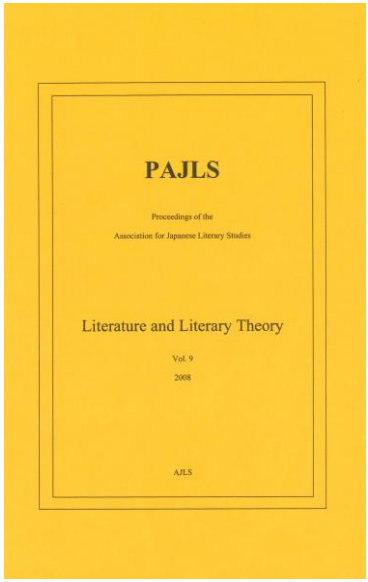
“The Fate of the Japanese Language in the Age of English”

Minae Mizumura

Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies 9 (2008): 1–13.



PAJLS 9:
Literature and Literary Theory.
Ed. Atsuko Ueda and Richard Okada.

The Fate of the Japanese Language in the Age of English

Minae Mizumura

The title of my talk is *The Fate of the Japanese Language in the Age of English.* A grandiose title calls for a grandiose and sweeping talk. So, here it is.

Let me start by going back a year from now when I gave a keynote lecture at an international conference in Yokohama, at Ferris University. The name may not ring a bell in your mind, but the university is not without historical significance. It is the oldest school for girls in Japan, founded by an American missionary woman in 1870, only two years after the Meiji Restoration. The conference was on Japanese literature and its title, befitting the illustrious history of the university, was: "The Future of Japanese Woman Writers."[1]

In the fancy poster they made for the occasion, there are pictures of three woman writers. On the left is a picture of Wakamatsu Shizuko, a Ferris graduate and the first woman translator. On the right is Miyake Kaho whose juvenile work, *Yabu no uguisu,* is usually considered the first novel written by a woman. The figure in the middle is Higuchi Ichiyō, the first and perhaps the only woman novelist ever to have had the honor of being truly taken seriously by men in the past.

As my repeated use of the adjective "first" indicates, these women were the precursors for other woman writers, like myself, to follow. True, Japanese woman writers had precursors of another order—Murasaki Shikibu and other astounding women. But they are from too distant a past; they have become nearly mythical, like princesses in fairy tales. Meiji Japan, like the rest of the world at that time, was unabashedly patriarchal, and the woman writers who followed these three precursors did not have easy lives. In fact, the more respectable the novel became as *the* literary genre in modern Japan, the more men seem to have tried their best to ignore and to even suppress women's presence.

Just look at those innumerable *bungaku zenshū*, the anthologies of literature, published one after another in Japan. Very few woman writers are ever given one full volume; they are sometimes crammed together in a volume as if they constituted an inferior subspecies of writers, called *joryū sakka*, the authoresses. Contrast this with someone like Tanizaki Jun'ichirō who alone is given three volumes in a collection.[2]

Nonetheless, over the subsequent years, fate has been kind to the gentle sex. It has, in fact, been so miraculously kind that, recently, we actually see a flood of woman writers in Japan. Their names are printed everywhere. Their faces are posted everywhere. Their stories are told everywhere.

Indeed, the male editor-in-chief of a literary journal, *Shinchō,* recently confided to me, a bit reluctantly, that it now seems as if more than half the novelists writing for his journal are women. His confession only confirmed my prior amazement. A while ago, I was asked if I was interested in starting a daily serialization of a novel for the *Yomiuri Newspaper.* I asked for details and for the names of other novelists already lined-up for the serialization. Who should be scheduled to write before me but another woman, Koike Mariko? And who should be scheduled to write before her but yet another woman, Miyabe Miyuki? *Yomiuri,* as you know, is not a

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[1] Mizumura Minae, "Keynote Lecture: Nihongo ga horobiru toki—Eigo no seiki no nakade" (Ferris University's Fifth International Conference on Japanese Literature, held on November 18, 2006). Compiled in Ferris University, ed., *Josei sakka no yukue* (Yokohama: Ferris University, 2007).

[2] See, for example, *Nihon no bungaku* (Tokyo: Chūō kōronsha, 1974).

lady's magazine. It is the newspaper with the largest circulation in Japan. How did we end up becoming so much more sought after than our male counterparts?

Really, the advancement of women in the Japanese literary scene is quite extraordinary—especially when you realize that Japanese women do not fare so well in other areas, except perhaps in the sheer number of years they are expected to live, which is now eighty-six, the longest in the world, and ahead of men by seven full years.

Was I to celebrate this extraordinary advancement of women in Japanese literature? The intention of the organizers at Ferris University seemed obvious from the start. They wanted a contemporary woman writer to commemorate, with them and with the audience, how far, we the woman writers, have come.

"*We've Come a Long Way, Baby*"—I felt I was expected to say.

However, Japan too is a free country, and I had the liberty to see this advancement of women as something else—to see it as a symptom of a darker phenomenon, that is, to see it as a symptom of an ailing national literature. And, as the cynical middle-aged woman that I'm afraid I've turned into, I chose to see it as the latter in the talk I gave.

For, what does it tell us about a human activity in which the best and the brightest of men, who once dominated it, no longer seem interested in taking part? When they no longer seem eager to compete and to excel? When they willingly allow women to begin dominating it? If the society is a patriarchal one, it probably tells us that that particular domain of human activity no longer answers to the highest intellectual, moral and aesthetic demands we, as humans, make on ourselves. And this, I think, is what is happening to the domain of Japanese literature today.

I'm not working on a novel right now. I'm struggling to finish a long essay that started out as an article but has turned into a full-fledged book, against my will. The book is about the possible ominous fate of Japanese literature, and more specifically of the Japanese language itself. Its title may be accused of being a bit alarmist: *Nihongo ga horobiru toki—Eigo no seiki no nakade* (When the Japanese Language Falls—in the Age of English).[3]

Some are born avant-guards. They love all things new. I'm afraid I'm the opposite. I was born to feel nostalgic for just about anything and everything. To this natural proclivity was recently added my advancing age that makes me ever more convinced that the world is simply getting worse. Things were always bad but not this bad, I would often murmur to myself. Nevertheless, it is my belief that the views expressed in my book with the alarmist title are not wholly subjective when one examines the history of modern Japanese literature—or, more precisely, the historical conditions which laid the ground for the emergence and the flourishing of modern Japanese literature. For these historical conditions are now disappearing quietly as the world is moving further into the age of English, especially with the advent of hitherto unimaginable advances in communications technology.

Today, I would like to briefly cover the main arguments of my book in progress.

I came up with three basic notions in my book which I will also be using here in an attempt to present a clear overview of what is, in reality, a messy history of human languages. The first is a notion of *fuhengo*, which I will translate in English as "universal language." The next is *genchigo*, which I will translate as "local language." And the third is *kokugo*, which I will sometimes translate as "national language," and sometimes leave it as it is in Japanese.

I understand that, in the past quarter-century or so, there has been much criticism of *kokugo* as a hotbed of Japanese nationalism. Hence, the word may automatically evoke a negative connotation in your mind. The notion of *kokugo*, however, is here used as a politically

[3] Mizumura Minae, *Nihongo ga horobiru toki—Eigo no seiki no nakade* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 2008).

neutral category. It basically designates a language used by the people of a modern nation state. I would even argue that *kokugo* represents a language that allows one to have a critical distance toward a nationalistic concept like *kokutai,* the national body, where the nation of Japan is likened to a large family with the emperor as its father figure. So, please keep in mind these three notions: the universal language, the local language, and the national language.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica on-line has a long article under the entry "Japanese Literature" which begins as follows.

> Both in quantity and quality, Japanese literature ranks as one of the major literatures of the world, comparable in age, richness, and volume to English literature, though its course of development has been quite dissimilar. The surviving works comprise a literary tradition extending from the 7th century AD to the present; during all this time there was never a "dark age" devoid of literary production.[4]

The article is written by none other than Professor Donald Keene. I, being Japanese, find it very sweet of him that he should declare Japanese literature as being "comparable in age, richness, and volume to English literature." Whether you agree with Professor Keene or not, there is one thing no one can deny: Japanese literature continued to flourish even after its encounter with the supremely powerful West. It did not get crushed, obliterated, or marginalized. On the contrary, there was even a surge, a newly found passion as the younger generation of Japanese began writing what seemed very much like western novels. Moreover, so quickly did the whole thing happen that the Japanese were already producing a great number of novels by the turn of the twentieth century, when the West itself was still living the golden age of the novel, waiting for Marcel Proust and James Joyce to appear and give the genre its last glory.

What were the historical conditions that made this possible?

As some of you may know, I have a slightly different upbringing from other Japanese writers, having moved to the United States when my father was stationed in New York. It was in the 1960s and I was twelve. Once placed in an American high school, I remained a total misfit—which is not unusual even for an American. I ended up spending my entire teenage years reading Japanese novels, especially those from a large collection called *Gendai Nihon bungaku zenshū*, first published in 1926.[5] A farewell gift from my great uncle, it allowed me to escape from America and lose myself in the Japanese novels of the Meiji and Taishō periods.

I always knew that it was those years in American high school that eventually led me to write Japanese novels myself. Yet I did not know until decades later how unusual my situation had been. An English girl who remained a misfit in an American high school during the 1960s may have lost herself in the Penguin Classics. A French girl, in the *Pléiade* collection. Yet, why could an Asian girl lose herself in a collection of her national literature, especially in a collection published in 1926? Not all Western nations had such a collection by 1926. And more importantly, none of the non-Western nations had such a collection by 1926.

Perhaps those of you who have approached Japanese literature from the outside were aware of this from the start. I was not. I somehow took it for granted that every nation had its own national literature, just as every nation had its own national flag, proudly displayed in front

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[4] Encyclopædia Britannica, "Japanese Literature," *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9106453 (January 27, 2008).

[5] *Gendai Nihon bungaku zenshū*, 63 vols. (Tokyo: Kaizōsha, 1926-1931).

of the United Nations headquarters building, and that, all around the world, *bungaku shōjo*, or "girl book worms" like myself, were reading their own national literature. If someone had asked me at the time, did I think, say, Mongolian girls were reading a collection of Mongolian novels, I would have answered yes in all earnest. I was an ignorant teenager, and like any ignorant person, young or old, I did not think historically. It is only recently when I began to fear for the ominous fate of the Japanese literature that I was struck by the historical unusualness—what, in retrospect, seems to me like a historical miracle—of my teenage years and began asking myself a question I've never asked before.

Why did modern Japanese literature flourish at such an early stage?

The answer, I found, was simple: because the Japanese language was able to become *kokugo*, a national language, at such an early stage, that is, by the late Meiji. Many Japanese would find this answer rather silly. They have been taught to believe that they always had their *kokugo*—that they always spoke in that *kokugo* and, that, soon after they learned the Chinese ideograms from the people we now call Koreans, they modified those ideograms, invented their own way of writing, and then started writing in Japanese. Such a view is not blatantly wrong. Yet it takes for granted, among other things, that writing is a representation of spoken words, thereby ignoring not only the true nature of writing, but also the very human history where, ever since writing was invented some six thousand years ago, it was more common for us humans not to read and write in the language we spoke. We read and wrote in the language of a greater and older civilization in our vicinity. And there were many languages of the kind all around the world, all from the great and old civilizations.

Let us move away from Japanese literature for a while.

In *Imagined Communities*, now a classic for any student of literature, the author Benedict Anderson calls those languages the "sacred languages" of "great religiously imagined communities."[6] They were languages such as the classical Chinese used in Confucian scholarship, Sanskrit and Pali used in the ancient Buddhist texts, Arabic used in the Koran, the Hellenistic Greek used in Greek philosophy, and, of course, Latin used in the Christian Bible.

And what characterized these sacred languages?

Anderson writes: "The determinative fact about Latin—aside from its sacrality—was that it was a language of bilinguals. Relatively few were born to speak it and even fewer, one imagines, dreamed in it."[7] Since only the learned, bilingual men—a small fraction of the population—were able to read and write those "sacred languages," Anderson repeatedly uses the adjective "arcane" to describe them.[8] "Arcane" comes from the Latin word "arcanus," meaning secret, concealed, or closed, which, in turn comes from the Latin word "arca," meaning "chest," that is, a box with a lid. These were the languages hidden deep inside a chest, making it impossible for the rest of the population, who were monolingual and illiterate, to have access.

My book, *When the Japanese Language Falls,* owes a great deal to the first chapters of *Imagined Communities*. Yet, with all due respect, Anderson falls short in one crucial point. By choosing to emphasize the "arcane" aspect of those "sacred languages," he fails to place enough emphasis on their more critical aspect. As you well know, myriad different vernacular languages were spoken in Europe before the emergence of the national languages, and it was only the use of Latin that allowed people to understand each other through writing. Anderson does point to

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[6] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Books, 1983), 16.

[7] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 38.

[8] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 38.

this critical historical fact, yet he does not pursue the subject further—and, let me add in passing that that is why he just does not seem to understand English for what it is today. That is why he seems to be blissfully unaware how even the very success of his book depended, in fact, on its being written in English—a naïveté for a man of his caliber, yet typical of a native speaker of English.

Let us pursue the subject in lieu of Anderson. Theoretically speaking, if we humans truly wanted to attain the kind of knowledge that is solely attainable through the written language, it would surely make more sense if we only had just one written language, like Latin. Indeed, mathematics, the purest of all human knowledge, has already settled for one universal language, opening the field to the entire population on earth. In this sense, the "sacred languages" are not at all "arcane" languages—hidden deep inside a chest—as Anderson describes them. They are the most open of all the languages. They are the most universal of all the languages. And it is only natural that the pursuit of knowledge—predominantly the religious knowledge, indistinguishable from the scientific knowledge, in the past—should have been carried out in those various "sacred languages," the universal languages in the various regions of the world.

The advantage of using a universal language became most manifest in Europe, moreover, as the power of the Catholic Church and hence religion began to wane and modern science and modern thought started to emerge. Take, for example, the route modern science traveled and developed in Europe. Copernicus, who advocated heliocentrism and ignited the Copernican Revolution, was born in what is now Poland. Galileo, who championed the Copernican Revolution at great peril to his life, was born in what is now Italy. Kepler, who defended Galileo by constructing a geometric model of the universe, was born in what is now Germany. Newton, who finally provided the mathematical proofs to the works of both Galileo and Kepler, was born in England. All wrote in Latin, including Newton. It took nearly two centuries and a long journey starting from Poland and going through Italy, Germany, and finally reaching England, but thanks to Latin, the heliocentric cosmology was finally established as "truth." And now, that the earth goes around the sun, and not the other way around, represents one of the most important items of knowledge we humans have attained in our history.

Or take the example of Erasmus, one of the greatest Humanists and a harbinger of modern thought. He was born in Rotterdam, but lived all over Europe—Paris, Leuven, Cambridge, Venice, Freiburg and Basil—studying, teaching and joining other thinkers. According to the *Wikipedia*—excuse me for quoting from the *Wiki*, but the sentence, I thought, was so well put—Erasmus "corresponded with more than five hundred men of the highest importance in the world of politics and of thought, and his advice on all kinds of subjects was eagerly sought, if not always followed."[9] Erasmus could have achieved all this only in the Latin language. It is, indeed, through this universal language of Latin that Europe began building a body of knowledge that would eventually allow it to become the world's greatest power, ready to conquer the rest of the world.

Now, what always comes hand in hand with the universal language, historically and structurally, is the local language—typically your mother tongue. The local language is the language one uses everyday, at home and on the street, where there is a universal language in a society at large. Whether or not the local language has a writing system is not critical. What is critical is that, whenever these two languages coexist in a society, there usually exists what may be called a division of labor between the two. The universal language carries the intellectual,

[9] Wikipedia, "Desiderius Erasmus," *Wikipedia,* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desiderius_Erasmus (accessed January 17, 2008, 03:15).

moral and aesthetic burden. The local language is merely for *onna kodomo*, women and children, and for the uneducated men who used to constitute most of the male population in the past.

So far, we have covered the first two notions out of the three, the universal and the local languages. We are now moving on to *kokugo*. What then is *kokugo*—national language?

Let us leave aside the discussion of the rise of modern nation states as its necessary condition, which is now a common understanding among the students of modern literature through the work of Benedict Anderson. The national language, as I understand it, is a local language that is transformed, through the act of translation, to function on the same level as the universal language. The key word here is the act of translation.

We have been living too long in the heyday of the national language that we have lost sight of what translation was originally about. Translation was radically asymmetrical—and hierarchical. One may now translate a French novel into English but that's not what translation was originally about. Translation was about translating a universal language into a local language. For, translation was a linguistic act through which a translator tried to transfer the knowledge accumulated in the source language to the target language, thereby gradually transforming the target language in such a way that it became a language that was itself translatable back into the source language. I know this definition sounds not only simplistic but also absurd, coming from the mouth of a novelist who, by the very nature of her profession, must perceive translation as an art—not transference of knowledge. Yet, if one looks at human history from a larger perspective, that is what translation had originally and principally been about.

From the fifteenth century on in Europe, with people becoming richer and books becoming more affordable, furious attempts were made to translate classical Greek and Latin texts into the European vernacular languages, and vice-versa, eventually giving rise to the European languages as we know them today. Naturally, it was the learned, bilingual men who played a major role in the process. We all know that the German language as it circulates today was born from Martin Luther's translation of the Greek Bible. In the dawn of the national languages, those learned, bilingual men wrote in both the universal and the local language, transforming the local language into a language that functioned on the same level as the universal language. Descartes' famous adage, "I think, therefore I am," still circulates today in both Latin and French—"*cogito ergo sum*" and "*je pense donc je suis*"—precisely because he wrote in both languages. His act of writing was at the same time an act of translation. Thomas More wrote a *History of King Richard III* in both Latin and English. Again, his act of writing was at the same time an act of translation. All bilingual writers were at once translators.

The result—the national language—was a miraculously wonderful language. For, being a combination of the universal and the local, it also exploited what's so compelling about the local language—what's compelling about one's mother tongue. The national language, capable of articulating high-flown ideas, was also capable of dwelling, deliciously, on the most mundane and intimate of subjects.

One can now see how the national language became such a perfect medium for writing novels and how the literary genre of the novel thrived thanks to the emergence of the national languages. You can talk about the existence or absence of God, about war and peace, or about the fate of humanity. Yet, you can also descend deep into your childhood memories—or even to those earlier moments when memories would be too concrete a word for the fragmentary recollections of touch, smell and soft murmurs you vaguely remember. You can describe everyday life, a chain of vulgar events, in exquisite detail. You can describe the innermost crevices in your thoughts, however shameful or insignificant.

Yes, at the dawn of the novel as a literary genre, Daniel Defoe's Moll Flanders had no interiority to speak of. She was, according to Defoe's own preface, "Twelve Year a Whore, five times a Wife (whereof once to her own Brother), Twelve Year a Thief, Eight Year a Transported Felon. . . ."[10] Yet, she feels precious little for all that she has gone through. Two hundred years later, Marcel Proust's protagonist, a fully grown man, would reminisce page after page about his childhood fear of not getting a good night kiss from his dear *maman*.

Indeed, this combination of intellectual discourse and emotional expressions proved so powerful that the novel became the true center of knowledge in the modern world where religion was being rapidly replaced by a secular pursuit of knowledge at the universities. The novel went beyond the compartmentalized knowledge of the academic disciplines. It offered the woes and the bliss of the human condition in its entirety and came to symbolize that which transcends the mere pursuit of knowledge. The novelist's voice became *the* voice of moral, intellectual, and aesthetic authority. Moreover, novels soon began to exploit everything a particular mother tongue had to offer, so that a reality perceived through a particular language came to represent a reality different from realities perceived in other languages, thereby creating a new spectrum of what life is all about. The human realities became as rich and as diverse as the number of languages in the world.

Let us go back to Japan now and the question of its *kokugo*.

If we apply the scheme of the universal and the local languages, there is no question that the Japanese language in pre-modern Japan was a local language that coexisted with and was positioned below Chinese, the universal language in its region. Even the Japanese imperial compilation of *waka* failed to carry the authority of Chinese poetry. Religious and scholarly texts, as well as important public documents, continued to be written in Chinese—and this, up until the very end of the Edo period.

That the Japanese language should have only been a local language is more the rule than the exception. That it acquired its system of writing through translation—*kanbun yomikudashi bun*—is more the rule than the exception. What is unusual is the level of sophistication this local language attained, which can only be attributed to the body of water that separates Japan from China. The distance between Japan and the Korean peninsula is six times that of the Strait of Dover; between Japan and China, twenty five times—not to mention the infamously deadly current.

And nowhere is this distance more manifest than in Japan's escape from the *kakyo* system, the Chinese imperial examination system for high ranking officials. The most advanced examination system in the world when it was first implemented in 605 AD, it lasted, alas, for 1,300 years without much change. Hence, for 1,300 years, the brightest men from all over China spent the precious years of their youth and even their adulthood learning the Chinese Classics, word by word, aspiring for power, glory, and wealth. Korea and Vietnam, sharing land borders with China, adopted the *kakyo* system, with the result that their learned, bilingual men had neither the time nor the energy left to work with their own languages.

The Japanese once tried to adopt the *kakyo* system but soon abandoned it. Our learned, bilingual men hence had both the time and the energy to work with the Japanese language. Let us remember that, Ki no Tsurayuki, pretending to be a woman, wrote *Tosa nikki* before Muraski Shikibu wrote *Genji monogatari*. In an attempt to establish *waka* as their own poetry, men in the Heian period got a taste of reading and writing in the much too local *hiragana bun*; they soon

[10] Daniel Defoe, *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders*, in Project Gutenburg, http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/370, (last updated on March 5, 2003).

grew so enamored of the sense of intimacy it gave them that they wanted to try prose writing in *hiragana* themselves. Let us also remember how eagerly Murasaki Shikibu and Sei Shōnagon, both learned and bilingual women, competed for the admiration of their male readers—a proof that the local language was not merely for *onna kodomo* even when it was written by women. It did not take long for the bilingual Japanese men to come up with another method of prose writing in the local language, first, by inverting the Chinese word order, and then, by incorporating more and more *katakana* into *kanbun yomikudashi bun*. They also began incorporating more and more Chinese expressions into *hiragana bun*. These experiments eventually led the way to *kanji kanamajiri bun*, which became the basis for the present day Japanese language. Toward the end of the Edo period, while Itō Jinsai and Ogyū Sorai, both great Confucian scholars, were writing their treatises in Chinese, a *kokugakusha* like Motoori Norinaga, moved by proto-nationalistic fervor, even dared to write scholarly works in the local language.

Added to all this, moreover, is the relative maturity of capitalism in Edo Japan. As you all know, the invention of the printing press, according to Benedict Anderson, provides only the initial condition necessary for the eventual emergence of national languages. Along with the printing press, there must also exist sufficiently developed capitalism. For, only with the development of capitalism does the law of the marketplace operate to gradually force the introduction of books written in the local languages, thus attracting a far greater number of consumers, and paving the way for the eventual rise of the national languages. The same law of the marketplace seems to have operated in Edo Japan. Though there was no standardized Japanese language, books written in various forms of Japanese were already circulating widely through the market—so widely, in fact, that *Gakumon no susume* by Fukuzawa Yukichi, published in the fifth year of the Meiji period, instantly sold two hundred thousand copies and then went on to sell five hundred thousand more copies in the next eight years—a figure far beyond the reach of my novels.

So far we have come up with two historical conditions that made possible the rapid emergence of *kokugo* in modern Japan: The level of sophistication of the written local language and its wide circulation through the market. These two conditions, however, were not sufficient. Another historical condition, more recent in time, was absolutely necessary, and that was nothing less than Japan's thin escape from the Western colonial powers.

Just recall how few—how really few the number of non-Western countries that escaped colonization at the time of the Meiji Restoration of 1868: Japan, Korea (before it became a colony of Japan), Thailand, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Liberia, and what remained of the Ottoman Empire. It would be naïve to assume that the Western powers, upon reaching the Far East and having taken what they could from China, would have left Japan alone. Japan was an appetizing country to colonize. It had many ports to supply food, water, and fuel for Western vessels. It produced copper, silver, tea, silk, and china for export. It could also provide a significant market for imported goods.

The Opium wars and the humiliation the Chinese had to endure at the hands of the West were very much in the minds of the Japanese, and some fought valiantly to open Japan from the inside and thus assure its sovereignty before it was forced open by the West. And there were also historical coincidences—help from Providence, so to speak. Soon after Commodore Perry's show of military force, the Western powers, one after another, entered into battle amongst themselves: the Crimean War, the American Civil War, the Franco-Prussian War. The Meiji Restoration in itself did not guarantee Japanese independence. In his fascinating autobiography,

Fukuō jiden, Fukuzawa Yukichi recalls how, even after the Restoration, he continued to dread Western colonization of Japan. He writes, "if the Westerners intrude with violence . . . I fear for my children. I would rather risk my life than have my son turn into a slave of the Westerners. Perhaps I would make him a *yasokyō no bōzu*, a Christian priest, so that he would at least have a greater chance of not being humiliated."[11] Under such precarious circumstances, it was more than understandable that Japan rushed to turn itself into a modern nation, complete with a modern army.

It is not in my interest here to repeat a critique of Western imperial ambitions at that time or to provide excuses for subsequent Japanese imperial ambitions. I am only trying to bring your attention to the fact that Japanese independence was a precarious one, and that the country, with a little less luck, could actually have become a colony, let us say, of the United States, like the Philippines. Every non-Western country was fair game for the West in those days.

Let us think hypothetically for a moment. What would have happened if America had colonized Japan? Americans would have signed the international treaties instead of the Japanese. They would have controlled the government, the military, big businesses, and education. And most importantly, English would have become the official language, making Japan a linguistically divided country, not unlike other colonized countries at the time. English, in other words, would have functioned as the universal language.

The Japanese language, already sophisticated and widely circulated, would in all probability have continued to be used by the local population. They would have continued to read *gesaku* for sometime. They would have written their letters in *sōrōbun*. They would have continued to compose *waka* and haiku. But there would not have emerged so soon the *genbun'itchi* movement, the movement that subsequently led to the standardized prose. The writing in *kanji kanamajiri bun* may even have been replaced by the Roman alphabet, as Americans actually and quite understandably recommended during their occupation of Japan after World War II. Japanese would have become a lesser language, a true local language both in status and praxis. And, of course, there would not have existed those novels in Japanese—the novels I used to read so passionately and forlornly while attending an American high school and whose existence I took for granted.

Fortunately, Japan was given the opportunity to remain independent. And it is this very independence that directly forced the Japanese language to turn into *kokugo*. Please note that I use the expression, "forced," here. For, in order to remain independent, it was imperative that the Japanese people quickly translate into the Japanese language all the knowledge that gave advantage to the Western powers. Indeed, one of the first books the Japanese translated, with the help of a pre-existing Chinese translation, was a guide to international law entitled *Elements of International Law* by Henry Wheaton, an American law scholar, which came to be known as *Bankoku kōhō*. Japan had to know the rules of the diplomatic game to sustain its independence—and to eventually rectify the unequal treaties imposed upon it before the Meiji Restoration. Japan also needed to quickly learn all the Western technologies, not only to build a modern military but also to build railroad and bridges. It also needed to quickly learn how to run a government in a modern nation state. The potential of Chinese ideograms, perfect for succinctly expressing abstract notions, was exploited to the full and the Japanese language, through translation, became a national language, capable of articulating ideas necessary to function in a modern nation state. It had suffered many irrevocable losses—sad poetic losses—

[11] Fukuzawa Yukichi, *Fukuō jiden* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, Tokyo, 1991), 200-201.

in the process, but by becoming a national language, it became a language capable, ultimately, of writing novels.

What exactly, then, is a novel?

After decades of wondering what a novel is, I came to the conclusion that a novel is not just prose fiction depicting the lives of ordinary people, including the underdogs. I hesitate using the word "global" here—it may sound too current in this context—but the word, I believe, perhaps best captures what makes a novel a novel, as a literary genre. Though written in a national language, a novel presupposes that the novelist has a global knowledge, and hence, a global consciousness—what I call *sekaisei* in Japanese. It presupposes that she shares with the outside world a contemporary knowledge of human history, of world geography, and even of scientific discoveries. If she is a writer who writes for this age, she would not only have to know that the earth goes around the sun and not the other way around, but she would also have to know that the earth is getting warmer. She would have to write with a consciousness, for example, that the ominous fate of her language, however much she laments it, is not as dire a subject as the ominous fate of the earth itself. Even if a novel is written in a most obscure language, for it to qualify as a novel, the novelist must share a basic understanding of the world with the rest of the world. That is why a novel, written in *kokugo*, could allow the novelist to have a critical distance toward her own country. That is why a novel is "translatable" on a different level from other earlier literary genres, making translation a subtler task.

The importance the Japanese universities played in the emergence of Japanese novels has been much too suppressed in Japan. The homegrown universities would not have been founded so early in Japan had Japan been colonized. The best minds from the privileged class would have gone to the universities in the West. Or, if the universities were founded in Japan, the courses would have been conducted in one or the other of the European languages—as was actually the case in Japan until the latter part of the Meiji Period. The best minds in Japan would not only have read in the language of the colonizer but would also have written in that language, to be read among the equally educated. Only the mavericks amongst them would have written in Japanese, but then that Japanese language would not have been the Japanese we know today. Japan's independence allowed Japanese universities to exist and to function, first and foremost, as gigantic institutions of translation. It trained translators en mass so that a new population of Japanese was created who used a new language that shared a basic understanding of the world with the rest of the globe. And from this new population of bilinguals arose the novelists of modern Japan.

Clichés, like old habits, die hard.

Older generation of Japanese writers and critics, who are predominantly male, still claim that you have to know poverty and women, preferably prostitutes, to write good literature, which, I take it to mean that a novelist must live a low life, a life as far away as possible from the privileged life of the ivory tower. How romantic, how naïve and how very stupid—how thoroughly steeped in the myth of national literature as that which represents the voices of the common people. Such a claim conveniently forgets that modern Japanese literature owes its existence to those privileged few who could afford to attend universities and become learned, bilingual men.

Daniel Defoe did not have to go to Oxford to become one of the founders of the English novel. Yet, just think of all those Japanese writers who went to the Imperial University of Tokyo, beginning with Sōseki and Ōgai: Tsubouchi Shōyō, Masaoka Shiki, Yamada Bimyō, Ozaki Kōyō, Ueda Bin, Morita Sōhei, Osanai Kaoru, Uchida Hyakken, Suzuki Miekichi, Saitō Mokichi,

Shiga Naoya, Mushakōji Saneatsu, Naka Kansuke, Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, Yamamoto Yuzō, Kikuchi Kan, Kawabata Yasunari, Kikuda Kunio, Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, Kume Masao, Osaragi Jirō, Nakano Shigeharu, Hori Tatsuo, Dazai Osamu, and the list goes on. Even after World War II, the University of Tokyo continued for a while to produce novelists, including the Nobel laureate Ōe Kenzaburo, perhaps the last well-known novelist from the university.

Moreover, if the novel were a literary genre that transcended the pure pursuit of knowledge, nowhere would that be more true than in a place like Japan, where what one learned in the universities seemed so far removed from what one experienced in everyday life. What one learned in the universities was supposed to represent universal knowledge but, aside from science, technology and medicine, much of it was, in fact, a Euro-centric knowledge, the kind of knowledge that did not have words to describe and to understand Japan and its people. That is why Sōseki so derisively and so rightly described himself, "*yōgaku no taichō*", "the captain of Western knowledge," while he was teaching English literature at the Imperial University of Tokyo. That is why Sōseki abandoned his prestigious position to devote himself to writing novels.

Indeed, it is no wonder that novels written in *kokugo* flourished with such an extraordinary vigor in modern Japan. There was a structural necessity in Japan for novels to attract the best minds because only in novels, written in *kokugo*, did one understand from a global perspective what Japan was going through—the depth and the superficiality of the radical changes that were taking place in the new society. And there was the excitement in the Japanese language itself which, still steeped in various literary traditions, was trying to reinvent itself amidst the chaos. I believe that the early novels, however ordinary the mind behind them, somehow transcend that mind, their language so vibrant. All novelists had to work like good poets, never taking their medium for granted. Moreover, as the years went by, *kokugo* so thoroughly permeated Japanese society that a monolingual woman such as Kōda Aya was writing what I consider to be one of the greatest works of modern Japanese literature.

And now, the initial excitement is all but gone. The literary journals, their circulation reduced to one tenth of what it was a quarter-century ago, are now hardly read by anyone. I, myself, receive several of them every month—all courtesy copies—but I hardly open a page. I just throw them into the recycle bin, unless I'm writing in them. The writers I know tell me they are doing the same. For we, the Japanese people, somehow know that the best minds in Japan are most probably no longer taking part in what was once regarded as a profoundly enthralling activity.

Yes, there are contemporary novels that are widely read. But then they are all written in such an insipid language that they barely hide the mediocre mind behind it. They circulate in abundance, with the help of mass marketing. And like all mass marketed products, they are basically for adolescents and young adults, or for those who have hardly read anything else. No cultivated reader in Japan takes them seriously—even a young reader, if she knows what literature is. What is sadder still, moreover, is that those novels, because they obviously lose little in translation, circulate in abundance abroad, not only with the help of mass marketing, but also with the undeserved endorsement from the literary establishment in the West, which ought to be able to tell good literature from bad literature, but somehow doesn't, and which promotes these novels as exemplary Japanese literature. My heart goes out for those readers abroad who are led to take those novels seriously—who are led to find a deeper meaning behind what is but nothing more than typical sophomoric writing. My heart goes out even more for Japanese literature itself. Alas, what misfortune to be represented by those novels!

I wish all this was due to the inevitable force of the market that necessarily and mercilessly caters to the average mind. I even wish all this was nothing but a symptom of the decline of the novel as a literary genre, not only in Japan but also all over the world. The decline of the novel in itself does not trouble me, though I'm a novelist. It is the fate of an art form to rise and fall gloriously, making place for something new. What troubles me is the possibility that this decline may also be symptomatic of something more fundamental—that it may also be symptomatic of a decline of all national literatures, and ultimately, of all national languages around the world. When a language falls, it falls precipitously and tragically, possibly to never rise again.

The culprit, of course, is the emergence of English language as the universal language in today's global community—here, I'm using the word "global" as it's currently used. Hundreds of historical accidents, coincidences, and events, one on top of the other, including the Louisiana Purchase, slowly led the way for the English language to dominate the world. With recent advances in communications technology, the process has become accelerated. We are now moving ever faster and deeper into the age of English.

The age of English does not mean that there will be more people whose mother tongue will be English. The age of English means that there will be more and more bilinguals for whom English will be their second language and who, in their profession, will read and write in English. Among those bilinguals, the ones who use English to attain better business deals obviously are not the ones who would threaten the national languages and literatures. The ones who would threaten the national languages and literatures are the ones who use English to attain a higher knowledge, the kind of knowledge that may eventually be translated into the national language, but that would be more readily accessible in the universal language. Those bilinguals would have gone to the universities in the English speaking countries. Or, they would have gone to the universities in their own country that conduct courses in English, and there will be more and more of those universities all over the world as the need for them is certain to grow in the future. It is one of those ironies of history that, the University of Tokyo, which once bid farewell to the Western professors and became a powerful center for creating *kokugo*, has started to conduct some courses in English.

It is those bilinguals, often the best minds from the privileged class, who, unknowingly, play a significant role in reducing their national language to a mere local language. For those bilinguals will begin to take their own language less seriously; they will cease to place on their own language the moral, intellectual and aesthetic burden their language once carried, depriving it of the authority it once held. Yet, no one can accuse them or prevent them from doing what they do, because what they do is only natural when a universal language emerges in a society. It is thus those bilinguals who will, unknowingly, recreate the world where only two languages exist, the universal and the local, relegating to the past the golden days of national languages and literature. Yes, it now seems that people all over the world are already beginning to live in a linguistically colonized globe. Some national languages would survive as true national languages; their users will continue to read great texts and will be inspired, in turn, to write great texts in that language. And yet other national languages would fall and turn themselves into mere local languages, languages that may still be capable of entertaining our mind, perhaps, but definitely incapable of truly instructing our mind.

The fate of the Japanese language is unknown at this stage.

Yet what a loss it would be, not only for the Japanese but also for the entire human race, if the Japanese language were to fall. What a loss it would be if the Japanese language were to

turn itself into a mere local language—the language for *onna kodomo* and the uneducated men. The French intellectuals have made it their pastime to deplore the fall of their much revered language. But allow me to point out that the fall of the French language would be a minor incidence when compared to the fall of the Japanese language. French is a European language, after all. The reality perceived through French is not radically different from the reality perceived through English. Yet, just think how wondrously strange the world looks when it is perceived through the Japanese language, a non-Western and a non-Indo-European language. Note how, for example, the Japanese use of the onomatopoeia acquires the kind of poetic sophistication unimaginable in the European languages. How the personal pronouns, including the very "I," work just like any other noun, giving different shades and contours to what it means to be a man or a woman, a human being. How the very writing system, making use of three visually and functionally different types of letters, provides, even more than the Chinese language, an irrefutable criticism against phonocentrism—the ideology that most pervasively conquered the world in the twentieth century, nearly effacing the *kanji* civilization from the earth.

Those of you for whom their first writing language is English are now the privileged of the earth. All you need to do is to sit down and write, and your voice will be heard all over the world, especially with the new tools of communication. Yet, with privilege comes obligation—at least for those happy few who understand what good literature is like in the Japanese language. You have the obligation to let the rest of the world know that most of what they are given to read today—the popular culture under the guise of literature—is only a shadow—a travesty of what modern Japanese literature once was. You have the obligation to point them towards the height that language once attained—and the significance of such a moment in world history when a non-Western language lived the golden age of the novel, concurrently with the West, sharing a global consciousness with the West while living in radically different world of its own.

And if it is not too much to ask of you, you should tell the Japanese people that they really have to do better—that they have an obligation of their own, that they owe it not only to themselves but also to the entire world of humanity to serve their language better.

Thank you.