* 1.7:30.

[40] For the history of Spiritualism and the occult in prewar Japan, see the special issue of *Japanese Religions* 44 (2019/2021) titled "Japanese Religions and the Global Occult"; Nihei Masato, "Spiritualism and Modernism in the Work of Kawabata Yasunari," trans. Joshua Solomon, *Japan Forum* 30.1 (2018): 69–84, https://doi.org/10.1080/09555803.2017.1307251; Avery Morrow, "Boundary Work in Japanese Religious Studies: Anesaki Masaharu on Religious Freedom and Academic Concealment," *Correspondences* 6.2 (2018): 117–43.

[41] Yu-chuan Wu, "Techniques for Nothingness: Debate Over the Comparability of Hypnosis and Zen in Early-Twentieth-Century Japan," *History of Science* 56.4 (2018): 470–78, https://doi.org/10.1177/0073275317743120.

[42] Miki Takasuna, "The Fukurai Affair: Parapsychology and the History of Psychology in Japan," *History of the Human Sciences* 25.2 (2012): 152, https://doi.org/10.1177/0952695111426659.

[43] For "occult causality" versus "instrumental causality," see Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 124–28.

[44] *Shirakaba* 1.7:24.

[45] For the impact of this connection between insanity and genius on Japanese literary history, including the reception of work by Cesare Lombroso, whom Yanagi cites heavily in this article, see Pau Pitarch Fernandez, "Cultivated Madness: Aesthetics, Psychology and the Value of the Author in Early 20th-Century Japan" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2015), https://doi.org/10.7916/D89Z943W.

[46] *Shirakaba* 1.7:25.

[47] Takasuna, "The Fukurai Affair," 155.

[48] Literary scholar Suzuki Sadami led a movement in the 1990s to rethink the role of various theories of *seimei* in modern Japan. Suzuki traces the term back to the Meiji period, especially Kitamura Tōkoku's essay "Naibu seimeiron" 内部生命論 (On Inner Life, 1893), and forward through the Taishō period. Suzuki's work was an early inspiration for this project, and he and his collaborators do address the influence of new concepts of religion and Spiritualism on vitalism. My work attempts to pursue the impact of these currents beyond discussions about *seimei*. For a compact history of vitalism in Japan, see Suzuki Sadami 鈴木貞美, *Taishō seimei shugi to gendai* (Kawade Shobō Shinsha, 1995), 70–77. For accounts of the impact of religion and esotericism on vitalistic thought, see Suzuki, *Taishō seimei shugi to gendai*, 36–46, 78–85, 142–50. See also Suzuki Sadami 鈴木貞美, *Seimeikan no tankyū: jūsōsuru kiki no naka de* (Sakuhinsha, 2007).

[49] Suzuki Yukari, “Taishōki no Beruguson no ryūkō ni tsuite” in *Taishō shūkyō shōsetsu no ryūkō: sono haikei to “ima,”* ed. by Igarashi Shinji 五十嵐伸治 (Ronsōsha, 2011), 187.

[50] Yanagi owned and had heavily annotated an English copy of *Creative Evolution*. Kikuchi, *Japanese Modernisation and Mingei Theory*, 7.

[51] Bergson was first introduced in Japan by Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎 in a 1910 article titled “Beruguson no tetsugakuteki hōhōron” ベルグソンの哲学的方法論 (The philosophical methodology of Bergson), which focuses on Bergson’s theory of intuition. In April 1913, the first translations of Bergson’s work—a 1903 essay titled “Introduction à la Métaphysique” (“Introduction to Metaphysics”) and a 1911 lecture titled “La perception du changement” (“The Perception of Change”)—were released under the title *Beruguson no tetsugaku* ベルグソンの哲学 (The philosophy of Bergson). One of the first in-depth analyses of *Creative Evolution* was “Sōzōteki shinka: Anri Beruguson ron” 創造的進化：アンリ・ベルグソン論 (Creative evolution: On Henri Bergson) published by Ōsugi Sakae 大杉栄 in April 1913.

[52] *Shirakaba* 4.9:18.

[53] Ibid., 24.

[54] Ibid., 25.

[55] Ibid., 70–72.

[56] Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Donald A. Landes (Routledge, 2023), 159–60.

[57] *Shirakaba* 4.9:73–74.

[58] *Shirakaba* 3.5:53.

[59] Ibid., 54–55.

[60] Ibid., 55.

[61] *Shirakaba* 1.8:73.

[62] Ibid., 76–77.

[63] *Shirakaba* 4.9:107.

[64] Ibid., 111.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Ibid., 112.

[68] Ibid., 113.

[69] Tomasi, *Dilemma of Faith*, 160–61.

[70] *Shirakaba* 3.2:98–99.

[71] "Epigonen" is a German term meaning someone who imitates the style of a great figure of the past.

[72] *Shirakaba* 3.2:99–100.

[73] Mushanokōji is referencing Tolstoy's account of the importance of reason in his own journey to religious faith. For example, Tolstoy writes that although he could not rationally prove the existence of God, rational inquiry led him to understand that life and the desire for something greater went beyond reason and thus must come from God. Leo Tolstoy, *Confession*, trans. David Patterson (W.W. Norton, 1983), chaps. 7–9.

[74] Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Brill, 2004), chap. 1.

[75] Ibid., 98–134.

[76] Edward Said describes this as the "Romantic Orientalist" project. See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1978; Penguin, 2003), 115. For more on this aspect of Orientalism, see Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and "the Mystic East"* (Routledge, 1999).

[77] Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 201–330. For a selection of case studies on the use of scientific authority within various religious and esoteric traditions across the globe, see James R. Lewis and Olav Hammer, eds., *Handbook of Religion and the Authority of Science* (Brill, 2011). See also Kocku von Stuckrad, *The Scientification of Religion: An Historical Study of Discursive Change, 1800-2000* (De Gruyter, 2014).

[78] Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 203–4.

[79] Ibid., 331–415.

[80] Honda, *"Shirakaba" ha no bungaku*, 134.