
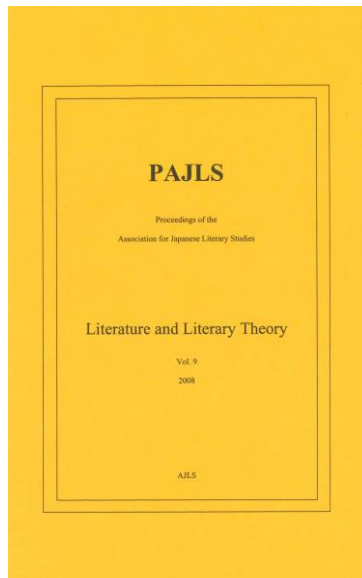


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Atsuko Ueda, Richard Okada, editors

Literature and Literary Theory

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Editors' Preface

Atsuko Ueda and Richard H. Okada
Princeton University

The sixteenth annual meeting of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies was held at Princeton University on November 2-4, 2007. We were blessed with beautiful fall weather during the three day conference, which featured a total of forty-three papers and two keynote addresses, all of which, one way or another, addressed the conference theme, "Literature and Literary Theory." Keynote speakers Professor Komori Yōichi of the University of Tokyo and Mizumura Minae, novelist and critic, did not fail to exceed our expectations in delivering provocative and at times controversial talks on the theme. We also had a featured panel entitled, "Rethinking Sōseki's *Bungakuron*: A Centennial Celebration," which commemorated the 100th anniversary of the publication of Natsume Sōseki's theoretical treatise, *Bungakuron* (Theory of Literature, 1907). In addition, participants from five countries—the United States, Italy, Canada, Australia, and Japan—engaged with a myriad of theoretical issues as they addressed writings from ancient to contemporary times, offering insightful readings of a wide variety of Japanese literary texts.

We selected the topic "literature and literary theory" in order to examine the basic questions that are unavoidable in our study: What is literature? What is literary theory? What are the boundaries of *Japanese* literature? Of *Japanese* literary theory? In Japan and elsewhere, historical contingencies have defined and redefined "literature" and "literary theory." As Michel Foucault has shown, literature as we know it now is a 19th century invention. Historically, numerous theoretical trends have configured and reconfigured the contours of "literature." Whether in the premodern or modern era, theories not only offered paradigms by which to compose and interpret their putative literary objects, but they often arose out of complex negotiations with the varying forces of history. The categories "Japan" and "Japanese" too have gone through much transformation, further complicating this line of inquiry. The above questions cannot be divorced from the more recent theoretical trends, evidenced in the surge of theories that we often categorize under the blanket term "postmodernism," that have further reconfigured our literary practices: these include post-structuralism, postcoloniality, feminism, queer theory, and other theories of gender and sexuality to name a few. Many such movements have questioned the basic tenets of our past and present literary studies and hence the boundaries of "literature."

We were eager to make this conference a forum to further our critical exploration on this important topic. Yet we could not shake off the sense that there was something quite anachronistic about it. Perhaps this theme would have been more in "vogue," so to speak, in the 1980s or the 90s. In spite of it, or rather, precisely because of it, we felt that it was important for us to reconsider or question the state of our current literary practices vis-à-vis what we refer to as "theory." What is the relationship between literature and literary theory now? What has happened in the last decade or so?

One of the differences between now and the 1980s and 90s is that we do not seem to have one dominant theoretical approach—such as deconstructionist, post-colonial, or psychoanalytic. The papers in this volume exemplify this: they engage with a variety of theoretical issues, but no one trend appears dominant over another. This certainly does not mean that they do not speak to

each other—we think they do in fascinating ways—but it means that theoretical concerns of literary studies have become increasingly dispersed.

Inscribed in the papers included in this volume are each individual's concerns for "literature and literary theory," which manifest such change in our perception of "theory." They speak to each other, at times in unison, at other times in dissonance. We are not naïve enough to think that the set of papers exhausts the concerns we raised. But we believe that they do embody a new set of inquiries that question the state of our literary practices today.

We are grateful to the Toshiba International Foundation for providing major funding for the conference. The meeting was further generously supported by the Northeast Asia Council and the following units at Princeton University: the Council of the Humanities, the East Asian Studies Program, the Department of East Asian Studies, and the Department of Comparative Literature. The conference could not have been successful without the help of various people. The editors would like to first thank Eiji Sekine for all his work and guidance that lies at the core of the Association of Japanese Literary Studies. We appreciate the guidance of the previous organizers; in particular, Paul Atkins, Davinder Bhowmik, Ted Mack, Jim Dorsey, and Dennis Washburn—for helping out whenever we needed them. We are further indebted to Andrea Stearly, who single-handedly took care of the logistics of conference organization, and to our students, who helped run the sessions smoothly: William Bridges, Erin Brightwell, Eno Compton, Chris Mayo, Jessica Kellog, and Tomoko Kitagawa. Chris and Erin also contributed greatly in bringing this volume into fruition as they tirelessly worked on editing and formatting the many papers. Finally, we would like to thank all the participants for contributing their papers and making this a successful conference.