“Historicism and Culture: A Commentary by Discussant”

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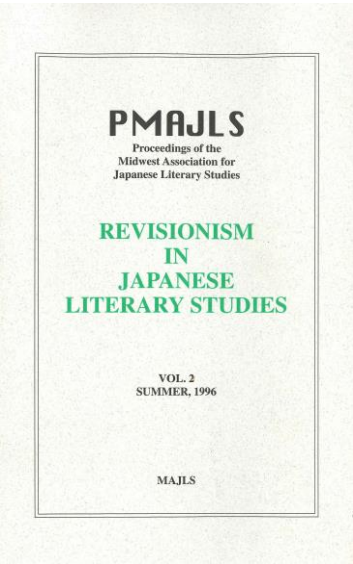

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HISTORICISM AND CULTURE: A COMMENTARY BY DISCUSSANT

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The topic of the panel is 'Historicism and Culture,' which obviously implies historical readings of the various texts addressed by the panelists. As Steven Brown points out at the beginning of his paper, 'New Historicism' as a mode of investigation has emerged as one of the major trends in literary studies of western texts, and it is not surprising that it should be incorporated into the critical methods used in Japanese literature. What distinguishes New Historicism and its practitioners from the older historicist criticism done by critics such as Edmund Wilson?[1] Both make use of the times and historical context of the writer, but while traditional historicism evokes the image of 'violently singular personalities' and shows this personality to be representative of the age, New Historicism critics are reluctant to so generalize. They are more likely to see a dynamic situation that does not readily yield a text that can somehow summarize a "culturally expressive whole." While eschewing the temptation to summarize, the strength of the New Historicism comes in its willingness to take into consideration all possible discourses that are revealed in a text and go into making the text, and the 'commerce' of the various texts, is what we are left with. The New Historicism approach can therefore:

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[1] The following comments on New Historicism draw on the description found in Mark Edmundson, *Literature against philosophy, Plato to Derrida* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), especially pp. 185-8.

> see the commerce between text and historical context not in terms of reflection or progressive dialectic, but of circulation, exchange, transformation, and transvaluation. New Historicists like [Stephen] Greenblatt understand that while a culture may tend toward total cohesion, the actual situation is always a dynamic one, in which numberless discourses, energies, and desires circulate, ceaselessly inflecting and reinflecting each other...Texts enter into the exchange of energies and metamorphoses of forms occurring among all cultural languages.[2]

Steven Brown's analysis of Hideyoshi's politicization of Noh points to the 'violently singular personality' that is characteristic of the writing of traditional historicism, but he follows a New Historicism approach by refusing to see it as simply 'representative of the age.' Although 'the age' is not directly addressed by Brown, his paper does look at one of these central discourses of the times, the discourse of power as revealed in the Noh, and in it we see the relationship of power and art as revealed in the specific texts and personalities he discusses. He is careful to point out that in breaking the study of Noh drama out of the "prison house of aesthetic autonomy which ignores the social, political, and economic contingencies surrounding its production, performance, and reception," (Brown, p. 13) he is not denigrating or ignoring the poetic, stylistic, performative, aesthetic and more traditional historical work done by others. Too often enthusiasm for a new methodology and new discoveries leads revisionist to belittle the substantial contribution of more traditional approaches.

Brown's paper shows how Hideyoshi used theatricality and his own person to demonstrate power through the Noh.

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2 Edmundson, p. 187.

Hideyoshi appears to be after legitimization vis;-vis the *kuge*, but given his megalomania it isn't too far-fetched to see that the audience for Hideyoshi's performance might be something other than the *kuge* or even the general populace, groups we would normally think of as the first audience. Perhaps Hideyoshi's intended audience was the gods of the shrines where the performances were accomplished. Given the preparations he made assuring that he would be celebrated as a god upon his death, it is not inconceivable that in his Noh performances he was already addressing the gods whose company he planned to eventually join.

Brown's paper reminds us that the questions that arise from the relationship of power and Noh are not limited to domestic displays of power. The fact that Hideyoshi commenced his study of Noh during the Korean campaign is a particularly intriguing act of timing. Is this coincidental, or is there some relationship between this imperialistic impulse and the aesthetics of Noh? This is a question that bears closer scrutiny. An examination of the relationship of power and Noh might also be fruitfully viewed in the context of the Tokugawa government's appropriation of Noh as an official art of the *bakufu*. Why was this done? Why Noh? Why exclusive? One suspects a relationship with power, but it is not apparent what that relationship is.

If, as Brown suggests, the emphasis on status was part and parcel of the sociopolitical order, which accounts for Hideyoshi's intense interest in his status in the arts, we might ask if this was also true in earlier historical contexts, and what were the forces that gave rise to Hideyoshi's use here rather than in earlier times. One important question that arise from reading the paper and then listening to the presentation, and perhaps yet

another approach to consider, is the extent to which the discourse of war and theater drew on each other's vocabulary. Perhaps there was even a kind of ritualization of war itself that interacts with and does commerce with the ritual and actions of the theatre, or vice-versa, that is, the ritualization of Noh is somehow related to the rituals of warfare at the time.

Phyllis Larson's paper on Tamura Toshiko raises an interesting point about the various discourses we examine when we study a work of literature in historical context, a point that seems to have been largely neglected in recent studies on the Meiji prose narratives, that is, the role of gender in the production and reception of texts during the Meiji period. Too often we are taken with the obvious (and sometimes overdetermined) paradigms of the West and Japan, modernization and tradition, *shōsetsu* versus novel, and either ignore or slight the question of gender in the production of Meiji texts. In recent readings of Meiji literature the object of critical inquiry is too often just the influence/imitation paradigm, and the texts selected are either the canonical objects of the traditional paradigm (Sōseki's *Kokoro* or Tōson's *Hakai*), or in some instances lesser works by the 'great authors.' Unfortunately this unintentionally results in reaffirming and reinforcing the closed nature of the canon. For this reason Larson's paper is a welcomed view of a neglected author.

Especially interesting are the questions that are implicit in her study that have to do with the creation of a subject in Tamura's writing, and how this relates to contemporary discourses of feminism. In the story Larson cites, *miira no kuchibeni*, we find all of the characteristics of an attempt to create an "individuated self through narrative conceived as referential,"[3] which is the

[3] James A. Fujii, *Complicit Fictions, The Subject in the Modern*

hallmark of Western realism. But if, as Fujii argues, the individuated subject is a construct dependent of specific times and places, and one that does not easily cross national boundaries,[4] then the expression of self in works such as Tamura's should reveal that fault lines that become apparent when things do not work well.

Larson's presentation demonstrates an attempt by a woman writer of the Meiji period to construct a self that defies dominant paradigms such as the 'good wife, wise mother' *ryo√sai kenbo* or even the 'new woman' *atarashii onna*. In doing so she asks us to consider the role of gender in the construction of this self. The writer cited, Tamura Toshiko, is particularly interesting because, as Larson has pointed out, the construction was fairly widely rejected as a failure, and particularly by the feminist of the time. But a failure for what reason? Not so much a failure of referentiality, that is, inaccuracy in her depiction of some outside reality, but rather a failure of ideals. It seems that the contemporary critics (and particularly the feminist ones) still gave primacy to the didactic value of literature, but a didacticism that was to valorize the status of the 'new woman', the liberated woman of her times. Although the historical context and the divergent discourses that make up that context are not fully address in the presentation, the implication is that they play an important role.

In considering the opening comments on 'western influences' in Jeffrey' Johnson's article on the Saikaku's humor and 'literary theory' as applicable to classical Japanese literature, I am reminded of a statement by Terry Eagleton in the preface to

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Japanese Prose Narrative (Berkeley: California University Press, 1993) p. 19.

[4] Fujii, p. 20.

his insightful little book Literary Theory, An Introduction, which states that "[h]ostility to theory usually means an opposition to other people's theory and an oblivion of one's own."[5] Indeed, all approaches to literature have a theoretical and ultimately ideological stance, and those that claim no theoretical bias only reveal a blindness to their own. We would do well to remember that any approach to classical Japanese literature, even if it isn't explicitly 'western' in its theoretical grounding or 'comparative' in its methodology, is based on some ideological framework.

As is clear in Johnson's presentation, Saikaku is a rich source of inquiry for various critical approaches. He notes that Saikaku is often viewed within the *shōsetsu* tradition and also as 'realism', both terms which are problematic and certainly bear more rigorous scrutiny. Johnson's analysis focuses on one small but important aspect of Saikaku's writing, his use of humor, and the approach is largely formal rather than historical.

Given the fact that comedy and humor depend so much on a knowing relationship between writer and audience, and the degree to which the reader is 'in the know' when a writer moves into the doubling discourse characteristic of ironic writing, it seems that Saikaku studies are ripe for a full scale reader-response analysis of the texts. This is just hinted at in Johnson's presentation, but it is clearly a way in which the study might go in the future. Johnson also suggests the importance of intertextuality in his description of *naimaze* and the use of the classical in Saikaku. The triple use of Ise-Genji-Saikaku texts suggests a kind of commerce between texts, with a currency that is accepted in

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5 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory, An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983) p. viii.

differing times by different social classes. Since Saikaku's era is one in which the merchant class is prominent as an audience, an additional factor beyond formal characteristics of the text might be brought into play here.

One usually thinks of comedy and humor as either reinforcing or subverting values, depending on who is the butt of a joke and who in the audience is 'in the know.' Although Johnson does not address this issue, it would be interesting to consider whose values are being satirized, what values reinforced and what values subverted, and to put it in the framework of a historicist approach, what discourses are at play in the humor that permeates Saikaku's writing. This is indeed a fertile field for analysis, and much work remains to be done.

Charles Inouye's presentation also opens with a survey of familiar critical terms, but he recognizes the problems involved in their use, particularly the more familiar terms, such as 'modern' 'Japanese', 'literature', and also '*shōsetsu*'. Inouye's outline of some of the problems inherent in trying to view things comparatively and trying to transfer critical techniques across culture, is instructive, especially since he ventures a new theoretical approach to viewing the literature of the Meiji and Taishō Japan. His approach is to relativize the modern discourse to not just give Japanese literature its due, but to actually see it for what it is, not for what we want it to be.

One way to challenge the assumptions of how we view the literature is to examine it at its most basic, radical root, which is its phonemic level and the function of phoneme as a sign. Inouye does so by contrasting the logocentric and the pictrocentric. I find this approach quite interesting, but several questions do come to play.

First, I wonder about the diachronic view of the movement of a sign system along the spectrum of logocentric and pictocentric. Inouye does not necessarily say this, but I sense a kind of teleology at word, a feeling of inevitability. But beyond that, assuming that this spectrum does exist and languages and societies do move along it, I wonder what actually determines the move. Inouye's presentation is fascinating in that it raises these very difficult questions and attempts to present a theoretical framework to answer them.

It is difficult to see a point of common ground in the papers in the 'Historicism and Culture' section of the conference. As discussant I would like to be able to point to something, but the answer is elusive. Perhaps it is necessarily so. If anything, while we are once again reminded of the importance of history in viewing literature and the richness of competing and complementing discourses that inevitably go into the creation of a text, we are also humbly reminded of the fact that we as critics must often take these discourses 'one step at a time.' The papers in this section have given us several solid steps on which to stand as we view the texts that we see in Japanese literature.