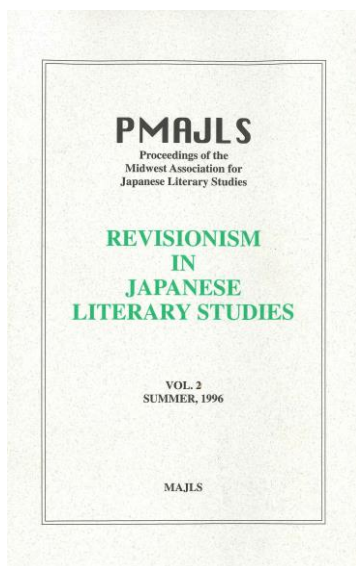


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Commentary II by Discussant”

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**THEORY VS. PRACTICE / EAST VS. WEST:  
A COMMENTARY II BY DISCUSSANT**

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Whether we have specialized in that period or not, we all know about the agony of coming into the world faced by Japanese writers in the late nineteenth century. A new kind of writing was needed both in response to internal and external intellectual challenges and in order to create a new readership and new interests for that readership. The very language, the heart and soul of the folk, had to change. Theory and practice went together to speak of, to and for the new world. Tsubouchi Shōyō's *Shōsetsu shinzui* in 1885, we are told, was the first statement of the new theory that would join the already existing. Let me quote some familiar phrases from that period to remind us of the seriousness of the task of re-visioning (to use the formulation Michiko Wilson urges us to consider) the functions of and commitments to literature that was then taking place:

Only a short time ago. . . the novel. . . had no air of having a theory, a conviction, a consciousness of itself behind it--of being the expression of an artistic faith, the result of choice and comparison. . . It must take itself seriously for the public to take it so. The old superstition about fiction being 'wicked' has doubtless died out [in England]; but the spirit of it lingers in a certain oblique regard directed toward any story which does not more or less admit that it is only a joke. . . . It is still expected. . . that a production which is after all only a 'make-believe' (for what else is a 'story?') shall be in some degree apologetic--shall renounce the pretension of attempting really to represent life. . . . The only reason for the existence of the novel is that it does attempt to represent life.

Theory is an essential companion to practice, the statement continues:

The successful application of any art is a delightful spectacle, but the theory too is interesting; and though there is a great deal of the latter [=theory] without the former [=art] I suspect there has never been a genuine success [=art] that has not had a latent core of conviction [=theory].

Now, if this sounded familiar, that is because you recognized, not Tsubouchi, but Henry James: his 1884 essay, "The Art of Fiction." The case for the seriousness of literature was needing to be made in those days not just in Japan; the recognition that theory and practice were fellow-travelers with related but different attractions was equally a part of the Euro-American and Japanese literary worlds in the 1880s.

Theory and practice have probably always existed as a team in a lively relationship to each other and their practitioners. But not until recently has the work of literature sometimes seemed to be almost incidental to the debates using it as their staging ground. As I have watched transformations in the "lit-crit" scene over several decades (since those halcyon undergraduate days when my teachers thought they were training me in what we now call the "old" New Criticism and none of us even realized that it was Eurocentric) I have come to see the struggles of the (Eurocentric) scholarly world as more a matter of politics than of literature--that is, literature itself has become no more than a site of social contestation, and "critical theory" is a strategy to prize open new space in enemy territory. And I see the contestations of used-up Europeanists and non-Europeanists anxious to establish beachheads on European territory as spilling over into our field--by which I mean the study of Japanese literature--when we are only

still beginning to do much more important work. Important, that is, if you actually do love literature and really do see it as representing human voices (a proposition not universally subscribed to). Yes, you must submit to the hegemonic discourse if you want to play their games; but (as argued the American colonialists in the 1770s) why would you want to participate in used-up, tired old European games?

As I contemplated these four papers, I--a gloom-and-doom Old Testament type myself--was reminded of my usually backgrounded fear that something important is being side-tracked, with only the occasional crotchety rear-guard action to resist the slide--say, a Harold Bloom or Wayne Booth unashamed to demonstrate that they love the literature they write about (even if their knowledge of what literature is worth writing about may be seen as limited; of similarly loving studies in our own field, I think of single-author studies like Anthony Chambers's recent *The Secret Window* on Tanizaki's work, or Edwin McClellan's earlier *Woman in the Crested Kimono* on Mori Ogai's story of Shibue Chūsai and his wife Io). Just as some of us watch with dismay and a fear that the soul of literacy itself is being lost when we see among our students a young generation of computer jockeys who confuse running off at the keyboard with communication and do not see it as, ultimately, the solitary, masturbatory act it is, so too I sometimes watch the debates--which are interesting in and of themselves, but often seem to be about something other than literature--and fear that we are in danger of losing literature in a world where "theory" is seen as radically "other" to it.

That debate is part of the pain that seems to lie behind at least two of the four papers we consider in this panel. Resistance to the whole mess ("a plague on both your houses," the Eurocentric

Bard of Avon would put it) can be actively discerned in Atsuko Sakaki's *cri de coeur*. The two statements I found most poignant in her paper were these: first, again and again she finds herself, a Japanese scholar of Japanese literature working in the U.S., treated as a "native informant," and not as the intellectual she is (brava to her for daring to own that latter appellation!); and second, she is discouraged and feels isolated at what she calls "the lack of counter-response from the hegemonic Other" when she looks for signs that the MLA considers Japanese literature a full player. Her account of an eternal battle to break down such established dyads as "West=theory/East=practice" (by, for example, proposing the existence of a switch-over: to consider thinking of the West as a practitioner and to look at the East's theory), sounds brave but lonely, given how little one side knows or cares to know about the other. To see--or be--a supplicant knocking at a door that seems never to be opened is a pretty depressing situation, as Sōseki told us in his novel *Mon*. The loneliness of our field is one of the reasons that the nicely evolving gatherings of the MAJLS have come to be; and I think we should talk about it, because there are some very real questions about whether we should be knocking so hard, or should instead be realizing the freedoms and opportunities to be found in our own developing discourse of Western criticism of Japanese literature (a freedom that is an aspect of the questions Richard Torrance asks in his paper). By "we," I mean people--native speakers and late-comers alike--who have access to literature that is impenetrable to most EuroAmericentered scholars of literature (even most of the famous ones). In fact, given that we do have these so-hard-earned linguistic skills and knowledge of otherwise inaccessible cultural contexts, we might, in our yearning to be somewhere else, be seriously

ignoring a discourse open specially to us and not to our Eurocentered MLA fellows--one that we could join with our Japanese colleagues, not all of whom are knocking at those same MLA doors.

Michiko Wilson extends the question of cultural marginalization to the matter of gender. Her paper speaks of struggle and fragmentation, defensiveness, disempowerment--it's a jungle out there in Lit-Crit Land! She is quite right--we can test the genderedness of plots by switching the genders of the characters, and discover that something weird happens. (I read some of her plot proposals to a particularly clear-headed student, without telling him what the trick was, and his response was, "There's something false here.") A protest started forming itself in my brain, however, as I read: Yes, it is a fact that the world is gendered and power relationships exist in human experience. How is that in and of itself a literary fact--one that I, a literary scholar, should care about as a special literary matter? (I know, I know--"Are you saying that literature is not part of the political world of lived experience?" No, but that is a political question, which I would engage in other than a literary venue. Is there not also a literary world of explored scholarship, in which there is knowledge to be gathered, not opinions to be propounded.)

John Mertz and Richard Torrance, perhaps because they are of the hegemonic gender, seemed considerably less haunted by a sense of marginalization. In fact, "disenchanted by essentializing systems" is a term that comes to mind when I looked back at their papers. Mertz gives us a nice phrase for a dangerous phenomenon: he warns us that "the narcissism engendered by an asymmetrical power relation can be so totalizing that it is all but impossible to break free from." He is of course speaking of the implicit limiting assumptions within otherwise

very articulate and creative arguments: for example, that Japanese are silent, or that they imported their modern sense of self. He both appreciates insights of "postcolonial criticism," but quite rightly, I think, points to a high-order foolishness that can debilitate an important argument when the critic gets seduced by his or her own metaphors and forgets that history is lived experience of real people, who usually have more than one motive and understanding for what they are doing. It is a warning against intellectual hubris, with a reminder of hard work yet to be done.

Similarly, Richard Torrance observes that we talk of seminal figures and yet there is still no major study of Sōseki in English--not even much of a synthesis of Japanese scholarship. (We might also take a moment to memorialize the relative silence of the American critical establishment--"us Japanologists"--on Japan's two Nobel Prize winners--we, the very people who take it upon ourselves to explain all of the Japanese mind and soul to outsiders. True, Michiko Wilson has recently given us a study of Oe; she knows how much I have appreciated her work, but I think even she would agree that hers is only a preliminary meditation, an opening entry--a mark to put something in a very large blank.) If some of Torrance's cases (Ian Buruma, Karel von Wolferen) are easy ones for us--"we're not like that, they are National Enquirers masquerading as real people"--he is right to point out how powerful they are at forming images and stereotypes for "those who don't know." And the totalizing explanatory schemes of Japanologists working to put themselves on the MLA map, he argues, only substitute new, currently fashionable versions of the earlier stereotyping we now all deplore, awakened as we are. What exactly is being revised, indeed, when literary scholars dip into "cultural studies" to tell us what really explains the

Japanese?

I guess what I'm saying, in summary, is that we have a lot of our own work to do, and it is a waste of time, energy, and precious morale to get sucked into complaints about hegemonic discourse. And it is a rationalizing distraction from genuine hard work to propound master narratives (Japanese silence, Japanese self) unless those are preludes to more hard spade-work. How many other writers have we learned about, beyond the handful of famous literary lions, since *Accomplices of Silence* gave us a few provocative and exciting essays--twenty years ago? Not many. John Mertz in his paper told me of Yano Ryūkei and Miyazaki Muryū, of whom I'd never heard, and told me new things about Tōkai Sanshi; I certainly hope he is working on their world, because I think we need to know much more about early Meiji than Tsubouchi Shōyō and Futabatei Shimei, before we go on about "the Meiji discovery of the modern self." And that is just as true of every other "modern" period. We are only yet beginning.