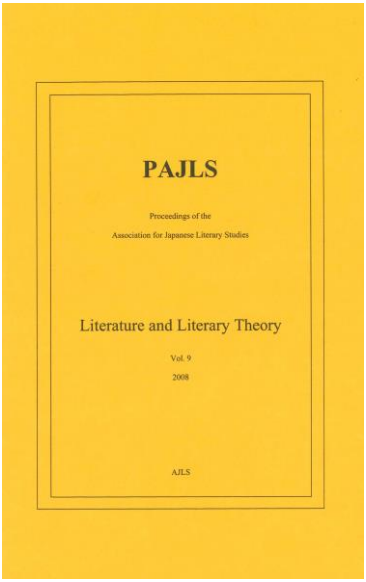
“Discussant’s Comments on ‘Rethinking Sōseki’s *Bungakuron*: A Centennial Celebration’”

Brett de Bary

Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies 9 (2008): 64–69.



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

Discussant's Comments on "Rethinking Sōseki's *Bungakuron*: A Centennial Celebration"

Brett de Bary
Cornell University

Let me start by thanking Richard Okada and Atsuko Ueda for organizing this thought-provoking conference on "Literature and Literary Theory." It's clear that the absence of "Japanese" as a modifier of "literature" in this case is not the result of an oversight, but is intentional, just as the incorporation of "theory" into the conference's subject matter reads as an explicit call for us to participate, in a process of historicization and of reflection on the institutionalized object of our study. The panoply of papers and topics presented over the past few days certainly suggests that over the past decade we have participated in a powerful transformation of our scholarly protocols and assumptions. It is a transformation I might very broadly characterize as manifested in a heightened awareness of the constructedness of boundaries at different levels—whether it be on the level of the text or so-called scholarly artifact; on the levels of national language and national culture (which, in a formative period for postwar Japanese Studies were so routinely invoked as a means of contextualizing the scholarly artifact and investing it with meaning); and in our conception of the boundaries of the subject of enunciation (as gendered, racial, ethnic, and so forth) in any given discourse or language regime.

It is perhaps appropriate to think of this problematization of boundaries that has occurred over the past decade not only as the product of our conscious, and conscientious, efforts to come to terms with the layered sociality that inheres in our knowledge practices themselves, but more precisely as an ineluctable product of our engagement with a history that constantly confronts us with rupture, contingency, and enigma. For example, and to speak broadly again, it seems to me that the papers presented at this conference—whether they have dealt with modern or premodern materials—must necessarily problematize boundaries insofar as they situate themselves in a post-Cold War context in which the concept of "region" is being defined in new ways. While what were called "regions" were usually subordinated to the national and defined as *sub-national* units during the Cold War, regions that do *not* conform to national boundaries are the subject of much work in Japanese Studies, and elsewhere, today. As Japan scholars we are now undertaking new work on cultural forms, whether produced by an earlier colonialism or contemporary global capital, that interpellate hybrid subjects or, against the fraught backdrop of an earlier Japanese imperialism, attempt to produce new regional imaginaries. Reconsideration of the "regional" today also requires that we attend to new forms of Japanese complicity with American military power as it attempts to stabilize itself within dramatically reconfigured East Asian power relations.

I also want to thank the organizers of this panel for inviting me to discuss their papers. To do so in the presence of authors of path-breaking Sōseki criticism like Komori Yōichi and Pak Yuha (whose book, *Nashionaru aidentitei to jendaa: Sōseki, bungaku, kindai* was published this year, 2007, by Kurein Press in Tokyo) is a particular honor. I'm also pleased this panel is extending the kinds of reflections on Sōseki commenced by our panel chair, Joe Murphy, in his book *Metaphorical Circuits* (published by the Cornell East Asia Series in 2004). New work by members of this panel will appear in a volume of translations of Sōseki criticism forthcoming from Columbia University Press, as well as in a special issue of articles on the subject in *Japan*

Forum (vol. 20. no. 1, March, 2008). As products of a sustained labor of critical reading and translation of literary theory written in Japanese, these projects represent a significant challenge to the way our field is still overwhelmingly configured around the hierarchized structure of the Japanese artifact as *explanandum* (object of explanation) and theory produced in the Euroamerican academy as *explanans*. As someone whose earlier professional life was deeply engaged by struggles over "theory and Japanese Studies," I continue to find misguided and conservative all attempts to claim that an authentic ground of Japanese cultural production should remain uncontaminated by "foreign" theory. Yet I cannot fail to notice that, after more than two decades of such debate, the gesture of presenting the Asian artifact as *explanandum*, to be interpreted by "theory" introduced quite unproblematically from the Euroamerican academy as the generality opposed to the particular example, is pervasive—it is one I too often fall back on in my own writing. The practice has, if anything, been enormously strengthened by the global contemporary movement to restructure universities, by the emergence of English as the academic *lingua franca*, and by the requirement of many universities around the world today that scholars publish in English-language academic journals. I think we are at a historical moment when many in Asian Studies would see this asymmetry as the persistence of a certain kind of post-coloniality. But to develop new modes of critical engagement that avoid repeating such structures and oppositions of modernity will be very difficult.

The papers on this panel, presented at a conference on "Literature and Literary Theory," are explicitly committed to addressing such problems. Not only do they focus on a text, produced in turn-of-the-century Japan, that names itself as a theoretical project, but they seek, in different but complementary ways, to historicize how and why this project should be seen as theoretical. Atsuko Sakaki's paper most directly sets up such a framework by viewing Sōseki's project in an explicit comparison with the process by which Continental texts were selectively used to establish a "theory syllabus" for American universities in the late 1980s (the difference being that Sōseki, in one sense, sought to disseminate norms of the British imperial center into "peripheral" Japan). Sakaki points out that *Bungakuron*, with its attempts to appropriate for itself the authority of modern science, drew on a broad range of materials in disregard of disciplinary divides, exemplifying the vibrant self-reflexivity John Guillory has found lacking in the contemporary American syllabus, where "literary theory" represents a sadly constricted intellectual discourse. Yuko Iida, drawing on psychoanalytic theory, reader-response theory, and phenomenology, presents an in-depth consideration of the neglected concept of the reader's *genwaku* or "illusion" in *Bungakuron*, pointing out that Sōseki delineates an experience of anxiety that might be linked to the positionality of the "minor" reader. Michael Bourdaghs and Mark Anderson, while taking as a mark of resistance the way *Bungakuron* rejects positivistic, linear schemas of causality that would privilege British literature or the "West," simultaneously point out the text's debt to the hierarchical, evolutionary schemas of "civilization" within which modernizing Japan formulated its own imperial nationalism.

In a basic sense, all the papers on this panel take *Bungakuron* to be *theoretical* insofar as it does *not* take its own knowledge practices, or their object, to be self-evident. But we should also link these papers' explication of the "theoretical" to some of the necessary concerns of post-Cold War Japan Studies I have mentioned above. Internal inconsistencies and a lack of systematicity has been one reason cited for *Bungakuron*'s failure to find an audience, and to be translated, beyond Japan. As Bourdaghs points out, Sōseki acknowledges in his preface that the text is based on the notes of his student, Nakagawa Yoshitarō; "an unusually large portion of the work consists of extended quotations" from works by others, calling to mind the fragmented

structure of Walter Benjamin's famous Arcades Project. However, rather than taking this failure of integration as a fault, an aspect of Japan's inauthentic modernity, as an earlier Japan Studies might have done, today's papers are more interested in situating the text within the contradictory, conflictual process of modern nation building, and as registering the unevenness of capitalist modernity. These papers go beyond Karatani's assertion that *Bungakuron* articulates a sense of alienation from "literature" to show how it evidences the very unnaturalness of "Japanese language" and "culture" at the time.[1] Moreover, in stressing the text's preoccupation with the reader and reading, the papers remind us that *Bungakuron* was composed while reading habits were undergoing a major transformation with the emergence of print capitalism in Japan. The practice of communal recitation, which Atsuko Ueda (in *Concealment of Politics, Politics of Concealment*, [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007]) has noted remained the dominant mode of consumption of the political novels (*seiji shōsetsu*) of the 1870s, was being replaced in Sōseki's time by the silent and solitary reading of printed books. That today's papers tend to find the fragmentary, aporetic nature of *Bungakuron* as precisely what defines it as a productive site for theory, certainly reflects the intellectual eclipse in our own time of the models of Japanese cultural homogeneity that dominated earlier postwar scholarship. Post-colonial studies, media studies, and translation studies appear to offer more helpful points of entry to the concerns of *Bungakuron*.

In this vein, we may return to Atsuko Sakaki's paper which opens up striking insights on *Bungakuron* by considering how the text both negotiates, and reflects on, matters of language. It was quite common for the emerging nations of 18th and 19th century Europe, wrote Susan Bassnett in her 1993 *Comparative Literature*, to embark on large-scale projects of translating foreign literatures as a way of discovering, through comparison, the distinctive qualities of their own, newly defined, national traditions.[2] Sakaki's rich analysis situates *Bungakuron* as participating in a Japanese modernity which is itself a massive process of translation, and yet attempting to stand apart from it. She offers us a rather post-modern Sōseki: a "decentered subject," committed to living "on the thresholds or boundaries of literature and science, literature and theory, literature and language, rhetoric and linguistics, English and Chinese." Sōseki's critical practice was affected by the contingencies of this process. Most importantly in relation to *Bungakuron*, Sakaki is compelled by Guillory's observations of the way analysis of language and rhetoric are often emphasized when foreign literatures are incorporated into national literary curricula. It is an insight that allows her to prise *Bungakuron* away from a culturalist reading. She notes with precision the words with which Sōseki claims that it is not grammar and syntax that differentiate Japanese and English but "a delicate shade of meaning that has a certain rhythm attached to it." I can't help recalling Benjamin's examples, in the "Task of the Translator," of *pain* and *brot* in French and German ("what is meant is the same, but the *way* of meaning it is not," he says).[3] Sōseki's insistence on the "delicate shade of meaning" is a reference to rhetoric, Sakaki maintains, and one which creates a commonality between the way he situates *both* Chinese *and* English in relation to Japanese. While Sōseki's reference to a "delicate shade of meaning" has often been seen as evidence of his struggle with the West and of the incommensurable cultural distance between the West and Japan, Sakaki points to Sōseki's familiarity with classical rhetoric in both Chinese and English, and concludes, ". . . the difference

[1] Karatani Kōjin, *Kindai bungaku no kigen* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1980).
[2] Susan Bassnett, *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1993).
[3] Walter Benjamin, "Task of the Translator" compiled in *Illuminations*, edited and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt; translated by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).

Natsume observes should be qualified as historical rather than cultural." I find this contribution of the paper extremely important because it extricates Sōseki's texts from the kinds of culturalist readings that have proven difficult to avoid when one attempts to counter the hegemony of Euroamerican theory. Sakaki's explication of Sōseki's "delicate shade," which resembles Benjamin's materialist notion that linguistic difference is a mode or *way*, avoids both the traps of essentializing the differences between national languages and its obverse, the concept of a purely ideational meaning that, in modern communications models, is simply translated unchanged from language to language.

Yuko Iida's sophisticated paper also makes its starting point a matter of translation. She points out that rereadings of *Bungakuron* made possible by the 2002 publication of a second set of lecture notes (those of Kaneko Saburō, another student of Sōseki's and contemporary of Nakagawa Yoshitarō) have asserted that the positionality of the *reader* is the site where "literary content is transposed according to the F+f formula." Rather than a formalist definition of the reader, Sōseki explores the embodied sensations of the reader, Iida claims, pointing out that Sōseki uses the Japanese term *genwaku* and the English term "illusion" interchangeably to analyze the experience of the reader. While Sōseki's extensive notes offer no specific reference for this term, Iida suggests a potentially fruitful line of inquiry which would situate *Bungakuron*'s focus on *genwaku*/illusion in the broad context of concerns for the nature of the aesthetic object and aesthetic judgment pursued by intellectuals in nineteenth century Asia and the West. While Sōseki drew primarily on sources from British criticism and literature, other Japanese contemporaries drew on German Neo-Kantianism (Hartmann and Volkelt) in their attempts to link aesthetic experience to concepts of judgment and value. Rather than analyze this as a matter of "Western influence" on Sōseki or Japan, we can certainly link the preoccupation with aesthetic value at this time to the attempts of thinkers at many different sites to grapple with the experiential dimensions of the new practices and new social divisions accompanying the advent of capitalist modernity. In such a vein, we might also ask how Sōseki's "illusion" relates to the process of "hallucinating an imaginary world" that Friedrich Kittler said needed to be acquired by readers of an emerging print capitalism.[4] But throughout her paper Iida emphasizes that *Bungakuron*'s reader is a site of conflation, conflict, and division: relations between author, text, and reader become muddied here. While some psychoanalytic theories might lead us to take Sōseki's "reader" as the site of a transferential relationship between the reader and the text, Iida posits more strongly that *genwaku* is in the realm of the Lacanian imaginary, and that the author's text is a mirror in which the reader strives to find a reflection (an "illusion," to be sure) of the self. The conflation and confusions that characterize Sōseki's reader resonate, for her, with the discomfiture and depression Sōseki himself experienced as a reader of British literature. As an Asian reader, he would find it all the more difficult to find his *imago* in an "Other" that is the West. Iida asks that we give more attention to the specifically "minor" reader that is delineated in *Bungakuron*. If so, I would suggest that the work on race and "double-consciousness" of W. E. B. Du Bois, and the psychoanalytic theory of Frantz Fanon, would also be pertinent in relation to Sōseki.[5]

---

[4] Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks, 1800/1900*, Michael Metteer trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

[5] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, edited with an introduction by David W. Blight and Robert Gooding-Williams (Boston : Bedford Books, 1997). Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Charles Lam Markmann trans. (New York : Grove Weidenfeld, 1968).

If the papers in this panel reflect the eclipse of interpretive strategies based on models of national culture, Yuko Iida's and Mark Anderson's papers constitute an especially interesting juxtaposition. By noting *Bungakuron*'s concern for an *embodied* reader, Iida exposes how the text negotiates the instabilities of modern subject formation, riven by the discordant demands of interpellation into national and ethnic/racial identities. If Iida's *dokusha* must deal with the vicissitudes of minoritarian identity, though, Anderson points out that this was part and parcel of the very nationalism through which late 19th century Japan had to define itself as modern. More precisely, this was a violence inherent in its coerced entry into the world market on terms set by the imperial "West." Against earlier postwar tendencies to heroize Sōseki's "loneliness," Anderson situates *Bungakuron* in its historical relation to Japanese participation in the suppression of the Boxer rebellion (1900), and its imminent annexation of Korea as a protectorate under international law. These were matters whose cultural significance was given short shrift in postwar scholarship which downplayed the imperialist history of Japan, Cold War America's East Asian protégé. Anderson agrees with Sakaki and Iida that "the readerly self in *Bungakuron* is potentially divided and not always present." For him it is because of the "specter of empire and imperial hierarchy" that haunts its every effort to challenge the colonial order of knowledge. For example, Anderson shows that, while Sōseki may have turned to the discipline of psychology in an effort to a counter a positivist stage-theory of history which would marginalize "literature" in the non-West, his psychological schema nevertheless links reading to "stages" of consciousness based on a civilizational hierarchy. What purports to be a liberal pedagogy advocated by Sōseki's text subscribes, in fact, to the same hierarchical distinctions of consciousness that underwrote Matthew Arnold's notions of culture and cultivation so influential in Britain at the time. The prevalence of such Arnoldian models of culture, in Sōseki's day and our own, have discouraged literary scholars from studying *Bungakuron* in relation to overtly political contemporary Japanese texts like Kōtoku Shūsui's *Imperialism* (1901), yet Anderson suggests that such comparisons would add complexity to our understanding of the contradictions of Sōseki's text.

Finally, Mike Bourdaghs' provocative analysis looks at the fissures of *Bungakuron* in terms of the continuities and discontinuities across the realms of the economic, the legal, and the cultural in Meiji Japan. "Natsume Sōseki," as a "position" worked out in texts that bear that signature, and "Natsume Kinnosuke," as legal owner of the copyright and income those texts produced, constitute a doubling or bifurcation that signify *Bungakuron*'s participation in the new legal infrastructure established by the Copyright Law of 1899. The law emerged in tandem with the industrialization of printing, which I have already referred to above in relation to *Bungakuron*'s preoccupation with new reading practices. But it was also in response to the imperial powers' insistence that systems of property rights were an essential ingredient of "civilization," a view we know Japan took seriously when it became, in its turn, a colonial power in Korea. The construction of the legal infrastructure of a capitalist economy made it possible for Japan to win abolition of the Unequal Treaties; but Bourdaghs allows us to see that such institutional and economic processes were hardly divorced from the emergence of aesthetic value as a central problem in the early twentieth century. The F+f formula that has elicited so much commentary from *Bungakuron*'s readers is problematized in an entirely new light when Bourdaghs examines it in what might, at first glance, seem to be a far-fetched relation to copyright law: if "f" represents something in *excess* of the literal that makes a text "literary," then copyright law is what allows this intangible excess to be defined as a form of property or capital. Such developments, rather than influence studies, plausibly explain the shared

preoccupation of writers in Japan and Europe with the question of "value" and "aesthetics" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

My comments above have explored some of the shared themes in the four papers presented on the panel. In conclusion, I will note, and suggest that further attention should be given to, a few perspectives that have not been taken up in the papers. First, while the papers devote considerable time to analyzing *Bungakuron* in relation to the construction of national and racialized identity, none take up the issue of gender. I find this curious. If, as Atsuko Sakaki observes Sōseki left the English passages of his text untranslated, could this also be related to the exclusion of women from university education and the generally homosocial character of relations in the Meiji literary world? This question is taken up by Pak Yuha in her newly published book, and has been explored by Keith Vincent at this conference. Since scholars like Lori Chamberlain have examined the gendered metaphorics of copyright laws, this would be fruitful to pursue in the Japanese context, as well.[6] Such studies might make visible the links between ideologies of literary reproduction and modern theories of race and eugenics, explored in "The Human in the Humanities" in Emily Apter's recent book, *Translation Zone*, and might provide another point of resonance between papers by Bourdaghs and Anderson.[7] Finally, many of the papers might make a more explicit attempt to historicize the readings of Sōseki their own work does so much to counter. Here again, I would strongly recommend turning to the recent contributions to Sōseki scholarship of Pak Yuha. Her voluminously researched book is more critical of Sōseki's nationalism than the papers we have heard today. Her research on the process through which Etō Jun and other postwar critics transformed the Meiji period Sōseki into the lonely, skeptical individualist we have known through the postwar canon is extremely informative.

[6] Lori Chamberlain, "Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation" *Signs*, vol. 13, no. 3 (Spring, 1988).
[7] Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).