"Problems on Interpretation in the Age of Databases"
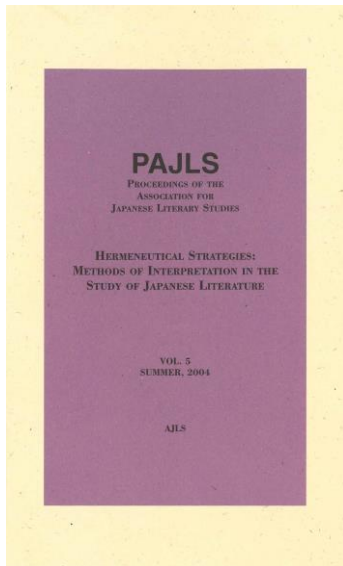
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PROBLEMS ON INTERPRETATION
IN THE AGE OF DATABASES

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I would like to begin by making two premises. This is the first time for me to attend an AJLS conference, so I have been observing this conference very carefully since the day before yesterday. As I was invited several times before to Nichibunken's international conferences, I thought I somehow understood the atmosphere of American researchers who are studying Japanese literature or culture in general. However, I realized that this was my misunderstanding. The members of this association seem to me more powerful and look like they play their own game with no less intensity than their Japanese colleagues. I was especially impressed by the people who are studying modern literature. They have their own favorite topics different from topics in Japan, and most of them have a historical or theoretical point of view rather than an aesthetic one about literary texts. So I am a little anxious now, wondering whether I grasp the point or target with my talk after attending this conference. For today's talk was prepared for a different type of audience. However I cannot change it now anyway, so I must go on with it.

I know most of you are very skillful in Japanese, but I dare try presenting my paper in my poor English here. If I cannot go on, please forgive me and I will switch to Japanese. I think however, talking in a foreign language seems to have little relationship to the contents of today's talk. So I would like to try doing something like using Pidgin English today.

Both the number of Americans who speak Japanese very well and Japanese who speak English very well is undoubtedly increasing (I myself was left far behind). But this does not mean that communication is becoming easier between these two different cultures. Language is not only a tool to communicate with, but also a barrier hindering the understanding of differences. So, with my talk, I would like you to "enjoy" the difference through my grammatical errors or curious phrases and remember that we are belonging to completely different linguistic universes again.

In my paper, I want to discuss the following three problems.

1. What does "Studying Foreign Literature" mean in the first place?

2. What is the purpose of literary studies or Cultural Studies in general? I will look back upon mainly the history of literary theory in the 20th century.
3. Looking at database type of knowledge; I will consider the ethics of intellectuals on how they undertake the task of thinking. I will also consider the future of knowledge.

1.

First of all, let me address the problem of what it means to study Japanese literature as a "foreign literature." This also involves the problem of myself, living in Japan, who examines himself while reading English or French books, as well as the act of reading books in a foreign language using a Japanese translation, while quoting from or referring to them in my paper.

It is necessary to consider the "foreign" in this case. Probably, a brief examination about "literature" will also be required.

"Foreign literature"—literally—means that it is not "literature" of the "home country." For most of you, the home country is the United States of America. In my case it is "Japan." However, was there any "American literature" from the beginning? It will be only in the 18th century at most that a country called the United States of America was born. Moreover, it was only after this time that many residents and immigrants became gradually "Americans." Therefore, American literature cannot be reduced to its narrow sense—Melville, Hawthorne, or Twain. The problem is what a certain people belonging to a certain group growing up in the United States have accepted as "literature" in a specific environment. Anyway, foreign literature has a close relation with the concept and system of "national literature" by the "native language." It is also related to the process of formation of the "nation-states" in the 19th century. In other words, we can say that the birth of "foreign literature" and that of "national literature" are two sides of the same coin. It carved the "self" and the "others" of the nation-state, and it is closely concerned with a process in which a mirror image was created. Therefore, the recent systems of national literature and foreign literature were born in the same place.

The situation is the same in Japan, since it was after the Meiji Restoration that the concept of "national literature" materialized there. We can say that a tradition of literature different from Chinese literature existed in the geographical Japanese Islands. However, this was never represented as "national literature." It is because of the system itself that the word "literature" was imported during the Meiji era as a translation. It was closely connected with the process of building the nation-state of

modern Japan. The process by which the documents of ancient and medieval times were arranged as "Japanese literature" was incorporated with the formation of the national history based on an imperialistic historical view. The beginning of foreign literary studies was also deeply related to the movement of this national history formation. It was not accidental by any means that many Japanese intellectuals who had studied French or German literature in their youth returned to Japanese culture late in their life.

However, there may be a difference between Americans studying "Japanese literature" and Japanese studying American or English literature. Unlike the United States which accepted European literature as their cultural origin, Japan took it as a totally alien culture. First of all, in Japan, which was completely raped and forced to be open by the United States as a vanguard of the Western world in the 19th century, the Western literature and system of art were the "Otherness" totally and fundamentally. Japanese literature developed by concealing this "otherness," "appropriating" it as if it was our own original culture.

In the first place, why did "literature" then become such an important device in the history of a nation-state? Because it is regarded as a reflection of the ethnic or racial spirit (Ethos) that Herder once talked about. It originated the made-up system of the "people of the Nation State." The system of "literary studies" in universities cannot be separated from such movement nor can it be considered without it. The same thing can also be said about pre-modern literary studies.

The academia literary studies was able to distinguish itself from the community of amateurs or journalists just because it was believed that studying national literature corresponded to clarifying the ethos of the Japanese people and their national traits. The study of foreign literatures was also considered a way to clarify the people's ethos and national traits. We must keep the following two things in mind. First, "literature" is thus a temporal and historical cultural phenomenon which materializes only in the specific social form of "modern civil society." Second, literary studies are an ideological construct which materializes only in such a specific historical context. They have entered into universities under the disguise of "science," a fact that camouflaged their ideological character.

In other words, literary studies are never neutral nor scientific.

I think that we should say in the first place that you are studying neither Japanese literature nor Japanese culture. You are studying a specific cultural position of modern invention.

2.

Next, let me look back at the history of literary studies in the 20th century.

Literary theory in the 20th century has basically developed from the question, "what is literature?" Literary theory in the 20th century has gradually shifted its central concern from "Author" to "Work" or "Text" itself as a linguistic structure. Furthermore, it moved towards theories of readers' response producing "meaning" through the act of interpretation, like reader response criticism or reception aesthetics. In other words, it developed from research on the historical background and biographical data which form the consciousness of the author, into research on "intertextual" relations with various other linguistic structures which the work as text makes, as well as towards research on how a text functions as social discursive devices by the social structure around the "reader".

However, such shift in the importance within the triangle "Author–Text–Reader" is only a local change produced along a very narrow path. Within the institution of "literature," which was the result of western modernity and of the social structure supporting it, a simple question is asked about what makes a certain text "literature," something that Roman Jacobson once called "Literality," whether this is the consciousness of the "author" as a romantic genius, the signification of a text, or the practice called reading. What does this historical process mean?

It is clear that the question "what is literature?" has been at work here without any doubt or suspicion. That is, linguistic texts were classified as "literature" and "not literature." This has been considered the most important benchmark for drawing the boundary lines of literature in various forms. There is an illusion at work of investigating the essence of "true literature," believing that such thing indeed exists somewhere, and that its investigation is the task of literary studies.

However, the system itself of "literature" which a modern society built based on views of uniformity, is now exposed to a crisis which today is dismantling literature itself. As a result of a flood of pop culture, such as comics and animation, of the collapse of a literary world supported by the readers' community and literary magazines, of the conversion of everything cultural into consumer goods arranged in giant supermarkets, of the rapid progress of globalization, hybridization and standardization of culture, and of the conversion to a database of learning by the rapid advancement of technologies (the creation of an index of the whole knowledge which anyone can use easily by subdividing, categorizing and attaching labels to it), literary studies are losing their taken-for-granted status and their basic foundations.

In Japan, literary series or complete sets of literary works have almost ceased from being published. If we exclude the books of very popular authors, the literary books are placed in the most inconspicuous corner of bookstores. Moreover, the sales of literary magazines supporting the literary world are now quite low. Even at the big bookstore near a terminal station, monthly magazines such as *Shinchō*, *Subaru*, *Bungakukai* are distributed only in volume form and they are rarely supplied. We may assume that the number of readers is far less than 10,000. Considering that there are hundreds of thousands readers of the coterie of comic magazines which are sold at the comics market called *komike*, this is a very small number. Interest by ordinary intellectuals or college students in literature has completely faded. For example, there are very few college students who know the name of Hirabayashi Taiko in Japan.

Of course, we might say that there is always value in studying any kind of subject. However, it goes without saying that the decay of the so-called "high culture," such as "literature" and "art," has been remarkable after the 80s.

Since then, literary studies have been avoiding to deal with the question whether the target "text" is an important literary work or not. Instead, they have shifted their concern to the social conditions that have produced that text, and how these conditions have functioned as "cultural device" in a fixed social context. The same method has been used also in the study about rock music or pop culture. Literary studies are considered more and more to be one genre of "cultural studies." People do not distinguish "culture" into "true culture" and "fake culture." They accept the culture as it is from the beginning, only asking how it functions. Here a literary text has changed its meaning from "Work" to "Data."

Is a literary text a data for understanding the singularity of a certain local culture, or is it a beautiful object connected with a universal humanity organizing itself within territories called Art or Literature? While every border and boundary becomes increasingly fluid, the so called "national culture" increasingly shows its fictitious nature. Under these circumstances, what does it mean to study and interpret Japanese literature and Japanese culture? Or more generally speaking, what is the condition of knowledge itself today?

3.

Finally I will address the remarkable phenomenon of the "databasization of knowledge" in the current situation.

In Japan as well as in the United States foreign literary studies are included inside a larger field of "regional studies." After the dismantling of literature, the text written in various local languages carries out the

representation of the cultural feature of the area, a disposition, a view of the world, etc. It is believed that it provides useful data for an understanding of the world where we live.

All researches are now "information" which anyone can use whenever they want. The value is beforehand guaranteed unconditionally. As the concept of "culture" was extended, all cultural phenomena have now come to be registered as possible candidates for research. No one can deny the possibility that someone in the future might get interested in some information, even if now nobody shows any concern for such trifling information. All the knowledge about the universe has some value to be stored into a huge database which the academy supports. Even the minor novel which attracted attention from no one, a teleplay with extremely low ratings, and an unpopular CD can be also registered into a database.

Of course, in the past as well there may have been scholars specializing in the study of trivial phenomena in which no one has ever been interested. On the other hand, in the world of academia which is centered on the publication of academic magazines, these trivial phenomena were buried, forgotten and, in many cases, they even disappeared. However, with the diffusion of Internet, there are no temporal and spatial restrictions. With the appearance of databases which can accumulate unlimited knowledge and which are connected by a network, the situation has completely changed. All researches now have the chance to be used by someone, and its value is guaranteed from the beginning.

The development of the Internet has realized the dream of "the amplification of intelligence," at least partially. Anyone has access to voluminous information and can connect not only the text but also the image, voice, and animation freely. If the infrastructure such as the portable terminal and the circuit are further upgraded, and databases are further improved, the dream of Intelligence Amplifier will be almost fully realized.

However, when it comes to human intelligence, will it be really amplified by it? I am afraid that it will not. When I want to know something, the electronic database will certainly give me an answer easily and quickly. But it will never take the trouble of helping me to know "what I really want to know."

The true problem lies inside the database itself. That is, the database is the spatial arrangement of information. It resembles the library where lots of bookshelves are arranged and classified. Unlike the library, we can access the electronic database at any time and from any place. At the same time, it means, "we don't need to access it now and here." The information, which is spatially arranged, actually lacks a sense of time.

On the other hand, human knowledge is a temporal experience. We obtain knowledge by meeting with it at a certain place and time. Although a text called Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* is one and the same, its meaning is entirely different if the book is read by a high school student or by a middle aged man. As hermeneutics indicates, interpretation is a specific act on the part of an individual in a specific historical situation.

An environment where we can access a huge database anytime and anywhere is certainly the necessary condition for intelligence amplification, but it is not a sufficient condition for it. Otherwise, the librarian of a major library would be the greatest intellectual in the world. That is to say, Hypermedia alone does not amplify human intelligence; occasionally, it actually intensifies a feeling of powerlessness and subordination to the system. The impression that our intelligence was amplified by contact with the electronic database is the same as the exhilaration that we feel when we enter a big library or a bookstore—it is an illusion after all. We are simply pulling out the possibility in advance which is included in the system or program; no new experience will ever be born. Most discussions over the Internet and database are trapped in such misunderstanding about knowledge and intelligence.

Knowledge is essentially individual and is produced from an individualistic experience and a personal encounter. It is formed through experiences in time out of man's specific individual way as a living animal. The interpretation of texts is also defined and limited by such individuality and isolation of being an animal. I am apprehensive about the current tendency in the fields of cultural studies and literary studies to reduce all knowledge into the system of a huge database. I believe that knowledge is fundamentally a specific phenomenon which belongs to the individual himself, and can never be reduced to or subjugated by "data."