“The European Border of Japanese Literature”

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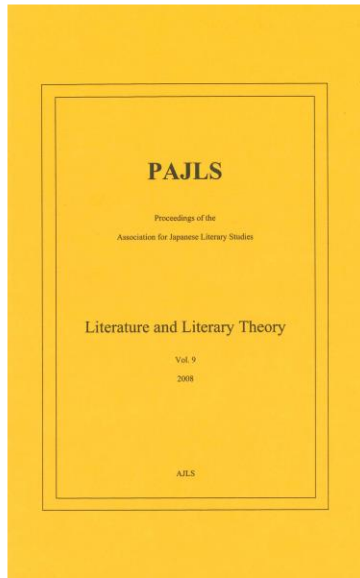
Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies 9 (2008): 93–99.



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

The European Border of Japanese Literature

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The aim of my paper is to introduce a few "Japanese" writers as representatives of a different "Japaneseness," one in which Europe is not only a cultural referent but also a relevant part of their identity. In doing so, I hope to contribute to a possible answer to the unsettled question of what makes a writer a Japanese writer: I shall consider it from the perspective of whether it is someone born in Japan, someone who writes in Japanese, someone who shares in the Japanese cultural and emotional world, and other such issues.

The first Japanese author writing in a European language who would probably leap to everyone's mind is Kazuo Ishiguro. It is difficult to consider him representative, however: if not an English writer, he is more a migrant than a Japanese.[1] His links with Japan have faded, and his imaginative world is far more European than Japanese.

I intend to start my discussion, then, with a writer who sums up all of the above distinctive features: Tawada Yōko (born in Tokyo, 1960). She is now well-known all over the world, as her work reaches Japanese-speaking and German-speaking readers; and she herself has visited various universities in North America, lecturing in Montreal and at Columbia, Tufts, Brown, and Amherst in 2006, and at Penn State in 2007. As a book about her work has also been published, I need not introduce her in any detail.[2]

Among the many writings she has produced, she herself suggested that three of them might be of interest for the purpose of this paper[3]: *Where Europe Begins* (2002), a collection of stories for the most part originally written in German, *Yōgisha no yakō ressha* (Suspects on Board a Night Train, 2002) and *Ekusofonī: bogo no soto e deru tabi* (Exophonie: Leaving My Mother Tongue, 2003).[4]

Yōgisha no yakō ressha consists of 13 chapters, each narrating a trip to a different town in a different country, as well as the emotions and thoughts of the narrator. The theme of different languages and cultures underlies the whole work: nevertheless, it is difficult to extract any one passage which specifically focuses on the issue. One of the more significant is to be found in the last chapter, "Bound to a Nowhere Town" (Dokodemonai machi e): "Here, we are on board. There are people talking in variety of ways. Those who cannot [bear to] listen to the talk of others had better get off." [5] More than illustrating a personal choice of

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[1] Such writers also include Fujimori Asuka (born in Tokyo, 1978), who writes in French, although her novels are much more "Japanese" in theme and atmosphere.

[2] Doug Slaymaker, ed., *Yōko Tawada: Voices from Everywhere* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007). Perhaps I should add that she has won literary awards both in Japan and in Germany: the Gunzō Prize (1991), the Akutagawa Prize (1992), the Kawabata Literary Award (1995), the Women's Literary Award (1996), the Tanizaki Jun'ichirō Prize, the Itō Sei Literary Award (2003), the City of Hamburg Prize (1990), the Adelbert von Chamisso Prize (1996), and the Goethe Medaille (2005).

[3] Personal correspondence with the author by e-mail, July 8-12, 2007.

[4] The bulk of *Where Europe Begins* was originally published in 1990 as *Wo Europa anfaengt*, which won the City of Hamburg Prize. All of Tawada's books are published in Germany by konkursbuch Verlag Claudia Gehrke. Furthermore, *Yōgisha no yakō ressha* won the Tanizaki Jun'ichirō and Itō Sei Awards in 2003.

[5] Tawada Yōko, *Yōgisha no yakō ressha* (Tokyo: Seidosha, 2002), 162.
Translated into French by Ryōko Sekiguchi and Bernard Banoun as *Train de nuit avec suspects* (Paris: Verdier, 2005).

internationalization, the passage states the necessity of mixing different cultures. In a sense, the narrator here denies her own interiorization of non-Japanese culture. In a previous passage, however, she writes: "She was looking without astonishment at her body which, she did not notice when, had changed into that of a hermaphrodite."[6] This can almost be construed as an admission that things change, which can be accepted as a natural occurence. As a result, a different culture can become her own.

Far more interesting is *Where Europe Begins,* although I have to rely upon a translation which, no matter how faithful, is inevitably to some degree an intepretation of the original text. In *Storytellers Without Souls*, originally written in German, the author, speaking in the first person, gives a very significant description of her attempt to understand the "powerful imaginary gap (*mizo*) . . . in which Tawada lives."[7]

> The first time I came to Europe on the Trans-Siberian Railway, I lost my soul. When I boarded the train to go back, my soul was still on its way to Europe. When I traveled to Europe once more, my soul was still making its way back to Japan. Later I flew back and forth so many times I no longer know where my soul is.[8]

Moreover, she here underlines that "border" is a term that cannot be used in a cultural sense, as a limit needs a concrete form to be effective and is not simply a space. Indeed, in *Where Europe Begins,* the eponymous story of the collection, we find the following statement:

> For my grandmother, to travel was to drink foreign water. . . . When I was a little girl, I never believed there was such a thing as foreign water, for I had always thought of the globe as a sphere of water with all sorts of small and large islands swimming on it. Water had to be the same everywhere. Sometimes in sleep I heard the murmur of the water that flowed beneath the main island of Japan. The border surrounding the island was also made of water that ceaselessly beat against the shore in waves. How can one say where the place of foreign water begins when the border itself is water?[9]

Here I find not only a statement of the impossibility of keeping various cultures distinct one from another, but also an intellectual refusal to see them as something distinct, as she says: "I never believed there was such a thing as foreign water." Another interesting passage can be found in the story *A Guest* (this, too, originally in German), attesting to the many difficulties she encountered as a foreigner in Europe. At a flea market she notices a book on the cover of which there are "letters written not from left to right, but in a circle" and asks the seller in what language the book is written:

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[6] Tawada, *Yōgisha no yakō ressha*, 92.
[7] See Reiko Tachibana, "Nomadic Writers of Japan: Tawada Yōko and Mizumura Minae," in Eiji Sekine, ed., *PAJLS*, vol. 2, (Summer 2001), 402.
[8] Tawada Yōko, *Where Europe Begins,* translated from the German by Susan Bernofsky and from the Japanese by Yumi Seden (New York: New Directions, 2002), 107; this collection includes miscellaneous works from 1989 to 2002: *Wo Europe anfaengt* 1990, *Talisman* 1996, and others.
[9] Tawada, *Where Europe Begins*, 121 and 122-23.

> He shrugged his shoulders and said it wasn't a book, it was a mirror.
>
> Maybe it isn't a book, I conceded, but I would still like to know what's going on with this writing.
>
> The man grinned and replied: To our eyes, you look exactly like this writing. That's why I said it was a mirror.
>
> I rubbed my forehead from left to right, as if rewriting my face.[10]

In an interview, Tawada has said: "I had the impression that German was rapidly penetrating into me; there were also very unpleasant sensations. I was tired—anyway there was curiosity, too, as I wished to better understand the true character of the foreign language that was penetrating into me."[11] At the same time, in another part of the former story, she goes to an ear specialist, who after the examination delivers the diagnosis: "You are pregnant." This is a vivid portrait of her interiorization of the new language, or rather the acknowledgement that the new language is going to be her own flesh and blood.

Tawada's most significant work is nevertheless *Exophonie*, the title of which directly states its subject: voices from outside. The book is composed of two sections, the first one dealing with a number of intercultural problems.[12] There are twenty chapters, each given the name of a town. In the first, "Dakar. Exophonie: A Plain Fact," Tawada explains that writers of *exophonie* are different from migrant writers, writers abroad, or writers of creole literature, whose language is "creolized." Going out of one's "voice," one's language, does not necessarily mean going out of one's country. In Senegal, writers use French as their literary language, leaving the local language without leaving their country. *Exophonie* thus has a considerably wider scope, including writers who simply leave their mother tongue, as Tawada does, even if only partially.

In "Los Angeles: The Poetic Interval between Languages," she proclaims her poetics:

> I am not particularly interested in learning many languages. I feel that the threshold (*hazama*) between two mother tongues is more important than the tongues themselves. I do not wish to become a writer who writes both in one and another language. I would prefer to find and proceed along the canyon (*kyōkoku*) between the two.[13]

Again, in the following chapter, "Paris: One Language isn't a Single Language," in which she deals with Paul Celan, her favorite author, she writes: "I did not want to go across the border but to become the master of it. That is why I feel something more important than the language itself in the wavering instant when the border crossing can be realized."[14]

One wonders, at this point, to what extent we can think of as "Japanese" someone who not only writes in German and lives in Germany, but also, even while writing in Japanese, wants

[10] Tawada, *Where Europe Begins*, 153-54.

[11] Quoted in Kondō Hiroko, "Tawada Yōko," in *Nakazawa Kei, Tawada Yōko, Ogino Anna, Ogawa Yōko* (Tokyo: Kadokawa shoten, 1998), 442.

[12] The first section is entitled *Bogo no soto e deru tabi* (Leaving My Mother Tongue), which is also the subtitle to the work. The second one, *Doitsugo no bōken* (Adventure with the German Language), is of no special interest here, as it deals only with her problematic encounters with German.

[13] Tawada Yōko, *Ekusofonī: bogo no soto e deru tabi* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2003), 31-32.

[14] Tawada, *Ekusofonī*, 35.

to remain outside the border of a Japanese uniqueness. Is Tawada to be considered a Japanese writer? I think she has to be. However, I would propose including Amélie Nothomb in the same category.

Amélie Nothomb was born in Japan, near Kobe, and lived there until she was five years old. In those formative years for a child, she had a beloved Japanese nurse and attended a Japanese preschool. After wandering from Asia to America, she settled in Belgium to attend university. At 21, she again went to Japan and spent two years there experiencing a very different Japan, which she portrayed in *Stupeur et tremblements* (Fear and Trembling, 1999).[15] This won the Académie Française Gran Prix, and her most recent work, *Ni d'Eve ni d'Adam* (Neither Eve nor Adam, 2007) was just awarded the Prix de Flora.

Her work is mostly autobiographical, and a memory of her first experience of Japan is portrayed in *Métaphysique des tubes* (The Character of Rain, 2000), where she states: "I speak frapponaise," and still more outspokenly, "To me, there were not languages, but a single great language of which I could choose the Japanese or the French variants. . . . Early, I chose my field. . . . I'll be Japanese."[16] Although she is referring to her childhood here, she still insists on her "Japaneseness" as an adult in her recent novel, *Ni d'Eve ni d'Adam*. Climbing up to the top of mount Fuji with her boyfriend, she writes: "It was my dream. Tradition has it that at least once in his/her lifetime a Japanese person has to climb to the top of Mt. Fuji, or s/he does not deserve the prestigeous nationality. I, who eagerly wished to become Japanese, saw in that climb a marvellous means of attaining it."[17] In an interview from 1999 she states: "I can accept that I am a Belgian writer, on the condition that a French person or a Chinese can, too," meaning that one's fatherland cannot be limited to a single country.[18] In a different interview, she states: "At last, I understood that my sole and true nationality was exile," but all the same she writes: "Early I realized that my only identity was my tongue, as it was the only thing I did not lose every three years," and "Beyond words, I do not exist."[19] Thus she is unable to give up her language, the *frapponais*, which is the distinctive feature of her double nationality. This search for a Japanese identity, as a Belgian, brings her into a space similar to Tawada's.

The themes that run through her work—an instinctive cruelty, the torturer-victim duality, the occasional hatred of self, and a kind of yearning for spirituality—are often featured in contemporary Japanese fiction, chiefly in women's writings, as is evident in the works of two recent winners of the Akutagawa Award: Wataya Risa (*Keritai senaka*) and Kanehara Hitomi (*Hebi ni piasu*). A subtle irony underlies Kanehara's writings, one which is likewise to be found in those of both Tawada and Nothomb. Nothomb puns with the names of characters, just as Tawada does, although her puns do not exactly follow the Japanese tradition, where names tend to suggest one or more of a character's features. It is significant that Nothomb lists among her favorite women writers, along with Murasaki Shikibu and Sei Shōnagon, her contemporary Ogawa Yōko.[20] Ogawa's works partly share Nothomb's world in their subtle cruelty, in putting disturbed characters on the stage, and in the same use of a surreal atmosphere. Modern Japanese fiction, like Nothomb's, draws on what Laureline Amanieux defines as the "rhetoric of the

[15] Amélie Nothomb, *Stupeur et tremblements* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999). All of her novels are published by Albin Michel.
[16] Amélie Nothomb, *Métaphysique des tubes* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2000), 49 and 66.
[17] Amélie Nothomb, *Ni d'Éve ni d'Adam* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2007), 114.
[18] Quoted in Laureline Amanieux, *Amélie Nothomb, l'éternelle affamée* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2005), 51.
[19] Quoted in Amanieux, *Amélie Nothomb, l'éternelle affamée*, 308, 104, and 319 respectively.
[20] Personal correspondence with the author, September 2007.

excess," the difference being the *hikikomori* attitude among most contemporary writers' characters and the repressed but underlying hunger for life and its value in Nothomb.[21]

Amélie Nothombe was born in Japan to a Belgian family, moved to many different places following a diplomat father, and now lives mostly in Paris, so her physical space is not restricted to a fixed country. She shares her creative world with a number of Japanese women writers, writes about Japan, and yearns for "Japaneseness." Is she a Japanese writer? To see her as one is perfectly plausibile if we accept the existence of a border-crossing space, the operational ambience of writers born in Japan, who have chosen a "somewhere else" to live while keeping alive their connection with Japan: a space between, the "threshold" or "canyon" which Tawada holds so dear.

Two other writers reside in that same "mental" territory, both with strong ties to Italy: Shiono Nanami and Suga Atsuko. Shiono Nanami (Tokyo, 1937) has received numerous awards,[22] although in the world of literary criticism, her books are considered popular novels, and it is difficult to find any critical writings about them. Shiono's works are products of constant research into events stretching from the history of the Roman empire (15 volumes), through the Italian Renaissance (which was her starting point), up to modernity: the Communist Party and the Pope. None of these works has been translated into Italian, but English translations exist of *The Fall of Constantinople* (1983, English 2005), *The Siege of Rhodes* (1985, English 2006), and *The Battle of Lepanto* (1987, English 2007).[23]

Shiono Nanami went to Italy after receiving a degree from Gakushūin University. Returning to Japan, she made her literary debut in 1968 with installments of *Women of the Renaissance*.[24] In 1970 she was again in Italy and shortly afterwards married an Italian physician, settling in Florence. She later divorced and moved to Rome in 1993, where she still lives. In an interview, speaking of the fall of the Roman Empire, she suggests its link with her homeland and then states: "I do not consciously think of conditions in Japan when I write the history of Rome," stressing that her distance from her country is not only physical but mental.[25]

She writes in Japanese and has won success in Japan, but has been living in Italy since 1970 and writes only about the history of the territory belonging to the present Italian state or to its former states, a history which, rightly or wrongly, we Italians consider ours. It is worth asking, then, why she should be considered a standard Japanese writer, and to what extent language exceeds the poetical world of the author. I would like to propose an extravagant comparison. Marco Polo could not write his memoirs by himself, and so we find renderings of his experiences written by Rustichello da Pisa: then Italy was only "a geographical expression." Rustichello, a Tuscan, wrote down in his own language the stories that Marco Polo, a Venetian, was narrating—thus those from a different and adversarial maritime Republic. Had Shiono narrated her stories to a Tuscan, to which country would her work be allocated? Perhaps she, too, is to be thought of as a border-crossing writer, rather than a Japanese one.

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[21] See Amanieux, *Amélie Nothomb, l'éternelle affamée*, 289.

[22] The Asahi Shinbun Cultural Award (1970), the Suntory Literary Award (1982), the Kikuchi Kan Prize (1983), the Women's Literary Award (1988), the Shinchō Prize (1993) and the Shiba Ryōtarō Award (1999).

[23] Shiono Nanami, *Konsutantinōporu no kanbotsu* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1983); Shiono Nanami, *Rodosushima kōbōki* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1985); and Shiono Nanami, *Repanto no kaisen* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1987).

[24] "Runessansu no onnatachi," *Chūōkōron* (April-September 1968). It first came out in book form the following year.

[25] Shiono Nanami, "Political Dysfunction and the Decline of Empire" in *Gaikō forum*, English edition, vol. 2, no.1 (Winter, 2002), 67.

The other writer related to Italy, Suga Atsuko (1929-1998), is now gaining popularity not only among readers but also in the critical world, both in Japan and internationally. Suga went to Italy after graduating, returning to Japan for a while before going back to Italy. She then married a left-wing catholic intellectual 3 years later. She returned to Japan in 1971, when her husband suddenly died, to become a professor of Comparative Literature at Sophia University.[26]

She began her career as a writer years later. Her first Japanese work was *Mirano kiri no fūkei* (Milan, Landscapes in the Fog, 1990), published when she was 61 years old and which received the Kodansha Essay Award and Women's Literary Award.[27] Most of Suga's works are focused on Italy, with the exception of an important essay on Marguerite Yourcenar. She writes on literature and, as creative writing, on memories of her Italian experience—from 1958 to 1971—that move between *zuihitsu* and fiction. In the essays, and in various magazine interviews, her choice of Italy as her homeland emerges very clearly.

In various writings she expresses her deep attraction to Italy and its language:

> After wandering from English to French, feeling the sense that I could not find what I was looking for, I met the Italian language . . . there was something in it that I could gulp down. . . .[28] My impression was that I had reached the place where I had to be, where I could put my roots down. . . . To me, the sound of the language was beautiful in itself. Such a language I could speak properly. . . . Here I can say all I want to.[29]

In "The Europe Inside Me," which is a conversation with the scholar Ikezawa Natsuki, we find the following:

> My idea was to live all my life in Italy. . . . In the dim night train [from France to Italy], I could hear some Italians speaking in the next-door compartment and soon I felt I was back home. . . . I strongly feel like my internal world lacks something if I limit myself to Japanese. . . . To put it in somewhat exaggerated terms, before going to Italy I had to search for words. Once in Italy, I thought that in using that language I could express the whole of myself . . . using that language I could fully live my life. . . . My friends say: "When you speak in Japanese you are a different person from the one you are when you are speaking in Italian." My impression is that I unburden myself; perhaps I could say that I get a new self.[30]

Her affection for Italy is explained at various points, but the reasons for her preference are essentially emotional. In "Crossing the Border of the Soul," a conversation with the multilingual Italian writer Antonio Tabucchi, she refers again to the episode on the Italy-bound train:

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[26] She was later a visiting professor at various Italian universities, but no work deals with these experiences.

[27] Suga Atsuko, *Mirano kiri no fūkei* (Tokyo: Hakusuisha, 1990).

[28] Suga Atsuko, *Itariago to watashi*, in *Suga Atsuko zenshū*, vol. 2 (Tokyo: Kawade shobō, 2000), 434-5.

[29] Suga Atsuko, *Seiyō teki naru mono wo megutte*, in *Suga Atsuko zenshū bekkan* (Tokyo: Kawade shobō, 2000), 10 and 12.

[30] Suga Atsuko, *Waga uchi naru Yōroppa* (a *taidan* with Ikezawa Natsuki), in *Suga Atsuko zenshū bekkan* (Tokyo: Kawade shobō, 2000), 84, 92, 98 and 99.

> In the compartment of the night train bound to Rome I happened to hear the conversations of workers going back to their native places. I felt as if I had a memory of those voices, as if I had heard them before somewhere in my life. . . . It's strange, but in that language there was something familiar. I am a native of Kansai, but when I was 8 years old I came to Tokyo with my family. I felt a sense of incompatibility with the language of Tokyo; I felt it somehow piercing. To me, Paris has become Tokyo and Rome Kansai! I am sure that in my former life I was Italian![31]

However, she clearly failed to be satisfied with this citizenship, because in another conversation with Tabucchi she seems to choose to become a citizen of the world:

> I often wonder which language I'll die in! . . . When I read *The Edge of the Horizon* and *Indian Nocturne* I felt deeply attracted to their nomadism—maybe because I myself had such an experience. My ideal is to deliberately become "floating grass," as the old saying goes. I cannot seclude myself within one country alone, one landscape alone.[32]

We can say that she wanted to be Italian but could not help being Japanese: "I realized, after having written my books, that I wrote to take a step into Japanese culture."[33] As a result, as Takeya Naomi put it, she was a "nomad in the forest of languages."[34] Or as Ikezawa Natsuki maintains, she was a Japanese writer who crossed the border of Japaneseness to become "a woman reborn in a foreign country," and as Giorgio Amitrano describes her, living "more lives in one."[35] Born near Kobe, like Nothomb, Suga Atsuko, too, floated between two countries, her actual homeland and her emotional homeland; as such she, too, has to be thought of as a border-crossing writer, rooted in a multicultural world.

To return to the starting point of this paper: are these writers then Japanese? In my opinion they are, but, borrowing Amélie Nothomb's expression, *on the condition that* they be equally considered European writers. This of course does not mean that they are half-European and half-Japanese, but something else again: border-crossing writers. If people like Tawada, Suga, and Nothomb (Nothomb moving in the opposite direction) choose a different space to live in, there is possibly a special element in their choice. There is a will to proceed towards a different world and a different literature, one which deliberately crosses boundaries towards a kind of *imaginary homeland* (to borrow Salman Rushdie's term) where cultural expatriates gather—expatriate writers who have a far greater right than others to be identified as writers of "world literature."[36]

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[31] Suga Atsuko, *Tamashii no kokkyō wo koete*, in *Suga Atsuko zenshū bekkan* (Tokyo: Kawade shobō, 2000), 229-30.

[32] Suga Atsuko, *Bungaku no naka no nijusseiki no jikū*, in *Suga Atsuko zenshū bekkan* (Tokyo: Kawade shobō, 2000), 253 and 255.

[33] Suga, *Waga uchi naru Yōroppa*, 109.

[34] Takeya Naomi, "Kaisetsu: Kotoba no mori no hōrōsha" in *Suga Atsuko zenshū*, vol. 6 (Tokyo: Kawade shobō, 2000), 364.

[35] Ikezawa Natsuki, "Kaisetsu: Ikoku ni umarenaoshita hito," in *Suga Atsuko zenshū*, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Kawade Shobō, 2000), 410. Giorgio Amitrano, "Bungaku kūkan toshite no Italia—Suga Atsuko no sekai," paper presented at a symposium entitled "Itariakan no isseki: tabi to chi to bi," held at Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, June 29-30, 2007. Paper courtesy of the author.

[36] Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta Books, 1992), 10.