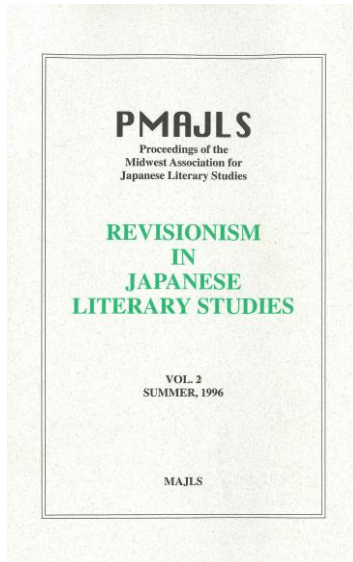


“What Exactly Is Being Revised?”

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## WHAT EXACTLY IS BEING REVISED?

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The topic addressed here today, by its nature, calls for a polemical position in favor or opposition, and so realizing I am simplifying and not addressing several theoretical positions, I will argue the idea that revisionism in theoretical terms has had little effect on the way Japan is viewed in academia or by the public at large, and that generally its conclusions, bound by totalizing methodologies that attempt to reduce Japan to a unified discourse, do not differ markedly from those of the past. For reasons that I hope will become clear below, I feel the answer to "totalizing views" of Japan is detheorization, the use of theory to dismantle intellectual systems that prevent one from dealing with Japanese language and literature situationally.

Historians and social scientists have generally set the agenda for the study of Japan in the United States. The study of modern Japan literature has generally followed and has been peripheral to the government's encouragement of institutional growth across all fields of Japanese studies in the United States. Since universities are by their natures conservative institutions, it is not surprising that the discourses on Japanese history, political science, and economics should conform to the broad contours of political orthodoxy and acceptability in the United States. Thus the modern history written by E.H. Norman, which foreshadowed or reflected a certain orthodoxy in Japanese scholarship, was massively revised by the modern developmentists in the United States, and while the preeminent historian John Hall would acknowledge that Japanese historians of an orthodox marxist persuasion had asked all the right questions, it seems clear that

the answers and methodologies that they arrived at were not acceptable to the mainstream of American scholarship on Japan, much more sanguine about the benefits of postwar Japanese capitalism under an American umbrella.<sup>1</sup> "Revisionists," American historians and social scientists far less optimistic about the benefices to be derived from state sponsored capitalism, were basically involved in a project of describing the powerlessness of the masses and individual will in the face of systems of ideological and physical coercion and control, a project that dovetailed nicely with postwar orthodox Japanese scholarship on the authoritarian, corrosive, and all powerful nature of the Imperial institution.<sup>2</sup>

"Revisionism," as I understand it in the study of modern Japanese literature in the United States, refers to generational adaptations of outside theoretical frameworks to redefine and reinterpret ways of reading modern Japanese literature in institutional settings. These adaptations are generally derived from broader trends and orthodoxies within Japanese studies, especially in history and the social sciences, but are also influenced by changing intellectual fashions within the humanities, specifically the study of literature in the United States. In short, revisionism of one sort or another has always been the orthodoxy in the United States.

In the 1960s, the crying need for translations of works of modern Japanese literature privileged those with abilities and

<sup>1</sup> Japan Foundation, ed., *Japanese Studies in the United States: Part One, History and Present Condition* (Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> H.D. Harootunian, "America's Japan/Japan's Japan," in Masao Miyoshi and H.D. Harootunian, ed., *Japan and the World* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 196-221.

interests in a belletristic direction, and this in turn was reinforced by the overwhelming dominance of the formalism in academic literary criticism in the United States. Indeed, until the 1980s, the rare voice that tried to relate works of literature to experience in the real world was condemned out of hand as having an "agenda." One need only remember that ten years ago, Jay Rubin's pathbreaking study of censorship of modern Japanese literature elicited accusations from Edward Seidensticker of axe-grinding and propaganda.<sup>3</sup> In short, unquestioning commitment to U.S. foreign policy and a background in intelligence left many of the major figures in the field of modern Japanese literature incapable of distinguishing between Lionel Trilling and Che Guevera.

A profound conservatism deeply rooted in American historical experience and values has established a sort of orthodox mode of argumentation in relation to modern Japanese literature, and this mode of argumentation has often been reformulated but never radically revised or questioned. First, American political and sociological categories -- individualism, liberalism, rightist, leftist, and so on -- are superimposed over the Japanese literary and intellectual scene. Then, Japanese literature is shown to be lacking in some basic moral attribute existing in the "west." That is to say, modern Japanese literature is shown to lack some fundamental linguistic, sociological, psychological, or spiritual category essential to the specific discourse superimposed over it.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Seidensticker, rev. of *Injurious to Public Morals: Writers and the Meiji State*, by Jay Rubin, *Journal of Japanese Studies*, v. 11, no. 1 (Winter 1985), pp. 218-21. For another that accuses Rubin of not understanding the Japanese because he does not understand that Japanese is a language of silence, see Takanori Irie, rev. of *Injurious to Public Morals: Writers and the Meiji State*, *Japan Quarterly*, v. 31, no. 4 (December 1984), pp. 459-60.

Finally, the seemingly insatiable need the American intelligentsia has to feel morally superior to the Japan is reinforced again and again through repeated assertions of variations on this mode of argument, which cumulatively demonstrate that the Japanese lack just about every identifiable feature that would make a person a rational, functioning adult. Below, I will attempt to outline this mode of argument in three broad theoretical movements that have gained popularity in the United States: semiotics, linguistics, and psychohistory.

On a popular level, works on modern Japanese literature, entertainment, and culture by such "revisionist" critics as Ian Buruma and Karl van Wolferen conform entirely to the generic formulas of popular fiction about Asia outlined by Daniel B. Ramsdel in 1983: in sum, that Asians "lack leadership," Westerners surpass Orientals at "Oriental" techniques, Asians are sexually subservient and available, Asians are childlike, burdened by "face" and superstition.<sup>4</sup> Praised in the 1980s as portraying the true contemporary Japan, Ian Buruma's writings on Japanese popular literature and entertainment, for example, stress again and again the lack of "maturity" of Japanese adult males. "The gap between real intentions and public posture is clear to every Japanese....And in no case is the gap quite as wide as with the father who is really a child." "When entirely at ease the men often regress into early childhood behaviour...." "Japanese groups are structured very much like families, with the senior members playing the part of parents over the juniors who are children... Children, after all, have no responsibilities... Ultimate responsibility lies in that

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel B. Ramsdell, "Asia Askew: U.S. Best-Sellers on Asia, 1931-1980," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 15 (1983), 4, p. 5.

empty space; in other words, with nobody."<sup>5</sup>

The revisionism of Karl van Wolferen, much commented on several years ago as a revolutionary insight about Japan, is really no more than an extension of Buruma's argument that adult Japanese are children and therefore lack leadership qualities. At the heart of van Wolferen's Japan is absence, the result of a lack of maturity based on improper childhoods:

To grasp the essence of a political culture that does not recognize the possibility of transcendental truths demands an unusual intellectual effort for Westerners, an effort that is rarely made in even serious assessments of Japan. Western child-rearing practice inculcates suppositions that implicitly confirm the existence of an ultimate logic controlling the universe independently of the desires and caprices of human beings. This outlook, constantly reaffirmed in later life, inclines Westerners to take it for granted that all advanced civilizations develop concepts of universal validity, and they are therefore not prompted to examine the effects of their absence.<sup>6</sup>

Revisionist and orthodox readings of modern Japanese culture in the United States, at least during the last twenty years have demonstrated that the Japanese lack maturity, in the sense of being adults, lack a sense of self, lack a sense of the individual, lack the ideal of compassion, lack an articulate language, lack transcendental values, and lack all qualities of political authority and leadership. Works on modern Japanese literature and culture

<sup>5</sup> Ian Buruma, *Behind the Mask* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), pp. 198, 225, 151-52.

<sup>6</sup> Karl van Wolferen, *The Enigma of Japanese Power: People and Politics in a Stateless Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), p. 10.

that find the widest acceptance and readership in the United States adhere to this formula, which has changed little since the age of Imperialism.

Though the conclusions of serious revisionist writing on modern Japanese literature in the American university are similarly explications of what is lacking in the Japanese psyche, such studies generally owe their intellectual origins not to the desire to tell the masses of the U.S. intelligentsia what they want to hear, but, paradoxically, to a Japanese mode of criticism that is some ninety years old and until recently constituted a certain orthodoxy in Japan.

The origins of this mode of argumentation can probably be traced to Ishikawa Takuboku's criticism of naturalism in 1910 and 1911, a result of Takuboku's deep despair over what he saw as the inadequate opposition by Japanese intellectuals to the injustice of the Kōtoku Shūsui Incident. In a series of articles, Takuboku accused Japanese naturalism of being apolitical and of not transcending the superficial appearance of reality to reveal the true reality of Japanese society constituted by underlying political and social systems.<sup>7</sup>

In its later more theoretically rigorous formulations, this mode of criticism would find that Japanese naturalism resulted in defeat: the trivialization of literature in the form of the autobiographical novel (watakushi-shōsetsu) or the shinkyō shōsetsu. The oppressive conditions of Japanese society, it was argued, did not allow Japanese novelists to develop the scientific and positivist spirit of Zola's naturalism and grasp Japanese society as a totality, revealing all of its inherent contradictions; instead,

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<sup>7</sup> Matsuzawa Shinyū, "Nihon no Shizen shugi to sono riarizumu," *Minshu bungaku*, June 1991 (no. 307), pp. 111-114.

Japanese writers were slaves fleeing from their oppressive society, and they escaped into the narrow confines of Japan's literary world, where they indulged in the mundane practice of writing about their own lives.

The relation between orthodox marxism and this literary theory of the distorted development of Japanese literary realism, which was at the same time a theory of the distorted development of Japanese personality and society, is clear in the following 1931 formulation by Tanigawa Tetsuzō.

A unique characteristic of Japanese society and culture is that the hegemony of the bourgeoisie did not result in the full realization of liberalism and individualism, and of course Japanese naturalism reflects this unique characteristic. The literature of naturalism is very weak in its criticism of society and the social challenges it raises. Naturalism's doctrines of "non-closure" (*mukaiketsu*) and "anti-idealism" are signs of the movement's surrender and submission, often to feudal values. The result was that naturalism came to be seen as representing lethargy, lack of purpose, and passivity, lethargy in particular.<sup>8</sup>

This theory of Japanese society and personality gained wide popularity among academics in the years following World War Two. Defeat in war could be laid at the feet of the "lethargic" masses who did not rise in struggle to win that abstraction, a bourgeois society of equal citizens. Kataoka Yoshikazu, Itō Sei, Ara Masahito, Hirano Ken, Nakamura Mitsuo -- one critic after another adopted similar arguments. In the United States, this theory of "underdevelopment" found a ready audience, though its marxist underpinnings were often softened. In 1983, Homma

<sup>8</sup> Tanigawa Testuzō, *Shizenshugi no sakka*, fourth pamphlet in the Iwanami kōza Nihon bungaku series (Iwanami Shoten, 1931), p. 22.



Kenshirō could present as definitive literary history the basically marxist paradigm formulated by Tanigawa fifty years earlier, though notice in the following how certain critical terms -- "bourgeoisie" and "feudal" -- are suppressed:

Naturalism found the justification for its existence as defining society and emancipating the individual from ages of exploitation, deprivation, and subservience. Japanese naturalism, however, was far from paying attention to social problems and science. Instead, it took an observant attitude of life, introducing watakushi-shōsetsu (autobiographical fiction) and shinkyō-shōsetsu (mental state fiction)....<sup>9</sup>

With the superimposition of this essentially sociological reading over a great many Japanese literary texts, the temptation to conflate the concept of the individual in its political sense with the notion of self in a literary sense was irresistible because this conflation could be used to establish a sort of prototypical Japanese personality distinguished by what is lacking when compared to the prototypical personality posited for the west. Since Americans are traditionally leery of marxism, the scientific methodology for locating the site of original absence is usually not in an economic infrastructure but in a vague "Japanese culture" advanced by holistic anthropological analysis, or in early child rearing practises, or more recently, in the Japanese language.

The revisionism of American academia in its claims to new and original formulations concerning Japanese literature are based on current, theoretical methodologies in fashion in U.S.

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<sup>9</sup> Kenshiro Homma, *The Literature of Naturalism: An East-West Comparative Study* (Kyoto: Yamaguchi Publishing House, 1983), p. 346.

intellectual circles. In terms of popular culture, this revisionism often consists of seizing upon an artifact of popular Japanese culture -- a comic book, a kabuki play, pornography, or a popular television program -- fetishizing this artifact and displaying it as a uniquely important symbol of the Japanese psyche and Japanese culture. Kenneth Alan Adams and Lester Hill, Jr., "Protest Anality in Japanese Group-Fantasies," is a particularly striking example of this genre. Adams and Hill write that "Our research is based on a six-month sampling of Japanese boys' comics. Comics for girls and adults are not included. In an effort to obtain a sample that was as representative as possible of Japanese culture, we targeted the most popular comics in Japan for scrutiny." In fact, however, these two social scientists analyze only one or two comic storylines, chiefly "Iro wa ni Hosaku," for several months and provide no historical background or context. Based on this highly selective example, they are able to categorically state about the Japanese, "even the existence of the individual qua individual is problematic" and that behind the facade of the acceptance of the group, "lurks a noxious mass of poisonous feelings -- resentment, hostility, rage, and vengeance, all on the verge of eruption at the group's intrusion into the individual's inchoately-perceived personal space." They conclude with the familiar childhood motif, "after the anal-sadistic fecal explosion, purification of mind and body has been achieved. The Japanese can become Clean Toilet Children...."<sup>10</sup> In short, the revisionist methodologies of psychohistory and social psychoanalysis, which are presently rather popular, yield conclusions that differ not in

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<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Adams and Lester Hill, Jr., "Protest Anality in Japanese Group Fantasies," *The Journal of Psychohistory*, Fall 1987, 15 (2), pp. 113, 114, 143.

the least from, and in some ways are more extreme than, those expressed by the most ardent American imperialists vis à vis Asians at the turn of the century. In this interpretation of popular literary texts according to a fuzzy blend of marxism and psychology, what exactly has been revised?

Semiotics in the 1970s seemed to provide a concrete and empirically verifiable way out of the closed system of formalism. However, when translated into Japanese studies in the United States, in Masao Miyoshi's *Accomplices of Silence*, for instance, this new awareness of the primacy of language was used once again to demonstrate what the Japanese lack. How a literary tradition so rich in different writing systems, vocabulary, and diverse genres and a people so immensely fond of talking and playing with language, how the speakers of this language could possibly be construed to "worship silence," has escaped me ever since the book came out in 1974. In any case, Miyoshi's conclusions concerning the nature of the Japanese novelist in his or her relation to Japanese society are in complete accord with orthodox marxist literary criticism established in the 1930s: the oppressive conditions of Japanese society and language did not allow Japanese novelists to develop into fully mature individuals and grasp Japanese society as a totality, revealing all of its inherent contradictions; instead, Japanese writers were slaves fleeing from their oppressive society, and they escaped into the narrow confines of Japan's literary world, where they heroically resisted the fatal allure of an undifferentiated group silence and alone faced the terrors inherent in personal articulation. Again, what exactly has been revised since the 1930s?

The discourse on "what the Japanese lack" comes full circle with Edward Fowler's 1988 book *The Rhetoric of Confession: Shishōsetsu in Early Twentieth Century Fiction*, in

which Fowler uses the "nature of the Japanese language" to argue the essential difference of the core personality of the Japanese:

Watakushi is actually one of a half dozen or so first-person pronominals that any one person commonly uses to refer to oneself, depending on the occasion (e.g., public or private)...This remarkable variety extends to the second- and third-person pronominals as well, which if anything are even more numerous. The incidence of so many pronominals in the language speaks eloquently for a very protean notion of self, one that depends for its existence more on the person or situation with whom or with which one is associated at a given moment than on one's own unilaterally initiated thoughts and acts. We can think of a true pronoun as a sign of separate and autonomous presence, marking an indelible boundary between self and other.<sup>11</sup>

What do the automatic habits of inclusion and exclusion of any language's grammar imply about the worldview of the speaker of that language? To what extent is the existential question in the west based on phantasmagoria presented by the eccentricities of the grammars of the Indo-European languages? If the grammars of different languages so rigidly predetermine world view, how can the speaker of one language ever presume to understand the literary texts of another? Do parents who raise their children in bilingual contexts in which both Japanese and English languages are learned condemn their children to an even more "protean notion of self?" There is not one person working in Japanese studies today who has the background in phenomenology, linguistics, literature, and child psychology necessary to even

<sup>11</sup> Edward Fowler, *The Rhetoric of Confession: Shishōsetsu in Early Twentieth Century Japanese Fiction* (University of California Press, 1988), pp. 5-6.

speculate on such questions with any authority.

Not only has the basic assumption that the "self" as it appears in literature has a relation to any given theory of the individual in a social or linguistic sense not been questioned or revised, the debate over how "the Japanese self" appears in the Japanese novel has undergone a permutation in its level of determinism; the notion of "self" has become a genetic linguistic trait that somehow the Japanese novel is not marked with. Modes of production can transform feudalism to capitalism; pronominals in a language will not change according to human volition.

In 1936, Tosaka Jun commented as follows on trends in criticism on his contemporary literary scene:

The individual is a sociological concept. It can be taken care of by historical materialism. The self, in contrast, is a literary representation. It possesses infinite literary and moral nuances and flexibility. The systematization of the individual is the splendid science called sociology. The systematization of the self may be literary, but it is not scientific -- positivist, technological, and so on -- theory.<sup>12</sup>

Much of what Tosaka called the "Japanese ideology" in the field of literature consisted of readings which conflated these two categories to establish the essential Japaneseness of the narrating Japanese subject. Tosaka maintained to the end that abstractions such as the "Japanese spirit" were simply meaningless in discussions about literature. In a different sense, through explicating the "Japanese ideology," postwar criticism of modern Japanese literature in the U.S. has performed the same operation

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<sup>12</sup> Tosaka Jun, *Tosaka Jun zenshu*, 5 vols. (Keisō Shobō, 1966), IV, p. 265.

that Tosaka Jun criticized.

What then is being revised? The revision of the three broad streams of criticism reviewed here -- unsystematic semiotics, or the travel writings of Buruma and van Wolferen that reveal unconscious reliance on stereotypes about Asia, social psychotherapy, and linguistic/semiotic determinism derived from orthodox marxism -- would seem to be difficult if only because the methodology of arguing that something is not absent seems like an infinite blackhole. I think the argument could be made that any western theoretical framework superimposed over Japanese literature will invariable produce the same sorts of results: explications of Japanese absence, of the distortion of Japanese society and personality, and of the lack of maturity of Japanese men in particular.

If the criticism of modern Japanese literature were to come to have little or nothing to say about the Japanese as a totality, what would we Japanologists have to write about and teach. The subjects seem limitless. We do not yet have a major biography of Natsume Sōseki. There is a crucial need for substantial, sympathetic treatments of a range of popular literary genres in Japan, such as mystery fiction or historical fiction. Can one cite a major work of literary sociology or a study of a Japanese readership written in English? The list goes on and on. Such studies, which do not depend on à priori theoretical conceptions of Japan, however, will probably not find a large audience in the United States.