“Authoring *Shishōsetsu From Left to Right*”

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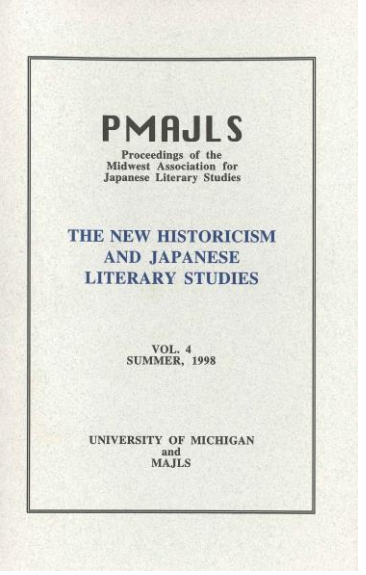
*Proceedings of the Midwest Association for Japanese Literary Studies* 4 (1998): 422–432.




*PMAJLS* 4:
*The New Historicism and Japanese Literary Studies*.
Ed. Eiji Sekine.

## Authoring *Shishōsetsu from left to right*

MINAE MIZUMURA

Writers, as you know, are self-indulgent people. Even the minor ones happily assume that their work and what they have to say about it are of great interest to everyone, including, of course, the distinguished (and soon-to-be distinguished) scholars of literature like yourselves. I don't claim to be an exception. I will be commenting today on my own novel, *Shishōsetsu from left to right*, published in 1995. And I will indulge myself so far as to argue that my novel addresses, or at least tries to address, a very fundamental question: What does it mean to be a writer in Japanese in this day and age?

Let me take some time to summarize the story of the novel. It takes place around the end of the nineteen- eighties, in a university town somewhere along the East Coast of the United States. It is a Friday night in December and snow is falling heavily. Inside a stuffy, over-heated apartment, totally cut off from the rest of the world, Minae, a Japanese woman and one of those eternal graduate students you find in a university town, is composing a diary entry on a computer. That day has proved to be a special day for her. It started with a telephone call from her sister, awakening her and reminding her of the dreaded truth: Exactly twenty years have gone by since her family left Tokyo and moved to New York. Like most of the Japanese who are sent abroad by Japanese companies, her family never intended to settle permanently in the States. But unlike most of them, they kept putting off the time of their return until it gradually became apparent to them that they had irrevocably lost the right timing. As Minae recalls the long and numerous conversations she had with her sister over the

telephone that day, she is inevitably led to reflect upon the last twenty years of her life.

The changes the passing of time brought to her family weigh heavily on her heart. America was still the land of golden dreams when the family left Japan, united, happy, and filled with vague hopes. Who would have imagined then that the price of the Japanese yen and the price of Japanese land would soar so monstrously that, were they to return home twenty years later, they would fare far worse than when they had left? Who would have imagined then that the two sisters, with all their triumphant American background, would fail to catch a respectable Japanese man and would end up husband-less in a foreign land, having to fend for themselves? Who would have imagined then that their mother, both in despair and upon calculation, would abandon them all and follow a young Japanese *salaryman* to Singapore? Or that their father would be prematurely consuming his last years in a nursing home, sickly and half-blind? The sisters, now in their early thirties, uprooted and lonely, spend hours every day on long-distance calls, lamenting the passage of time and the unexpected turn of events.

What makes the recollection of the past twenty years most disturbing for Minae, however, is the sense of having wasted her own life. Certainly, there had been the initial thrill of living in America. But that thrill had soon faded, and as far back as she can remember, all she had ever wanted to do was to go back to Japan.

America had taught Minae that she was an "Oriental," an outsider. She felt that she had no legitimate place in this country, and, more critically, that she would never be a legitimate user of the English language. That was probably why, from her early days in junior high school, Minae had turned her back to English, keeping the necessary contacts to a minimum, while immersing herself in an old collection of Japanese novels her parents had

brought with them. In college and beyond, she took up frivolous things like painting and French so that she could go on with her usual business, turning her back to English, immersing herself in the world of Japanese literature. Thanks to the thousands of days spent obsessively in this single pursuit, her Japanese turned out to be almost as good as if she had never left her native soil, making her naively assume that she could write like those wonderful writers she had been reading. It has been a long time since she began harboring the desire to go back to Japan to become a Japanese writer. Nonetheless, years have passed without her being able to make a decisive move. She has been afraid to face her choice -- afraid, also, to leave her sister behind, all alone in America.

Twenty years have already gone by.... A pang she had felt in learning the dreaded truth that day provides her with the last push needed to make that decisive move. She is now determined to go back to Japan to start writing in Japanese. That determination, however, rather than alleviating her mind, lets loose the obvious questions she had previously tried to suppress. Indeed, if all she ever wanted to do was to go back to Japan and to write in Japanese, why had she not done so earlier? Why had she wasted her precious youth like this, inside a stuffy, over-heated apartment in a boring little town? And more profoundly, what was the meaning of those twenty years in America if all she had ever wanted was to become a Japanese writer?

As Minae keys in her diary entry and reflects upon her life, sad and confused, the telephone rings, piercing the late night air. It is her sister again. Despite the hours Minae has spent talking to her sister that day, she has been unable to bring herself to tell her that she finally must abandon her. Now it is her sister who, unexpectedly, gives Minae leave to go: "Yes, you can return home. Go ahead and give it a try." Suddenly, a glimmer of hope,

and along with it, all the forgotten yearnings for life itself, awaken in her mind. "Yes, I should give it a try." The novel ends as Minae throws open the window and lets the fresh winter air into her apartment.

Needless to say *Shishōsetsu from left to right* is basically an autobiographical novel. Ever since Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, what can be called "how-I-became-a-writer" stories have flourished in the world. *Shishōsetsu from left to right* is no doubt a variant. You may even detect in my novel that self-complacent, self-congratulatory tone, characteristic of such stories. Yet, in my novel, inextricably connected to this tale a hundred times told, is a more sober tale, full of regret. For my story is not just a how-I-became-a-writer story. It is a how-I-became-a-Japanese-writer story and that story necessarily runs parallel to the story of how I failed to become a writer in the English language.

What does it mean to write in Japanese in this day and age? Well, it means first and foremost that you are writing in a highly local language -- as a matter of fact, in a highly singular language as well since the Japanese language does not even belong to a larger linguistic family. What does it mean then to write in a highly local language? The answer, obviously, is not too auspicious. For it ultimately means that you may toil till death in an effort to create great works of literature but you are not likely to have even the slightest chance of becoming a truly *major* writer -- that is, a writer whose work, both in the original and in translation, will reach so far into the distance that she will, in the end, be read by millions of her true readers, some of whom will, in turn, create their own works which will engage in a direct dialogue with her, thus sending her words still further into time and space. Jane Austen, for me, exemplifies such a writer. I have

encountered many people -- lots of women -- in many places on earth who read Jane Austen with an astonishing passion. And Jane Austen wrote, of course, in English. Naturally, no one becomes a Jane Austen nowadays even if one wrote like Jane Austen. To compare yourself with Jane Austen and lament that you are not graced even with the slightest chance of becoming a writer like her is, I know, preposterous. But writers, as I've told you, are self-indulgent people and it is in their nature to be a bit megalomaniacal, both in their hopes and in their despairs.

More and more stories of how people born on foreign soil turn themselves into American writers are appearing on the American literary scene. Those stories are not just how-I-became-a-writer stories. They are how-I-became-an-American-writer stories. On the surface, *Shishōsetsu from left to right* may look as if it were just a mirror image of those stories. One may say that some people just choose to write in English and remain in the States while others, like myself, just choose to write in their original tongue and return home. It's a free world and you make your choice, and the two choices are equally valid -- so the assumption goes. Nevertheless, however laudable in its egalitarian impulse, such symmetric view of the relationship between the two languages is at best naïve. The choice between the English language and the language that is not English does not represent a choice between two different languages. It represents a choice between a universal language and a local language.

At any given place at any given moment in history, there is always a language more universal than others, that is, more widely used than other languages among the people who are not born into that language. And yet, at no time in history has one, single language acquired so much universality worldwide as English in our age. Today, even Japanese, Chinese and Korean writers read each other's work in English translation -- something

that was unthinkable only half a century ago. Moreover, this trend, being a linguistic one, follows its own logic of propagation, independently of the rapidly changing world political and economic picture. While the supremacy of America may be increasingly challenged by the rest of the world, the predominance of the English language is only growing, relegating the writings done in other languages to ever more marginal places. No doubt the trend will continue for generations to come.

I don't know what other writers writing in other non-English languages think of this asymmetry. I know that the Japanese writers do not waste much thought on it. However, I was made to be acutely aware of my asymmetric predicament because I was in a situation in which, theoretically, I could have chosen otherwise. Indeed, most people who come to America at my age will make the "right" choice without even thinking and adopt English as their first language. I was so busy resisting English that I could not see the two languages for what they were, totally unaware of the choice I had until the choice was irrevocably lost.

My English, as you can see from this presentation, is not quite up to the level of Jane Austen -- though when I come to think of it, my Japanese is not quite up to the level of Sōseki, either, but then that's another story.

Let us go back to *Shishōsetsu from left to right.*. *Shishōsetsu from left to right* can thus be read as a story of a woman who made a wrong choice in her life. If that were all there were to the story, I could only feel sorry for the protagonist, for myself and for Japanese literature. But then, running alongside this story, fortunately, is the story of a woman very much elated by the idea of writing in the Japanese language. And here, of course, is where the notion of the untranslatability of language comes in.

Why did the protagonist persevere in her resistance against

English? It is true, as I have said, that, as an "Oriental," she felt she was an outsider. It is perhaps also true that she was too proud or too cowardly, afraid of the humiliation that necessarily accompanies the process of learning a new language. Yet these sociological and psychological reasons cannot explain away what in the last analysis remains a profoundly literary phenomenon. For what made the protagonist persevere in her resistance against English was an act of reading. The more she immersed herself in the Japanese novels the more she had to turn her back on English. It was in reading that she encountered the irreducible material difference of the Japanese language from the English, which made it acutely uncomfortable for her to live in two worlds, to live with two subjectivities.

Hence the peculiar form of *Shishōsetsu from left to right*, which is an attempt to answer my original question: What does it mean to be a writer in Japanese on this day and age? As the awkward title indicates, *Shishōsetsu from left to right* is a novel that may be called a "bilingual" novel. It is written horizontally in Japanese with English sentences scattered here and there. It actually begins with an English sentence, "Alas, twenty years since the exodus." The part written in English, though limited in quantity, is integral to the understanding of the novel.

On the one hand, I hoped, through this bilingual form, to attest to the linguistic asymmetry that I just mentioned. A writer who writes in English cannot possibly expect her readers to understand Japanese. In contrast, a writer who writes in Japanese can quite reasonably expect her readers to understand some English. Moreover, no other language could have replaced English here. Gone are the days when Chinese writing reigned supreme in the Far East. Indeed, it would be possible to translate *Shishōsetsu from left to right* into any other language in the world, be it Korean, Polish or Arabic, and still replicate its bilingual form by

leaving the English sentences intact. The only language into which it would be impossible to translate the work would be English. If we leave the English sentences as they are, how are we to replicate the bilingual form in the translation? Yet into what language are we to translate the English sentences? No other language in the world functions in the same way as does English. In fact, the impossibility of translating the work into English, and the singularity of that impossibility, is the clearest testimony to the linguistic asymmetry we now have in the world.

Throwing light on this fundamental asymmetry, however, was not the only objective of the novel. Inextricably related to that objective was another objective, more critical. By juxtaposing the two languages, what I hoped to convey above all was the irreducible materiality of the Japanese language. I hoped to make the readers truly see that the Japanese is a language that is different from the English, different from any Western language, and furthermore, different from any other language in the world. It is not that I tried to make a case for the uniqueness of the Japanese language. I tried, through the Japanese language, to make a case for the irreducible materiality of all languages, the reason for which writing even in the most local of all the local languages becomes a worthwhile activity in itself.

Indeed, the irreducible materiality of language -- the untranslatability of language -- is that which prevents the world from ultimately making sense only in English. Imagine a world in which the cream of all societies, the most well-educated and the most prosperous, expressed themselves exclusively in English. Not only would humanity be less rich in variation, it would also be less subtle, less articulate, and less capable checking the tyranny of one Logos. Perhaps I am being megalomaniacal again, but I would certainly be happy if, on top of all the intrinsic pleasures involved in writing in Japanese, to write in Japanese

today meant working to save humanity from succumbing to that horrid fate.

All this finally brings us to the notion of *Nihon kindai bungaku* ("modern Japanese literature") and its significance within Japanese literature. Let me call your attention to an apparently obvious detail: What the protagonist in *Shishōsetsu from left to right* read was not *Man'yōshū*, *the Tale of Genji*, or *Chikamatsu*. What she read instead was a collection of *Nihon kindai bungaku*, a retrospective term invented to designate Japanese literature which is written after the Meiji Restoration and which is comprised mainly of Japanese version of modern European novels. Not all non-Western societies witnessed the flourishing of their own versions of *kindai bungaku* as they came into contact with the West. Aside from the national independence that made possible the pursuit of higher education in the native tongue and the sophisticated use thereof, two other historical conditions were met in Japan allowing for *kindai bungaku* to flourish: first, the strength of existing literary traditions and second, the willingness to understand the West and to become a part of the West, the "universal" world, by radically transforming those literary traditions. The Japanese language, with all its blessed and the cursed burdens of the past, had to be transformed.

Hence the reason why it was only *kindai bungaku* that could have indicated to the protagonist the untranslatability of language. The language of *Nihon kindai bungaku*, born initially out of an effort to come up with translations of Western literature, is a language that sought the translatability of language in the language. (A writer like Izumi Kyōka who prided himself on his work being untranslatable was an only small minority.) It was a will to universal signification that was at the core of *kindai bungaku*. And it was this very will to universal signification, with

its conscious and unconscious emphasis on the referential function of language, that necessarily brought forth to the eyes of the protagonist the intrinsic and inalienable logic of the Japanese language.

It is for these reasons that my novel has the subtitle: "*Nihon kindai bungaku*." *Shishōsetsu from left to right* is a story bred by *Nihon kindai bungaku* and a story that is an homage to *Nihon kindai bungaku*. Moreover, and rather sadly, it is also a story that bids farewell to *Nihon kindai bungaku*, for, whatever the Japanese writers are doing today, one thing strikes me as being certain. There may be some writers today, as there always were and always will be, who play with the notion of the untranlatability of language. But no writer today seems to find it necessary to actually seek the translatability of language. The translatability of the Japanese language is already assumed as a fact. The language, in other words, has become transparent.

I would have liked to end this short talk on an optimistic tone, yet it is not in my power to do so as I look at the state of contemporary Japanese literature. Perhaps it makes little sense for a contemporary Japanese writer herself to complain about the state of contemporary Japanese literature, but I cannot help it. However filled with intricate metaphors, strange, violent, or erotic, there is this inescapable impression that the language has become transparent, that is, devoid of the genuine effort of signification. You may say that all modern literature has come to a dead end. Yet, I do not think so. The cyclical process of rebirth that visits a literature from time to time may still be in order for some other literature today, though not, I fear, for Japanese literature. It is certainly not only my nostalgia that makes me think that Sōseki, Ōgai, Ichiyō and Tanizaki were better than us. Those writers no doubt were of uncommon literary talent but they were also blessed with the imperatives of history. They were forced by historical

necessity to struggle with the language itself, that is, with the medium itself. And the struggle with the medium itself has always been and will always be the condition for any true work of art.

As a writer, all I can say for myself is that although I am not blessed with the imperatives of history -- or with the slightest chance of becoming a writer like Jane Austen -- I'll just have to keep on toiling in an effort to create *good* works of literature, because that's what's being a writer is all about, Japanese or otherwise.