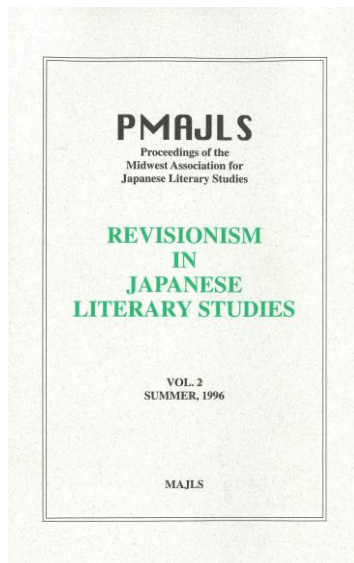


“Situating Westernism in Meiji Literary Development”

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SITUATING WESTERNISM IN MEIJI LITERARY DEVELOPMENT

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This paper proposes that Meiji literary change was not motivated by Western literary fashions per se, but by a complex of historical developments--primarily political and technological--that were similar to developments in the West. Meiji literature looks "modern" because it was a response to the lived experience of "modernization."¹

In his most recent reevaluation of the state of the enterprise surrounding Japanese literature, Masao Miyoshi sets out with a manifesto on the already ambiguous national position of the critic:

The first item on our critical agenda is to situate the Japanese novel and ourselves as its First World readers in a discursive context. The 'novel' will be contested thereafter against the shōsetsu form, while the United States and Europe as seen from the perspectives of the Japanese will be kept in peripheral vision.²

Miyoshi's purpose is to free the Japanese shōsetsu from the domestications and neutralizations that Western readers have brought to bear upon it--with the consequence of marginalizing the form--and to resuscitate the form by putting it at the center of a new, historically motivated critical viewpoint.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Southern Comparative Literature Association Conference, September, 1994.

² Masao Miyoshi, *Off Center*, p9.

The critique is docketed with the idioms of subalterity and post-colonialism, ascribing the undervaluation of non-Western literature (and the Japanese *shōsetsu* in particular) to the overwhelming asymmetry of political and economic power between First and Third Worlds. In the self-fulfilling logic of the so-called "Great Divide," First World interpretations will always prevail over those of the Third World. In Miyoshi's words, "Cultural contaminations are never reciprocal, power always imbalances the relationship." (Miyoshi, 43)

There are two forms of cultural contamination at work in Miyoshi's analysis. One is the infiltration of First World aesthetics into the Third World. If we accept Miyoshi's categorizations and interpret the Japanese *shōsetsu* as a Third World form of narrative, then we may trace this contamination in terms of Western literary values being brought to bear unnaturally on the otherwise natural development of Japanese literature. This is a familiar story of Japanese literary history, and can be summarized somewhat as follows: In the late 1870s, a number of Western novels were translated into Japanese, inexorably influencing the Japanese literary landscape. Authors such as Tsubouchi Shōyō and Futabatei Shimei were inspired to read and translate English and Russian literature, whose literary values they then sought to transplant onto the otherwise impoverished native literary landscape. Their eventual success at this led to the development of the modern Japanese novel, or *shōsetsu* form, whose half-breed origins have never been fully reconciled by Japanese or Western critics.³

³ Early critical works such as Marleigh Grayer Ryan's *Japan's First Modern Novel* (1965, Columbia University Press) and Janet Walker's *The Japanese Novel of the Meiji Period and the Idea of Individualism* (1979, Princeton University Press) reflected even in their titles a tendency toward universalist--i.e., Eurocentric--interpretations, which at best gave

The other form of contamination belongs solely to the contemporary world, as it looks back at Third World literary production from the point of view of an established First World aesthetics. The idea of "looking back" is itself complicated: In its most obvious sense, it invokes the teleology of modernization, i.e., that the First World is simply further ahead in the natural development of all things social, political, economic, or aesthetic, and that the Third World, provided they do not run astray, will eventually catch up. For critics in Japan and the West, the *shōsetsu* form has provided an unfortunate example of what happens when literature runs astray.

Arima Tatsuo, for instance, in his 1969 treatise appropriately entitled "The Failure of Freedom," characterized turn-of-the-century Japanese intellectuals as being not political enough, or, in the case of Marxists, for being too political and overestimating their own function in society. Arima's work is pervaded by the implicitly alternative notion that this intellectual class might have succeeded (that is, avoided the Pacific War and joined the Western world in a triumph of democracy?) had they only not strayed from the golden rule of properly linking political ideology to social action.⁴

A less visible sense of "looking back" is the fact that First World aesthetics have evolved partly as a negative and differentiating response to those of the Third World, and vice versa. This is far more difficult to document. While several strands of Japanese narrative history since the 1880s have been explicitly

a passing nod to to a bare handful of historical "events," and at worst disguised or ignored the social-historical specificity of both the Japanese literature and the U.S. critical framework alike.

⁴ Arima, Tatsuo, *The Failure of Freedom*, 1969, Harvard University Press, Cambridge

anti-Western, their aesthetic bases have all too often been expressed in the thoroughly colonialist terms of social unity, superiority, and domination based on categories of nation and race (e.g., Okakura Tenshin's 1906 *Book of Tea*, or the Romantic Nationalists of the 20s). Less obvious are discourse qualities such as orality, dispersal, presentationalism, and anti-abstractionism, which Miyoshi alternately applauds and chastises, but which seemingly exist outside the dimensions of Western literary aesthetics. These are modes of literary production that persisted in Japan not only despite their marginalization by Western aesthetics, but at times seemingly because of it (e.g., Kawabata), as if to reassert a sense of national identity via that difference.⁵

As Miyoshi points out, when a reader equipped with First World aesthetics attempts to read a Third World text, the "potentially upsetting" experience of encountering new modes of expression is all too often met with a variety of neutralizing gestures. The reader will domesticate the argument and ignore cultural differences, or else the reader can simply distance himself or herself from the text and let the enigmatic other remain enigmatic. "One opens a book," Miyoshi explains, "in order to close it." (Miyoshi, 11)

The task of the post-colonial critic, then, is to recuperate a sense of the upsetting nature of the text, and the question is how to accomplish this. In this quest, Miyoshi has recently been joined by two other critics of Japanese literature with similarly acute sensitivities to the notion that cultural description is thoroughly contingent on the position of the voice that describes. David

⁵ Admittedly, at other times, authors seem to be directed away from the idea of national difference as the bottom line of literary identity: to wit, the early political novelists Miyazaki Muryū or Suehiro Tetchō, or much of Tanizaki's work which parodies the very idea.

Pollack, in *Reading Against Culture* (1992, Cornell University), traces a number of strands in the evolution of the so-called modern Japanese conception of self. Pollack uses the metaphor of a hall of mirrors to describe an unceasing interaction between self and other that is both necessary to culture and a deleterious by-product of it. In Pollack's analyses, as with Miyoshi, "self" and "other" are differentiated most often along the lines of Japan versus the West (or Asia versus the West, or Third World versus First World), but also in terms of male versus female (Chapter Five on Kawabata), along lines of class (see especially Chapter Eight on Mishima), or less often and less successfully along lines of ideology (see especially the Conclusion, which recasts his reading of Sōseki versus the Meiji state).

Like Miyoshi, Pollack's analyses make consistent appeal to Japanese historical context, but with the further comparative step of tracing analogous developments in Western writing: Tanizaki's prewar brushes with fascism are contrasted with those of Celine, Pound, and Knut Hamsun; while Sōseki's *Kokoro* is read for its analogous structure to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, stripping away the miniaturized and exportable layers of modern state Confucianism down to a hollow core at the center of the purported Japanese "self."⁶

Pollack is sensitive to Miyoshi's warnings against exaggerating the familiar and thereby domesticating and neutralizing the "potentially upsetting" foreignness of the text, yet one is prone to question whether similar historical circumstances and similarly structured responses (i.e., between Japan and the West) amount to an elucidation of literary "motivation," i.e., to an explanation of why Japanese literature--

⁶ Pollack, see especially p82-83 and p194-195.

with a premodern history as it was, essentially untouched by the West--could develop into a modernity so richly identifiable in Western terms of what "modernity" meant?

To pick on one particularly dubious moment of Pollack's critique, I quote from one of his early chapters:

During the Meiji period the notion that Japanese lacked a concept of an individual self was frequently called upon, both at home and abroad, to explain a lack of power in a dangerous world that seemed predicated on the idea of possessing and projecting such a concept. From the start, the Japanese took for granted the European understanding that an individual self lay at the very heart of the modern Western nation-state's economic and political organization and strength, as well as of its ability to project that strength economically and militarily in the world. (Pollack, 40)

The implication is that Japanese intellectuals had, by virtue of accelerated contact with the West in the 1870s, been made aware of a lack in Japanese culture--one that could only be satisfied by importing a preformed cultural artifact from outside, or else by constructing their own imitation within. Just when and where the first attempts were carried out to obtain such an artifact are left unclear: suffice it to say that by 1914, the year of Sōseki's *Kokoro*, there was a basic working prototype of the self that was asking the important questions "Who am I?" and "What is my place in the world?" (Pollack, 53) Pollack should not be faulted for leaving out a detailed consideration of early Meiji literary history--that is not the focus of his inquiry--yet his omission results in an interpretation that the self was something that never really belonged in Japanese literature, and that it never would have occurred had it not been for that dialogic "hall of mirrors"-style encounter with the already-developed West. There is little

possibility of other mechanisms and motivations of development--specifically, of histories that are contained within the nation and are not everywhere driven by the asymmetry of international power and "development." Never mind how the literary self may have come to exist in the West, all of its other manifestations (i.e., in the Third World) are but feeble attempts to catch up.

I pick on Pollack's blind spot only to illustrate a point of which he himself is abundantly aware, which is that the narcissism engendered by an asymmetrical power relation can be so totalizing that it is all but impossible to break free from. The point is familiar to readers of Gayatri Spivak, who has attempted to view the problem conversely, from the point of view of the subaltern, and come to the conclusion in at least one critical juncture that power imbalance is innate to the act of representation, and that the subaltern can never really "speak for itself."⁷ But, to return to the case of the erstwhile subaltern called Japan, is this an adequate historicization of literary change in the Meiji period, or is it an artifact of the first world critic conditioned to read First World-Third World power relations into all aspects of development? Pollack provides a clue to escaping this dilemma in one fell swoop, by simply disregarding it. In his discussion of the Chinese vernacular novel *Ch'ingpingmei*, he claims that the women's problems are not due to their status as females, but are because of their problematic family.⁸ By simply replacing one analytic set of power relations (male-female) with another (family-on-family politics), he achieves a startlingly revealing reading.

In a similar vein to Pollack's work, James Fujii's *Complicit*

⁷ Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak," in Grossberg & Nelson, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, pp.271-310.

⁸ See Pollack, p.45-47.

Fictions (1993, University of California) attempts to view the modern Japanese literary subject as arising from a network of differential relations, based in competing political interests. Fujii explicitly follows the cautionary advice of the Subaltern Study Group, stating that, "In order to avoid the practice of inserting Japan within this grand narrative [of Western development] we must take Spivak's hint and attempt to locate the sites of confrontation in the narrativization of modern Japanese literature" (Fujii, 3). Like Pollack, Fujii also resorts to the concept of dialogic structures to recontextualize our understanding of that history, yet he purposefully sets aside the East-West dialogue in order to produce a more nuanced critique. Shimazaki Tōson's *Kyūshujin* (Former Master, 1902), for example, is situated within the problematic of city and country, for which Fujii reads a voice of dissent towards the unrealistic claims of a centralized government that "the vertically conceived social order [of pre-Meiji times] had been replaced by a horizontally cast egalitarian...society." (Fujii, 45)

For Sōseki's early novel *Wagahai wa neko de aru* (I am a Cat, 1905) Fujii's perspective is illustrated by a discussion of Okitsu Kaname's critiques of the late 1960's:

[Okitsu's] studies admirably challenge the overwhelming tendency to represent Soseki as the quintessential Westernized writer by rooting his early writing in a native comic tradition. But his revisionism can also unwittingly reify the familiar opposition of Japan against the West, recast here as the early playful (even unstable) writer and the later serious intellectual, questioning the costs of Western influence. (Fujii, 107)

For Fujii, Sōseki's context is instead to be found in the purely (?) Japanese contestations between rakugo (the native comic

tradition) and genbun'itchi (an officially sanctioned movement to reform written language so that it would conform to the structures of spoken language); that is, between a national tradition that fused the narrating subject with the language itself of narration, and a newer form of representation that sought to neutralize and efface the speaking subject.⁹

Again like Pollack, however, Fujii's attempts to trace the motivations for literary change in a dialogics of ideological context end up being justified only by appeal to precisely the kinds of arguments that he sets out to avoid. To explain the origins of the genbun'itchi movement, for instance, he resorts to the old saw that its texts were "modeled on nineteenth-century Western realistic novels." (Fujii, 97) In a discussion of Shimazaki Tōson's *Hakai* (Broken Commandment, 1906) he claims that "Like many other writers of his time who chose to distance themselves from the apparent frivolity of the gesaku tradition and follow many of the standards of Western realist literature, Tōson experienced difficulty in creating a new narrative style that would seem natural and also would be appropriate to these new conventions" (Fujii, 81). The result is a curiously hollow and bastardized version of what literary history is all about: authors choose their tropes in order to differentiate themselves from the mistakes of other authors. Moreover, authors are motivated to do this because it is fashionable. Worse yet, the rhetorical space occupied by the West in Meiji literary development was one of take-it-or-leave-it, a fashion which like all fashions was essentially arbitrary in its form and hence ungrounded in its relation to lived experience.

Fujii fairly declares this much in his warning that "To explain the phenomenon [of the rise in prose novels] as replicating

⁹ Fujii, see especially p.111.

the rise of the Western realist novel and its celebration of the concept of individualism (anchored in the workings of capitalism) is to universalize Western experience" (Fujii, 16). One reviewer, Paul Anderer, has observed that this "is either an indictment of that Meiji audience which was so 'receptive' to the West, or, more likely, another overkill shot taken at that all-purpose strawman, Japanology."¹⁰

Is it necessarily a universalization of Western experience to say that one history "replicated" another? Unlike Anderer, I do not find an "overkill shot" at Japanology in this quote: if anything, Japanologists have sought to show that Japan was a case unto itself, an argument that Fujii would seem to support by discarding the notion of "universalism." But there is more to Fujii's dismissal than that. To declare that Western individualism was "anchored in the workings of capitalism"--and in the same breath to imply that Japan's was not (anchored in capitalism)--teases the question: if not capitalism, then what? If not the reality of lived experience, then what?

We can begin--again--by questioning the relevance of the West and Western literature in the eyes of early Meiji writers. The incongruity of Western cultural artifacts with their lived experience must have often seemed similar to a situation that Roberto Schwarz has described for the case of Brazil in this century, where "Examples of inappropriateness include Father Christmas sporting an eskimo outfit in a tropical climate and, for traditionalists, the electric guitar in the land of the samba." Where literary history is concerned, Schwarz writes, "the change from one school of [literary theory] to another rarely arises from the

¹⁰ Paul Anderer, review of Pollack and Fujii, in *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 20:2, 1994, Seattle, p.468

exhaustion of a particular project; usually it expresses the high regard that Brazilians feel for the newest doctrine from America of Europe. The disappointing impression created, therefore, is one of change and development with no inner necessity and therefore no value."¹¹

In the case of Japan, such an impression is strengthened by the apparently unproblematic acceptance that many Japanese writers and translators initially had of the relation between Western literature and Western society. When translations from Scott, Disraeli, Lytton, and Shakespeare began to appear in the late 1870s, they were generally framed in the interpretation that for Japan to modernize and become more like the West, the Japanese people should first learn how to think and behave more like Westerners, and to this end they would do well to read Western literature. Westerners were able to sustain their ostensibly harmonious democratic institutions on account of their superior cultural attributes, and if Japanese people could only learn from this, they could no doubt do the same.

It did not take long to disabuse the intellectual class of this idea. When Itagaki Taisuke, a leader of the People's Rights Movement, visited Paris in 1882, it is said that he arranged a visit with Victor Hugo to ask how he could better spread democratic-style thinking among the Japanese people. As the story goes, Hugo responded "have them read my books." Between 1881 and 1887 over one hundred political novels were published in which images of the righteous public struggled valiantly against all kinds of harsh governments--all of them of course alluding somehow to the Meiji oligarchy. This was not fashion, it was lived experience.

¹¹Roberto Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas*, 1992, Verso, London.

When we read Meiji culture in terms of the lived experience of people who have to deal with a myriad of social nuances and the daily plays of power, then the national boundaries that defined what it meant to be "Japanese" appear forced, arbitrary, distant. In this we can take heed of Aijaz Ahmad's warning to a most unlikely candidate, Fredric Jameson, not to conflate the national too easily with the collectivities of culture and society.¹² In the case of Meiji, political writers like Yano Ryūkei and Tōkai Sanshi richly exploited the arbitrary nature of nation to achieve their own political ends. In Sanshi's *Kajin no kigū* (Strange Encounters with Beautiful Women, 1886-1897), the pseudo-autobiographical narrator, also named Sanshi, sympathizes with Irish and Spanish expatriates on the basis of his having fought on the side of the defeated Tokugawa alliance, against the far stronger pro-emperor Meiji forces, an argument which he then uses as a springboard for describing why little Japan should be wary of the giant Western powers, and why it should thereby extend its own military power throughout Asia, to protect its national brethren from the same Western powers. Nation is an important trope, but it is by no means the only configuration of collective identity. The Japanese political writers understood this fact, and they exploited it as fully as any colonialist Western power.

The political novels also exemplify another problem, which is that the political novelists laid claim to collective identities in opposition to an authoritarian Meiji government. They saw themselves as leaders of the "Japanese people" in the face of a centralized, cruelly efficient, and dictatorial power; a government that provided no concept of civil rights, and provided no avenues of legal recourse against its own arbitrary exercise of power. The

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Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory*, 1992, Verso, London, p.106-110.

idea of "the people" was an imaginary construct on the part of authors and politicians to counteract this real power. Yet from this imaginary concept grew all sorts of notions about what it meant to be Japanese; what it meant to be normal; what it meant to be essentially interchangeable with any other citizen. Here, I would argue, is one important core of the modern national identity.

If a colonialism is to be found here, it is not in the relation between Japan and the West, but rather between an autocratic government and a public that was told every day how to act. And if it was not the government telling people who they were, it was a very specific class of writers, who starting in the 1880s gradually gained--as a class--an understanding of the dilemma and the futility of their position. To recast Miyoshi's phrase from the other perspective, they opened their mouths, as it were, only to close them. This was a dilemma of modernity; it was not a Western import.

Yet the idea of the Western import still pillows our discourse. An area in which this idea has been most egregiously abused has been that of technology, in the big sense of newspapers, railroads, and telegraph equipment. Indeed, a bastardized version of copyright law seems to thrive in the critical literature, extending a sort of Western "national rights" to the amount of time it took to ride the train from Tokyo to Yokohama, or to send a message from the battlefield in Kyūshū by telegraph to Tokyo. The implications of technological change are immense. Transportation allowed a boom in the fashion industry, enabling people to dress in accordance with their ideology, and partially replacing modes of dress that were contingent upon region and class. But to say that the critical interiority that derived from this was itself a Western import is a flagrant distortion. Even when a person could project himself or herself as a Westerner, the discursive

configuration that enabled such a projection was an artifact of modernity, not of Westernism per se.

Likewise, changes in the communications industry enabled newspapers to print news quickly and thoroughly, enough to feed back in to the political process. In 1879, when a man named Usui Rokurō took out his sword and killed a man who had decades earlier killed Usui's father and then gone on to become a Tokyo district judge, newspaper novels were written to dramatize the story and sympathize with Usui, with the effect of dramatically altering his trial and his sentencing. The serialized docudramas of the 1880s altered the literary landscape by rendering all stories contingent, unfinished, on-going: they took stories out of the past and put them into the present. This was not an import, it was a development that arose in lived experience.

As readers were provided with progressively richer views of the political processes that affected them, they were also in a position to imagine alternate possibilities. Because of the newspaper industry, government for the first time became visible, naked in its arbitrariness. With it, an overtly political consciousness was culturally enabled, one that could seek out domination in all its forms, social and political, new and traditional. Comic gesaku writing was not rejected for its frivolity; it was rejected because it was part of the old world order that was now viewed as manneristic and suffocating. Trends such as realism and naturalism--which rejected such domination--may have been inspired by Western models, but they were certainly not motivated by them.

So my point should be clear by now, that literary modernity in Japan (if you will permit this generalized term) did not arise because of Westernism, but despite Westernism. The questions

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posed by postcolonial criticism offer a way to elucidate these mechanisms, but only if they can be used to cut through the critical blindnesses that an international power asymmetry has produced; and not used as a smokescreen to ascribe all literary change to that asymmetry.