“Good Karma, Bad Karma, Words and Deeds”

William R. LaFleur

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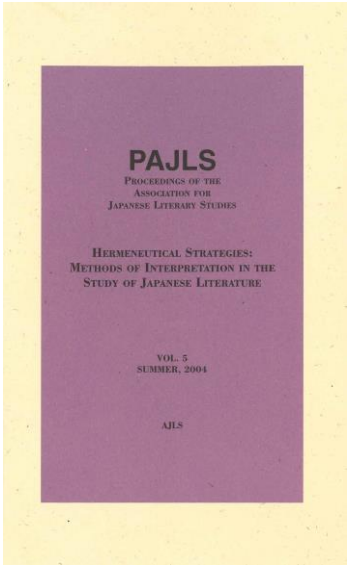

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GOOD KARMA, BAD KARMA, WORDS AND DEEDS

William R. LaFleur

COURSE CHANGE

I suspect that one of the reasons Michael Marra wanted me to come back to UCLA and speak at this conference was to have me explain why I, who started my studies in Japanese literature, seemingly abandoned the field and then as quickly dove into studies that compare Japanese ethical practices with those in America—on questions such as abortion and bioethics. It is a totally valid request and I appreciate the chance to respond to it. I need here to declare at the outset, however, that in my intellectual love-life I have not jilted Japanese literature. So I need to grasp this chance to give an *apologia pro vita mea* —at least for why I feel compelled to connect literature with ethics. And I thought I might do that by saying a few things about words and deeds.

Let me start by telling you something about the post-publication karma of one of my books, the one titled *The Karma of Words: Buddhism and the Literary Arts in Medieval Japan.*[1] When in June of 2003 I arrived at Nichibunken for a half-year spate of research there, I somewhat narcissistically checked its library to see which of my books it might already have and which ones might be missing. I was immediately struck when the library website showed as the first of my publications a book I had never recalled writing. It turned out to be *The Karma of Words* translated into Russian and published in Moscow in the year 2000. Good, I thought to myself, the book has gotten another batch of readers. Good karma! But then I realized that in the three years since its publication neither the University of California Press nor I had received as royalty one red cent, one red rouble, or even what in post-Soviet Russia would have to be called one *non*-red rouble. Bad karma! –at least from a capitalist point of view. But, then, through the kind auspices of a Russian scholar at Nichibunken, Evgeny Bakshev, I learned that the translator is one of Russia's best. Good karma, I thought! And when I wrote that gentleman in Moscow a letter, he sent me—maybe in lieu of royalty, two copies, which I now have. Good karma!

Later I will say something in a more serious vein about the afterthoughts I have about *The Karma of Words.* Let me move in that direction by noting that the struggle between using aesthetic and extra-aesthetic

[1] Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983.

criteria in analyses of literature has been and will, I think, remain an ongoing one. Very early in my own study of literature that struggle played itself out with some drama within a single seminar I took—and is probably worth telling you about. It was the late 1950s and I was in my first graduate seminar in Comparative Literature at Michigan. The professor in charge was none other than Austin Warren, who, along with Rene Wellek, co-authored *Theory of Literature* in 1948, a long-standing classic translated into multiple languages, including Japanese. [2] That book, implicitly intended to serve as our guide through the seminar, was a standard apologetic for the New Criticism that was so much in vogue back then. At its core—and as shown by the two-part structure of the book—is a distinction made between the extrinsic and intrinsic ways of studying literature. Extrinsic studies do it in terms of an author's biography, in terms of a work's connection to psychology or to society and politics, and finally in terms of its relationship to other, non-literary, arts. This is in contrast to what Wellek and Warren called the "intrinsic study of literature"—that which they wished to promote as the *true* way of studying literature. (In Japanese translation the preference is, if anything, more clear—one between *hi-honshitsuteki taido* and a *honshitsuteki taido.*) The intrinsic way of studying literature is focused on matters of tonality, sonorousness, style, imagery, metaphor, symbolism, and genre. It is no doubt significant that Wellek and Warren used the term "the poem" to represent every type of literature in the course of their discussion. To them the true study of literature was akin to the study of music. And to focus on connections between "the poem" and the outside world—psychology, sociology, politics—was, even if tolerable for practical reasons, to move away from what the true study of literature ought to be. As you can imagine, subsequent critics of Wellek/Warren and New Criticism more generally charged it with being ideologically tainted, a typical move within post-World War II Anglo-America to isolate such studies from Freudian and, most especially, Marxian modes of analyis.

By about the third week of our seminar at Michigan, Austin Warren, who was in frail health, became too seriously ill to teach and our seminar, as fate would have, was turned over to a much younger scholar, someone at the time not only deeply interested in the extrinsic study of literature but himself engaged in a Marxian mode of interpretation. Our syllabus was radically rearranged and instead of references to "the poem" it was the modern novels of Europe that were brought front and center. Georg Lukacs, probably the most brilliant literary critic and historian ever to

[2] Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co.), 1942.

appear within the Marxist intellectual ambit, was now the unseen mentor of our Michigan seminar. Within days our seminar had made a 180 degree turn. New Criticism was now old hat. Although the term was not yet in vogue, our new instructor was teaching us how to read literature as ideology. Our education in the placid 1950s was about to be replaced by the rougher, more trenchant, ride of the 1960s and early 70s. America's aggressive and immoral military involvement in Southeast Asia eventually was a catalyst for doing literary analyses—even of Japanese materials—in the mode of *Ideologiekritik.*

I believe that there has been value in having tension between intrinsic and extrinsic ways of studying literature. I myself have never felt compelled to choose one side and discard the other—either for myself or for my students. I have rationalized this to myself at times as an application to literary studies of what the Buddhists referred as as "the Middle Way," although I am aware that some may judge it as a merely middling and maybe even a muddled method. I myself have never felt comfortable working reductively at either *end* of the spectrum—that is, neither at the place of pure aesthetics where art seems detached from the world and from values such as ethical ones, nor at the diametrically opposite end where literature can come across as nothing but politics and power-grabbing in disguise. To me there is always something a bit effete in the posture of pure aesthetics; but on the other side, a journey through the old Soviet Union already in 1968 convinced me that Marxism in practice turns out to be pretty awful compared to how it sometimes looks as theory. And I think there is a lot of space in between those two poles for doing exciting and creative literary analyses.

HERMENEUTICS AND ETHICS

Another way of articulating my preferred way of doing things is to say that I relish exploring the connections between literature and ethics—not just personal ethics but the ethical decisions whole societies are forced to make. Although it may seem that the turn to ethics came only after *The Karma of Words* appeared in 1983, to my own mind it was much earlier. My first essays about Saigyō were analyses of the positive valorization of the natural world in his verse. In this they diverged from the far more intrinsic, perhaps even New Critical, approach to *waka* found in *Japanese Court Poetry* by Robert Brower and Earl Miner, the standard English-language text at the time. My early essays on Saigyō, although surely

flawed by the University of Chicago jargon of the time,[3] arose out of what were the initial stirrings of what was to become the ecological movement—the sense that we have an ethical duty to future generations to refrain from the commercial and military destruction of our world, including that part of this earth that we usually identify as "nature." And if within the literature we study we find perspectives that offer a true alternative to the current industrial-military rape of our planet, I feel compelled to exhume and bring them to the fore. It's a rarely used word but we are all "hermeneuts" in some sense—as Michael Marra has insisted by making it the theme of this meeting. And, although every student of literature may not feel compelled to do so, some of us as interpreters feel the need to assist the literature we study, however rooted in the past, to elucidate and criticize the morality, both private and public, of ourselves and our time. It is to implement what Paul Ricoeur called the "hermeneutics of recovery"—but not just recovery for recovery's sake. It helps us to be critics of the society of our own time. It is one way of implementing the advice of Friedrich Schiller, who wrote "Live with your century; but do not be its creature. Work for your contemporaries; but create what they need, not what they praise."[4]

I fully recognize that in recent years some Western students of Japan have pointed out that, at least for contemporary Japan, a national rhetoric there about a special Japanese "love of nature" is belied by the amount of poured concrete that the greedy construction industry has been pouring over the Japanese landscape. But that is precisely why the *pre-modern* can be of heuristic value. During the past decade or so we who study Japan have seen multiple Western studies which, perhaps in partial reaction to that rhetoric of a Japanese love of nature, insist that such claims are overblown and that a *Japanese* love of "nature" is itself only an ideologically tainted construct. But I suspect this reaction has itself tended to become something of an *over*-reaction. In a recent book an American historian of the Meiji tells us that Meiji thinkers were "scavenging Japan's past and European philosophy to find resonant images of nature...."[5] *Scavenge?* Were images of nature in Japan's past so rare that modernizing Japanese had to behave like catfish seeking out rare crumbs at the bottom of the sea or like homeless people going through garbage-cans to find

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[3] "Saigyō and the Buddhist Value of Nature," in Two Parts, *History of Religions* 13:2 (Nov 1973): 93-126 and *History of Religions* 13:2 (Nov 1973): 93-128 and 13:3 (Feb 1974): 227-248.

[4] Friederich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* 9th letter (1794-95)

[5] Julia Adeney Thomas, *Reconfiguring Modernity: Concepts of Nature in Japanese Political Ideology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), p. 187.

mere scraps of food? Students of Japan's pre-modern literature and thought will, I think, see this as forced.

Others have been exploring the nexus between literature and ethical stances and practices in other ways. Have the now extensive studies of gender and Japanese literature come into being because the topic happens to be "out there" like some peak never scaled before? I suspect not and suggest that such research arose at least in part because of enhanced awareness of discrimination, sexism, and institutional glass ceilings as matters of our own contemporary ethical concern and interest. Scratch the surface and you will find many, maybe most, of us linking our study of literature to a concern for moral and ethical issues.

My interest in questions about the ethics of abortion, eventually taking published shape in *Liquid Life* and subsequent essays, arose, at least in part, out of my fascination with the implications of differing metaphors used to represent moral dilemmas. The early work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson had an influence in this.[6] The work of the literary critic meshes with that of the comparative ethicist once it is admitted that, if it is the case that we cannot think without metaphors, we also cannot deal with moral questions without their use.

Even my current interest in Japan's discussions of bioethics was, in fact, inspired by a Noh play. During the Spring term of 1994 I gave a course on Noh and Kyōgen texts at Penn; fortunately that term I was able to go with my students to New York to see a performance of the relatively new Noh play, "Mumyō no I" by Tada Tomio. Those of you who know that work know also that it is in classical style but about a very contemporary social and ethical issue—namely, the removal of internal organs from persons putatively brain dead in order to transplant reusable items into other persons with an organ replacement need. Dr Tada, a former immunologist at Tokyo University, so skillfully presented the ethical problem—that of removing organs from persons deemed dead not by observation but by definition—that I decided to explore that question as well as a range of others where most American and many Japanese arrive at different delineations of what is right and what is wrong.[7]

From the perspective of many in Europe and America the protracted debate in Japan about the ethics of transplanting organs looks like a strangely insular and ultimately futile argument about a kind of medical

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[6] For example, their *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

[7] Dr. Tada not only wrote intelligently about immunology and bioethical issues but also wrote about Noh from within his expertise in physiology and medicine. I recommend especially his *Nō no naka no nōbutai* [The Noh-stage within the Brain] (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 2001).

technology widely regarded elsewhere as "good" and moral. Yet running through the Japanese debate on these things is an underlying and very important question: What happens to our humanity when our rapidly developing bio-technologies invite us to think of the human body as largely an assemblage of interchangeable parts? Was the social acceptance of organ transfers as a "good" and noble thing but a prelude and pretext for a whole range of new biotechnological developments? Once merely therapeutic, these will rapidly become bodily enhancement technologies. It is, I suggest, significant that it is the Japanese and the Germans, peoples who themselves conducted horrendous medical experiments during World War II—the "Nazi doctors" and Japan's Unit 731—who today are far more cautious than their American and British counterparts about bioengineering ourselves into a new and "improved" species.[8]

I confess to having no specialized knowledge of Japanese *manga* and *animé*. Nevertheless, I have noticed that from time to time there seems to be "carryover" into these genres of themes and problematics that show up in Japan's public debates about biotechnology. And I wonder if in some deep sense these genres, so powerfully present in the lives and imaginations of our students, are not themselves reflections on the question asked above—namely, what happens to our humanity when our most innovative biotechnologies invite us to think of ourselves as assemblages of interchangeable parts? Although this topic interests me, I myself do not have enough knowledge of *manga* and *animé* to explore it. My hunch is that deeply ethical questions are being asked either explicitly or implicitly within these media. And I look forward to seeing the scholarship (either already existing or as a future prospect) that will help me to grasp the relevant connections.

INDETERMINATE TEXTS AND BODIES

I feel compelled to end this by expressing a rising concern. My worry is that some positions commonly held among us humanists can be easily exploited by technicians in ways we may not, if we see what is happening, really wish to approve. Specifically I have in mind the fact that for some decades now we (and I clearly include myself in this category) have been loath to use a term such as "human nature" and, in addition, have usually gone out of our way to disavow the existence of any such entity. We all know how such a term has been abused in the past—to condemn behaviors and cultural practices, especially sexual, as contrary to

[8] Such questions were address in a tri-national conference, "Going Too Far: Rationalizing Unethical Medical Research in Japan, Germany, and the United States," convened at the University of Pennsylvania April 28-May 1, 2004, and on the way to becoming a published volume.

"human nature." So many of us have been, at least to some degree, constructivists.

And, in accord with that position about culture, our literary hermeneutics, touched by postmodernism, has tended to favor the "indeterminacy of the text." We have told ourselves that that famous entity called "the text" can and ought never be stable. I acknowledge that my 1983 book, The Karma of Words, argued that the hermeneutic to which Japan's medieval Buddhists were attracted was one holding to the indeterminacy of the text. As a feature discernible within Japanese literary and religious history such indeterminacy is, I still maintain, surely there.

Within the past few years, however, intelligent arguments have been made for asking whether we were really so wise to have so easily jettisoned all notions of "human nature." Steven Pinker's *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*[9] is, however controversial, the work that stated the problem most energetically. But it is the case made by Jürgen Habermas that I find most compelling and important. Habermas, surely not someone apt to recycle old theologies and philosophies in these matters, finds that our dismissal of any notion of human nature leaves the door wide open to the entry of those biotechnologies that would, perhaps irrevocably, happily alter even the *somatic* dimension of our humanity. Critical of what today is sometimes called "liberal eugenics," Habermas faults those who would wish to pre-program the life of someone not yet born. "As the designer makes himself the *co-author of the life of another,* he intrudes—from the interior, one could say—into the other's consciousness of her own autonomy."[10]

Japanese discussions of these matters, at least as I read them, recognize a dilemma: Japan wants to be in the forefront of every new technology, but many of the newest and boldest *bio*-technologies may be morally objectionable. Anxiety about this shows up in many Japanese books and essays. And my hunch is that the omnipresence in Japanese film and literature of cyborgs, chimeras, and radical mutations of the human species is a collective expression of precisely this anxiety. My hope is that we who study Japanese things professionally will be up to the challenge they present. Essentially it is a challenge to us to be the most skilled interpreters we can be. The hermeneutical task is and will remain one of crucial importance.

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[9] New York: Viking, 2002

[10] Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003) p. 81. The German original is *Die Zukunft der menschlichen Natur: Auf dem Weg zu einer liberalen Eugenik?* (Frankfurt am Main: Surkamp, 2001).