“Theory vs. Practice / East vs. West: A Commentary I by Discussant”

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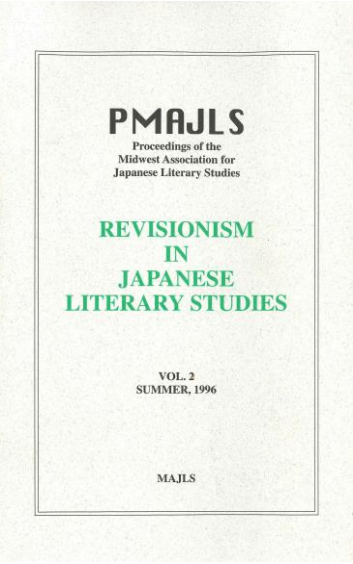

PMAJLS 2:
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THEORY VS. PRACTICE / EAST VS. WEST: A COMMENTARY I BY DISCUSSANT

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I wish to begin my discussion by reiterating the title, though not necessarily the gist, of Richard Torrance's talk, "What Exactly Is Being Revised?" I do not mean to be disingenuous, but it is my impression that the history of Japanese literary studies in the US--and in most other parts of the world, for that matter, is so brief, barely fifty years old in fact, that there has not even been time to establish an identifiable critical orthodoxy that needs revision. The works published before the recent spate of consciously new writing have mostly been translations with brief introductions representing the Japanese scholarship on the work in question. Apart from a couple or so rare examples, it seems inappropriate to even talk of New Criticism, the late reigning orthodoxy in other literary fields; that approach presupposes a particular understanding of the literary artifact *per se*, a method of reading, and at the very least a feel for the richness and complexity of the literary text, that by and large have not even been compellingly demonstrated in Japanese studies. There is, in other words, a time lag in our history and practice, one necessitated by the effort it took to translate a number of canonical works of sufficient critical mass to enable the following generation to analyze them with the confidence that they were not speaking in a total vacuum.

And now we are being propelled directly into the age of postmodern theory without having properly undergone the New Critical stage. And wandering into the wilderness of interdisciplinarity with no training in any single discipline, not

even the discipline of literary studies as constituted in Anglo-American practice. Is it not ironic that we seem fated to relive the experience of a forced modernity, or postmodernity, similar to that which so distressed Sōseki he abandoned English literature for fiction writing? I raise these two issues of a critical time lag and the issue of disciplinary training simply because I feel that we have not confronted them directly, and that the omission is bound to surface in a certain crudeness in our attempts to apply contemporary theory to texts.

It is quite possible, for instance, that the reason for what Atsuko Sakaki decries as the Euro-American indifference to Japanese literary issues is that we have not provided them with textual or thematic analyses of sufficient rigor and richness to make them feel qualified to talk about Japanese literature with any sophistication at all. In other words, it seems to be the case that to converse with outsiders, you would have to speak in their language, which would mean to naturalize the Japanese work, to translate the foreign object in an idiom intelligible to Euro-American critical sensibilities. Some of us will object to this on theoretical or ideological grounds as a form of orientalism. But just as we have had to constitute the field by beginning with the treasonous act of translation, so is it unavoidable, in pedagogical practice, that we render otherness or, that is to say, *difference*, intelligible. Otherwise, we could not even teach Japanese literature to undergraduates, and would end up talking only among ourselves.

Speaking of *difference*, Atsuko also raises the question, in connection with the marginality of Japanese literary studies, of whether there is an irreducible gap between East and West. I happen to believe that there is, but only in the absolute epistemological sense that we can never know anything or anyone completely, and that this irreducible difference is what constitutes

us. And yet it is also this difference, is it not, that generates desire for the Other, perhaps even constitutes it as Other vis-a-vis oneself? Speaking for myself, if someone asked, why Japanese, I could only reply with a tautology. Why? Because it is not Philippine, not American, not Spanish, and so on, because it *is* Japanese, something I do not know, and hope never wholly to know. Because it is not my native tongue, reading it awakens my senses, refreshes a mind easily stupefied by the well-worn tracks of the familiar. If all this puts me beyond the pale as a dilettante aesthete and skeptic to boot, then I would also have to admit to being as anally obsessive about my work as the next academic, and that would have to be my justification.

Which is all a detour meant to return us to the question of difference, to the East-West difference that our panel raises. I hope I offend no one if I observe that whether or not you subscribe to the necessity of underlining the difference depends on your desire. Possibly, if one were a member of the majority white--and preferably male--culture in the US, the desire would be to retain and even overvalue the Japanese difference as a sign of exclusive, privileged knowledge. Conversely, a minority scholar in the US would conceivably desire to reduce the difference in order to facilitate communication with the Other under the aegis of the universality of knowledge. But in either case, the difference of East from West would not signify *marginality*, except where it is employed as a mark of lower value, and that kind of prejudiced discourse does not belong to scholarship but to propaganda. So in principle, I see no need to bury the irreducible East-West, or self-and-other difference. I believe what Atsuko calls the marginality of Japanese literary studies within literary studies in general--which is to say within comparative literature--is a function of the narcissism of the center. Since Eurocentric comparatists--

with a few notable exceptions--do not bother to read Japanese literature, then they could not be expected to be interested in studies of it. It is that simple.

The field of theory, however, would seem to offer more access, since it does not necessitate reading the works themselves, but only their conceptualization. Here one would have to be in complete agreement with Michiko Wilson that the new theories and the field of cultural studies offer so many windows for a re-vision of Japanese literature, so many beams lighting the isolation, so to speak, of our gloomy house. True, a principled objection could be made that the lack of a common ground in the Other's knowledge of the texts of Japanese culture would preclude real dialogue. I have in mind, for instance, the fascinating "Dialogue on Language" "between a Japanese and an inquirer" that opens Heidegger's 1959 work, *On the Way to Language.* There is here a mutual incomprehension between Heidegger and his native Japanese informant (a term Atsuko does not like, but that is how, at least in part, Heidegger sees his interlocutor) attributable to the German philosopher's lack of experience with Japanese cultural forms. Compared to it, the Japanese shows a touching familiarity with Heideggers' works and ideas, and it is this, finally, along with an utterly sincere desire for mutual comprehension on each part that enables the dialogue. What compels the reader's attention here is not what has been comprehended (that is not at all clear) but that two minds have engaged one another--and the reader's too after them--to open a path towards some unnamed destination. What is of note is Heidegger's eager desire to discover if the vision toward which he was groping would resonate and perhaps become clarified through dialogue with the Japanese. This attitude is somewhat distinct from Derrida's sceptical response to Karatani's and Asada's

claims that deconstruction existed in Japan even before the fact due to the absence there of a logocentric structure (during Derrida's visit to Japan in 1984, as reported by Marilyn Ivy in her piece in *Postmodernism and Japan*). In this latter case, the dialogue was perhaps not so satisfying because Derrida himself is too clear about what deconstruction is, and not so amenable to resituating and re-visioning it in the Japanese context.

This suggests that the marginality of Japanese studies cannot be repaired by the "me too" syndrome when the East-West dialogue is contaminated by the politics of authority. "Japan too is postmodernist" is a claim that could not be of the slightest interest to the powerful center, since by a structural necessity, it could not surrender its place to the other and still remain central; this would be a case of redundancy. Equally, from the other side, it is not clear what advantage should accrue to Japan by being assimilated into the universal discourse of the center which is an Other. Rather, for Japanese studies to find a place in literary or cultural studies in general, it would have to adopt the strategy of challenging the universal validity of the dominant discourse, and *force* it to yield its place.

The "me too" syndrome could result in confirming Japan as a colonized Other, willy nilly collaborating in the orientalist discourse of the Western center. I notice that Richard Torrance makes no single mention of the word "orientalism." I would like to know the reason for this significant omission, since his critique of the so-called revisionist works of Ian Buruma, van Wolfern, and Fowler surely demonstrates their Orientalism. Orientalism is, as Said says, and I quote, "a Western style [of discourse] for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient," or in other words, a means for European culture to gain "strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of

surrogate or even underground self." (*Orientalism*, p. 3) In Richard's analysis, the cited works in effect employ the Western ideology of liberalism, individual autonomy, rationalism, and the metaphysics of transcendental values as an arbitrary framework in order to show how such are lacking in Japanese popular culture, thus confirming the superiority of the West in this regard. Now since I have not read Buruma or van Wolfern recently, I cannot say whether these authors intended to project these various "lacks" as a measure of Japanese inferiority. It might be that despite the authors' intentions, general readers are all too prone to interpret "lack" or "absence" as inferior precisely because as Derrida has shown, Western logocentrism unquestioningly affirms the metaphysics of presence over absence, autonomy over interdependency, the center over the margin, and so on. Consequently, despite the authors' intentions, their use of Western philosophical ideology to structure their understanding of Japanese culture is always already Orientalist through and through.

A less inimical approach would begin from first principles, by explaining that "lack" or "absence"--far from being the scandalous immaturity exposed by Buruma "behind the mask"--that this "absence" is a positive value in premodern Japanese aesthetics, for instance, and that Buddhist intellectual philosophy is precisely grounded on emptiness, the rejection of the concept of individual self or entity as an illusion. Such an approach would then strike at the metaphysical core of Western thinking, and challenge its claim to universal validity. In general, we japanologists still have to seriously confront the structures of premodern Japanese thought or theory--all those *karon*, *rengaron*, and *nōgakuron* that Atsuko enumerates in her talk, and their implications for a description of Japanese cultural forms. And scholars of modern literature have only just begun to deconstruct

the orthodox narrativization of *kindai bungaku* as a story of Westernization in order to make room for those works and authors structurally excluded by such an Other-oriented literary history.

The works that John Mertz discusses, Masao Miyoshi's *Off Center*, David Pollack's *Reading Against Culture* (1992), and James Fujii's *Complicit Fictions* (1993), would all seem to be aware of the perils of orientalism. In this sense, they are true revisionist works in their determination to displace the centrality of Western standards of judgement and evaluation, their awareness, as John puts it, that "cultural description is thoroughly contingent on the position of the voice that describes." John's critique, if I understand him correctly, is that their preoccupation with the East-West *asymmetrical* relation inadvertently perpetuates the very binarism that they expressly set out to overturn. Pollack's analytical method, for instance, based as it is on the dialectics of the self and other (or East-West) relation, gives the impression that the Japanese self was heretofore absent and wholly a product of the culture's dialogue with West. In Fujii's otherwise more nuanced approach, on the other hand, the rejection of Western universalism apparently leads to a misleading rejection--or at least passing over--of the correlation between individualism and capitalism in the Japanese as much as in the Western case. Apparently then, the revisionist approach of historicizing the development of the modern japanese novel within the ideological framework of first world/ third world power relations can lead to blind spots and inner contradictions in their analyses.

Given this state of affairs, John turns around and desires to grant validity to Western influence, though not as an arbitrary and oppressive import but rather, if I understand him correctly, as part of a discourse of the imaginary that writers employed to resist the overwhelming control of the Meiji state over daily life

and thought. In John's analysis, Japanese modernity and the critical interiority manifest in the modern japanese novel were less a response to the West *per se* than to the lived experience of a people under the pressures of nation-building and state capitalism. This seems to me a basically sound approach, a refreshing insight into the imaginative appropriation of Western ideas to respond to Japanese reality, and one that underscores once again that in literature we are dealing with representations, with the imaginary, but this fact does not detract from their validity as mediated expressions of a lived reality. I would only add that claims about "lived reality" need a theoretical justification, given the emphasis these days on literature as a system of conventions that is alleged to leave little room for "expression"-- another discredited term that needs reexamination.

In conclusion, Naoki Sakai's observation, as cited by Atsuko, of the heterogeneity of the Japanese language, is another sound principle to keep in mind as a warning to those who would argue for Japanese uniqueness or pure Western Otherness. To put it in another way, there is no such thing as a unitary, monolithic identity; there are only alterities and differences. The question is, what are the implications for Japanese literary studies of this axiom of postmodernism? Do we continue a type of East-West dialogue generated by the animus of power relations, or set that aside for a less politically-laden approach? Must we bow to the presumption in some quarters that the will to power is always implicated in knowledge? Is there not something oppressive about having to identify yourself ethnically, politically, and theoretically, in order to express your thoughts about a literary work? In other words, is not the implicit demand for an identity card itself a blatant sort of subjection? Is not the interpretation itself--your words interacting with the words of the work--already an

inscription of your identity, even if the identity so constituted is wholly contingent, beyond fixed categorization, and liable--as any speech or writing would be--to misprision? Is this not a more pleasurable way of receiving texts, a more dialogic reception? Not objectifying the work and categorizing or describing it in order to gain control over it, but allowing it to speak to you and you to speak back to it?

Michiko Wilson's way of talking back to the canonical works by reversing them is indeed illuminating. "What!?" she asks, "can a female manic-depressive like Sensei be a protagonist in the literary canon?" "How about the conceited egoist female who comes and goes as her spirit moves her in search of liminal space and time in the snow country?" This is very broad irony indeed. *Gekokujō* is fine for pedagogical purposes, as a shock therapy to the complacent. And surely there is enough complacency in a field like ours, where the works of female colleagues seldom get the sober estimation they deserve, and where *joryū bungaku*, despite its canonization by the male establishment, still awaits its proper valuation as the product of female hands. But I do worry about, and sense in myself a resistance to, a simple role reversal. What good is it to reverse roles if the master-slave opposition remains intact?

We all recognize, I believe, that the subtext of cultural studies, and the revisions generated by theory, is the question of authority and power. That is what animates them, and literature is only the battleground, and not the object, of this academic warfare. Reversal, deconstruction, decentering, and defamiliarization are its strategies. If these procedures result in the legitimation of heretofore unheard voices, well and good. But it would be equally good if we listened also to the voice that still speaks through the text, despite "the death of the author," since it

is this voice--multivalent, refracted, and contingent though it is--that ultimately legitimizes our own speech.