"De-Politicization of Literature: Social Darwinism and Interiority"

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DE-POLITICIZATION OF LITERATURE:
SOCIAL DARWINISM AND INTERIORITY

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Despite the varying reactions to Tsubouchi Shōyō's *Shōsetsu shinzui* (*The Essence of the Novel*, 1885), critics generally agree that it was the first work that called for the modernization of Japanese fiction. In our literary history, *Shōsetsu shinzui* is the origin of modern Japanese literature, and this is now rarely questioned. There is, in fact, a significant breach in our historical narrative. *Shōsetsu shinzui* embodies the modern, while all other works that precede are designated as a "not-yet-modernized" set of works. It is as if *Shōsetsu shinzui* was generated in a vacuum.

Needless to say, however, it was not produced in a vacuum. Once we turn our attention to the discursive space of its production, we see the various contingencies with which Shōyō negotiated in writing this seminal text. Inscribed in the text is the chaos of the time brought about by the unprecedented transformation Meiji Japan went through. Whether it be language, knowledge, or political and economic systems, nothing was clearly defined. Perhaps most significantly for Shōyō, the boundaries of Japanese literature were not clearly established. *Bungaku*, now a standard translation of literature, meant *gakumon* or *gakugei* (study or knowledge). *Shōsetsu*, now a standard translation for the novel, referred to writings often classified under history and politics. Moreover, literary writings were devalued in the early years of Meiji and were denigrated as works that were unworthy of attention. Fukuzawa Yukichi, for example, characterized literary writings as "impractical" for the modernizing nation.[1] In writing a text called *Shōsetsu shinzui*, therefore, Shōyō needed to produce an entity called *shōsetsu* that would deserve the name of the artistic novel, and in the process, establish literature as a discipline of its own that is worthy of study in the age of modernization.

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[1] Fukuzawa Yukichi, *Gakumon no susume* (Tokyo: Iwanami bunko, 1978). Partial translation of this work is available in Eiichi Kiyooka, trans., *Fukuzawa Yukichi on Education* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1985).

In order to legitimize its existence in a modern nation state, Shōyō sought to define the boundaries of literature as "national literature." His modern *shōsetsu* was thus to be a representative genre of national literature, a medium that can and will take on the new national identity of modern Japan. In other words, he needed to produce a medium that could be shared by the members of the national community. Up against the need to produce a medium that would consolidate the national community of Japan, one genre proved to be a hindrance—*seiji shōsetsu* or political *shōsetsu* written by the advocates of the People's Rights Movement. *Seiji shōsetsu*, which were extremely popular among the intellectuals of the time, were a medium for propagating party politics. Inscribed in political *shōsetsu*, therefore, were contrasting kinds of propaganda based on different party agendas. Such works clearly divided the community through conflicting principles, and thus were far from suitable for the creation of a literary practice of a "unified nation." It is not a coincidence that Shōyō completely ignores the existence of *seiji shōsetsu* when he discusses a variety of writings written in Meiji. He had to do everything in his power to sever his artistic *shōsetsu* from political *shōsetsu*.

The need to de-politicize *shōsetsu* was thus an imperative demanded by the creation of a unified, national literature. In my talk today, I would first like to focus on how he achieves this goal. The key, I believe, lies in his use of Social Darwinian discourse. Specifically, I will examine Shōyō's definition of interiority, a definition of which is drawn from principles of psychology promoted by Social Darwinian scientists such as Alexander Bain, and question what such a definition suppressed and in turn expressed in its form. In doing so, I wish to outline how *shōsetsu* has come to present itself as an apolitical medium. And toward the end of my presentation, I wish to elaborate upon what I call the politics of concealment. That is to say, I wish to inquire into the ideological forces that govern *our* gaze, the very forces that allow *shōsetsu* to retain an apolitical façade.

Let us now turn to "Shōsetsu no shugan" (The Main Theme of the *Shōsetsu*) a section of *Shōsetsu shinzui* that is often considered to be Shōyō's most notable contribution to the development of modern Japanese literature. For Shōyō, the main theme of modern *shōsetsu* was emotions, or more specifically, the internal struggle of the modernized man.

What are human emotions? They are man's passions (*jōyoku*). All human beings, even those who are wise and good, are crea-

tures of passions. . . . What sets a man apart as good or wise is
simply that he suppresses them, and uses the power of reason or
the strength of his conscience to drive away hounds of passion.
Very intelligent, dignified men conceal their base desires (*retsu-
jō*), never allowing them to become apparent. It may seem that
they have escaped them altogether, but the fact that they are sen-
tient beings makes that impossible. . . . Before they attain to that
irreproachable behavior which others see, they must face many
a secret attack from impure impulses (*retsujō*). *Retsujō* and rea-
son war within them; good conduct is only possible when reason
wins. . . . In the human animal, then, there exists a dichotomy
between outward behavior and inner thoughts (*uchi naru shisō*).[2]

What is noteworthy about this definition of interiority is the use of abstract
terms such as "human," "reason," "base desires," and "passions." Because
of these terms, Shōyō's interiority seems to be something that is shared by
all humans. The discussion, in other words, appear to transcend any tem-
poral, spatial, or social differences that separate people and manages to con-
solidate them into a unitary group in the name of "human."

    This figure of the "universal human" is none other than the product of
Social Darwinian discourse. When we think of Social Darwinism, the theory
of evolution and the survival of the fittest immediately come to mind. Yet
we often forget that the discourse of Social Darwinism is strikingly abstract.
It was a form of discourse that, in the name of "science," generated the
image of the universal human. As I mentioned earlier, the definition Shōyō
provides is drawn from Alexander Bain's principles of psychology. Through
Bain, Shōyō learned that feelings or emotions are something innate—that all
human beings, by virtue of being human, possess passions and desires.
Perhaps, in many ways, we can still agree with such a definition—which is
the reason why it appears universal. However, if we examine the discursive
paradigm upon which this abstract language is based, we will see that it is

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[2] Tsubouchi Shōyō, *Shōsetsu shinzui* from *Tsubouchi Shōyō shū*, vol. 3 of *Nihon
kindai bungaku taikei* (Tokyo: Kadokawa shoten, 1974), 68-69. I have consulted
Nanette Twine's translation of *Shōsetsu shinzui* in providing my own. Nanette
Twine, trans., *The Essence of the Novel*, Occasional Papers 11 (Department of
Japanese, University of Queensland, 1981).

very discontinuous from our own. Psychology in Shōyō's day was a study that attempted to make the interior accessible through examinations of physical features—such as nerves, bodily movements, facial features, etc. Take, for example, the following passage from Herbert Spencer's *First Principles*, a work that attempted to consolidate all forms of science with the Darwinian formula of evolution.

> When the quantity of sensation is great, it generates contractions of voluntary muscles, as well as of the involuntary ones. . . it is manifest that quantity of bodily action is proportionate to the quantity of sensation . . .as emotions rise in strength, the muscle of face, body and limbs begin to move.[3]

In this manner, psychology was closely connected to disciplines such as physiognomy and phrenology, disciplines that gained their claim to science through Social Darwinism. They were all endorsed as "science" and attempted to decipher human characteristics through an examination of facial and bone structures.

Despite the abstract language of this interpretive regime, it is extremely Eurocentric. Spencer elsewhere says the following:

> Among the vertebrata in general, evolution is marked by an increasing heterogeneity in the vertebral column, and more especially in the segments constituting the skull; the higher forms being distinguished by the relatively larger size of the bones which cover the brain, and relatively smaller size of those which form the jaws. Now this characteristic, which is stronger in Man than in any other creature, is stronger in the European than in the savage.[4]

Notice the abstract language being used to define "humans" in the first few sentences. Defining the theory of evolution as a progress from the homo-

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[3] Herbert Spencer, *First Principles*, (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1876), 219.

[4] Spencer, 341.

geneous to heterogeneous, Spencer's language initially gives the passage a non-social façade. The last sentence, however, provides ample evidence of its Eurocentric character.

We will not be doing justice to Shōyō's reality if we characterize his belief in Social Darwinism as his lack of sophistication. Social Darwinism was a form of science endorsed by the West. Science was the basis for modernization and industrialization, and hence a discourse with utmost authority. To question its validity was not even an option for Meiji Japan that desperately tried to modernize itself.

Through my brief description of Social Darwinism, I want to highlight two points: 1) Social Darwinism was an abstract system of discourse that produced the figure of "universal human," 2) despite its seeming universality, it is visibly discontinuous with our own ordering system. Now, the question is: How does the seemingly "universal" figure of human of Social Darwinism relate to concealment of politics?

In this image of the "universal human," Shōyō found an answer to one problem with which he negotiated: the varying differences that visibly divided the national community, such as the conflicting political agendas that are manifest in *seiji shōsetsu*. Faced with the need to construct a national literature that would represent a single unified national identity, he needed to produce a medium in which the conflicting political agendas would be erased. With the representation of the "universal human" transcending all socio-political differences, Shōyō found a way to overcome this crucial problem. In the portrayal of the universal human, he sought to sever *shōsetsu* from politics.

In simple terms, the logic behind his argument is this: since humans all have interiority, if *shōsetsu* becomes a medium that portrays interiority, it will become a medium that can be shared by the national community. The problem, however, arises in representing or portraying the interiority in the textual world of *shōsetsu*. All human beings may have an interiority, but not all of them get a voice on the textual surface. And modern *shōsetsu*, as Shōyō defines it elsewhere in *Shōsetsu shinzui*, clearly shows that it is restricted within a certain realm. I must briefly turn to a section called "Shōsetsu no shurui" ("The Types of *Shōsetsu*") in order to highlight the textual domain of modern *shōsetsu*. It is worthwhile recalling here that *shōsetsu* as a novel had yet to exist. In his attempt to define this entity, Shōyō could only posit through negation—that is to say, he defines his

modern *shōsetsu* as that which is *not* something else. And this is precisely what he does in "The Types of *Shōsetsu*."

In discussing the various types of *shōsetsu*, Shōyō posits a crucial dichotomy, namely *jidai* vs. *sewa* (he has English glosses alongside of these terms, namely historical for *jidai* and social for *sewa*).[5] Through this dichotomy, he attempts to posit *sewa shōsetsu*—the modern *shōsetsu* he wishes to promote—by negating *jidai sōsetsu*. He explains that *jidai shōsetsu* are based on "historical figures or real events of the past" while *sewa shōsetsu* portray emotions, customs, and mannerisms. It is not too hard to see that this is a strange opposition. They do not oppose each other in any obvious way. If *sewa* was defined in opposition to the historical, the defining features of *sewa* should have been "real events of the present" or "figures making history." What can we make of this opposition?

Turning our attention to the discursive environment within which Shōyō wrote, we are able to identify a genre that featured "figures making history," namely *seiji shōsetsu*. "Figures making history" were political activists who had a voice in works Shōyō tried desperately to erase. By *sewa shōsetsu*, therefore, Shōyō sought to portray a life that is dissociated from the political sphere to which "figures making history" belonged. By social lives of the people, he meant the non-political lives of the people. Positing *shōsetsu* as that which restricts itself to a realm that is not politics, he strategically configured a textual world that would evade the political. It is not a coincidence that his protagonist in his experimental *shōsetsu*, *Tōsei shosei katagi* (*The Character of Modern Students*, 1885-6) is the one who claims, "there is no merit in joining a political party; in fact, only harm is done by it."[6]

Interiority, in other words, was not granted to a character with political ambitions. Of course, there are other characters who are politically engaged in *Tōsei shosei katagi*, but the one who struggles internally—whose interiority gets a voice in the textual realm of modern *shōsetsu*—is the one who lacks political ambitions.

By limiting the textual domain of modern *shōsetsu* to those outside of the political sphere, Shōyō seemingly de-politicized his modern *shōsetsu*. However, the concealment of politics can only be political in itself. It embraces

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[5] *Shōsetsu shinzui*, 80.

[6] Tsubouchi Shōyō, *Tōsei shosei katagi*, from *Tsubouchi Shōyō shū*, vol. 3 of *Nihon kindai bungaku taikei* (Tokyo: Kadokawa shoten, 1974), 343.

a certain form of politics that manifests itself in the concealment of the political.

We can only be blind to the politicality of this evasion when we focus on "Shōsetsu no shugan." The seemingly universal definition of interiority provided in this section of *Shōsetsu shinzui* suppresses the very fact that the realm of Shōyō's *shōsetsu* is restricted to those who are "not making history." To single out Shōyō's claim for the portrayal of interiority as his primary contribution to modern Japanese literature is to suppress the manner in which he limited *shōsetsu* to the textual sphere that evades the political. Shōyō's interiority is portrayed in a textual domain of "social lives" from which "figures making history" are excluded.

And what is more, this de-politicized textual realm was designated as "artistic." *Shōsetsu shinzui* is, in effect, a text that instituted the separation between politics and art. In many ways, we are still haunted by this division. Oftentimes, it is considered that art and politics are mutually exclusive, that artistic merit needs to be sacrificed to be political, and vice versa. Of course, recent scholars of post-colonialism and cultural studies have blurred the boundary somewhat. However, the fact that we still must argue that literary works are political, or that such an argument is endorsed as an "argument" by the institution of Japanese literature to which we belong, suffices to show that the division is still firmly in place.

Although I am inclined to suggest that the uncritical valorization of "Shōsetsu no shugan" is one of the primary reasons that the modern *shōsetsu*'s identity has been found in "de-politicized" interiority, I must hasten to add here that I am not making a simple claim that a reader of *Shōsetsu shinzui* must examine the "whole" without focusing on the "part." Such a statement is not only simplistic but it is one that suppresses the ideology that governs our gaze. The questions we must ask are: Why are we *motivated* to read that way? What specifically makes us focus on "Shōsetsu no shugan?" Answering these questions, I believe, will allow us to inquire into the politics of concealment.

The institution of modern Japanese literature, whose canonical works feature the internal struggle of the modernized man, retrospectively finds the origin of its practices in "Shōsetsu no shugan." In other words, seen from a perspective instituted after the development of the theme of modern selfhood, "Shōsetsu no shugan" seems to have shown the "correct" direction. This type of reading merely imposes the present only to produce a "clean

linear past" that leads up to where we are now. It only derives from a form of reading that sees only what one *expects* to read.

This type of reading is induced by the assumption that there is continuity between the present and Meiji. If we simply step back and read *Shōsetsu shinzui*, we find that it is a foreign text—and by foreign, I mean a linguistic economy so distant from our own. Within the discursive site of *Shōsetsu shinzui*'s production, *bungaku* did not mean literature; *shōsetsu* did not mean the novel; and the interiority described in "Shōsetsu no shugan" is based on a discursive paradigm in which a large skull is considered to be a mark of intelligence. *Shōsetsu shinzui* is written in an entirely different system of signification that is not reducible to our own.

Despite the visible discontinuity between Meiji and us, we often lose sight of its foreignness. By imposing the present regime of interpretation onto "Shōsetsu no shugan," Shōyō's interiority is made to seem identifiable in *us*. Once we believe in the presence of his interiority, the other sections of *Shōsetsu shinzui* seem meaningless. In fact, the other sections of *Shōsetsu shinzui* have often been dismissed as a manifestation of his not-yet-modernized sensibility. Anything and everything that deviates from the expectations of the present is attributed to his naivete. With this gaze, we can only be blind to the concealment of politics.

At least on the surface, *Shōsetsu shinzui* seems comprehensible. It is thus very easy to fall into the trap of assuming that contemporary and Meiji discursive sites share the same system of signification. Moreover, in many cases, we share the same signifiers. What is important, however, is the fact that the signifieds attached to these signifiers have changed considerably. Reading works of Meiji—though supposedly the beginning of modern Japan—involves identifying a linguistic economy and distribution that are based upon an entirely different system from our own. In order to unlearn our gaze, we need to question the seeming comprehensibility of *Shōsetsu shinzui*.