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East Meets West, then Gives It Back: The Fate of Pure Literature in a Global Age

ABSTRACT

As part of the early Meiji (1868-1912) project of constructing a modern "subject" to populate the newly-fashioned, Western-style nation-state, late nineteenth-century Japan's literary artists enthusiastically engaged in the exploration of the individual self. Borrowing as their template the European realistic novel, they succeeded not only in establishing the modern *shōsetsu*, but an equally new language in which to write such novels. Their work came to be known as *junbungaku*, or "pure literature." Written by, for, and about Japanese subjects, *junbungaku* has come to be understood as a quintessentially Japanese mode of artistic expression.

This began to change in 1979 with the début of contemporary novelist Murakami Haruki. While engaging Western models in the formation of his literary landscape, Murakami rejected the "by/for/about Japanese" strictures of *junbungaku*, exploring a more global subject grounded in a hybrid conception of that subject as both Eastern and Western. Having thus encountered "the West," Murakami then "gave it back" as a new, hybrid type of fiction that eschews polarizing concepts like "East" and "West," emerging instead as a truly global form of literature. While scorned by some traditionalists as the "death of *junbungaku*," Murakami's work has also been heralded as a rebirth for serious global literature.

KEYWORDS: subjectivity, *junbungaku*, *shōsetsu*, global literature

STRESZCZENIE

*Wschód spotyka Zachód, a później go oddaje: los „czystej literatury"
w erze globalnej*

W ramach zamysłu stworzenia nowoczesnej „podmiotu", który zaludni odnowione w zachodnim stylu państwo, w okresie Meiji (1868-1912) literaci japońscy entuzjastycznie rozpoczęli odkrywanie swojego osobistego „ja". Czerpiąc ze wzorca europejskiej powieści realistycznej, zdołali nie tylko wykreować współczesne shōsetsu, ale i równie nowy język, w którym powstawały takie powieści. Ich prace stały się znane jako junbungaku lub „czysta literatura". Pisana dla, przez i o Japończykach, junbungaku była odbierana jako ściśle japoński sposób wyrazu artystycznego.

Ta tendencja zaczęła się zmieniać w 1979 r., wraz z debiutem współczesnego powieściopisarza Harukiego Murakamiego. Tworząc swój literacki krajobraz przy użyciu zachodnich modeli, Murakami odrzucił strukturę junbungaku („przez/dla/o Japończykach"), odkrywając bardziej światowy podmiot, osadzony w hybrydowej koncepcji podmiotu ze Wschodu i Zachodu jednocześnie. Murakami najpierw spotkał „Zachód", a następnie „oddał" go jako nową, hybrydową fikcję, która porzuca spolaryzowane idee „Wschodu" i „Zachodu" i ukazuje jako prawdziwie światowa forma literatury. Wyszydzane przez niektórych tradycjonalistów jako „śmierć junbungaku", dzieło Murakamiego zostało jednocześnie ogłoszone odrodzeniem poważnej literatury światowej.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: podmiotowość, *junbungaku*, *shōsetsu*,
literatura światowa

Introduction

After a fifteen-year period of confusion and conflict following the two visits to Japan by Commodore Matthew Perry in 1853 and 1854, during which the necessity of strengthening Japan's ability to resist a possible invasion by the technologically more advanced Western powers was at the core of discussion, Japan reformulated itself from a relatively isolated and technologically backward feudal society into a modern, unified, Western-style nation-state. This reformulation was accomplished through the wholesale investigation and selective importation of Western thought

and technology. It is widely acknowledged that the beginning of the Meiji period (1868-1912) was marked by intense "borrowing" of technological, political, and cultural knowledge from the West. From a French-inspired military (later German, after the latter's victory in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870) to a British-style constitutional monarchy, Japan set about the wholesale invention of itself as a modern nation-state in the European fashion (Pyle 1969; Duus 1976; Gordon 2003).

This was as true in the arts as it was in technology and political structures, but it is also true that Japanese art and literature in 1868 already could boast long and thriving histories that surely did rival Western counterparts. From screen painting to woodblock printing, ceramics and woodwork, Japanese visual arts were much coveted by early Western visitors, enjoying particular popularity with the French.[1] In literature, Japanese poets had been developing and refining highly stylized poetic forms for more than a thousand years, and dramatic modes such as Nō, Kabuki, and Jōruri (better known today as Bunraku, or puppet theater) had a long tradition, Nō having been established in the fifteenth century, Kabuki and Jōruri in the seventeenth. While it is true that prose fiction was viewed as a relatively vulgar form of writing, Japanese could look back much further to the poem-tales (*uta-monogatari*) of the Heian period (793-1185), which included the remarkable *Genji monogatari* (Tale of Genji, ca. 1010 A.D.) and *Makura no sōshi* (Pillow Book, ca. 1002 A.D.), works that continue to be read today.

So why did writers of the Meiji period feel the need to "import" Western forms of writing in the latter half of the nineteenth century? Simply put, the pre-Meiji Japanese literary tradition, while rich in abstract and stylized forms of expression (particularly in its poetic forms), was not suitably equipped to construct, describe, or express a modern political subject. It was not designed to express the individual in concrete terms, and it lacked a colloquial linguistic form that would be recognizable to readers who would become citizens in the new era. For these reasons, Japanese literature – including its language – needed to be re-invented in a completely new form.

In the pages that follow, we shall explore briefly how this re-invention took place, how Japanese writers of the Meiji period imported Western literary forms, and established a new written language capable of expressing the Japanese "subject." We shall also see, however, that just a century later, many of these established forms of literature were rejected in favor of narrative forms and subjects that defied the very "Japaneseness" of the earlier

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1   See, for instance, H. Tanaka, "Cézanne and 'Japonisme'" in: *Artibus et Historiae* 22.44, 2001, pp. 201-220.

subject, opening the way for a less culturally specific, more "global" mode of expression that has come to be adopted outside of Japan as well. In this sense, I shall argue that the Japanese, having once imported literary forms from the West, eventually exported a resilient and malleable new literary trope that is, even now, being adopted in the West and various parts of Asia.

From Edo to Meiji

Having just made the critical turn from centralized feudalism, in which hundreds of domains (*han*) enjoyed relative autonomy in governance, the concept of a single, unified nation-state would have been somewhat alien to most Japanese. The Meiji Restoration (*ishin*) was, in many ways, an actual revolution (*kakumei*) in the sense that it was an overthrow not only of the Tokugawa shōgunate, but of virtually every aspect of pre-1868 everyday life in Japan. Whereas individuals in the Edo period (1603-1868) were apt to conceive of their identity locally, as belonging to a particular domain, under the rule of a particular domain lord (*daimyō*), the new Meiji system was centered upon the central authority of the Emperor himself, who was presented as the "father" of his nation, his subjects identified as his "children" (Keene 2002, Gordon 2003). The formation of the individual subject was thus an essential step in the construction of the Western-style nation-state Japan was to become, for how could one speak of an "imperial state" when the "imperial subject" did not yet exist in the minds of the common people?

The concept of the national "subject" was by no means a clear one. What were the duties of such a subject? What rights, if any, would he have? This was to a great extent a political question, one pursued through a variety of government decrees, most important of which had to do with the establishment in 1872 of a centrally-controlled education system that informed commoners of their duties to the nation and their emperor. As Andrew Gordon (2003) writes, "schools were to encourage practical learning as well as independent thinking. By this means commoners would find their own way to serve the state."[2]

But efforts to establish the Meiji subject did not stop with compulsory education. Japan's intellectuals – and especially, its young writers – quickly took up the task not only of depicting the new Meiji citizen in fiction, but also in determining both the language and the format in which this

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2   Gordon, A., *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 67.

citizen would be expressed. This was by no means an easy task, for Japanese literature up until the Meiji Restoration, and indeed for a brief period after it, was dominated by heavily stylized poetic and dramatic forms; fiction, as Janet Walker (1997) notes, was considered a vulgar mode of writing. It was only the relatively higher status of fictional forms in Western literary canons that led Meiji *literati* to reconsider fiction as an acceptable form.

> Fiction in the period before contact with Western literature never had the prestige enjoyed by, first, lyric poetry, and then lyric-based drama. It may have taken an awareness of the greatness of the nineteenth-century European novel to convince the first shapers of a classical canon in the 1890s to include Japanese classical fiction in their histories of Japanese literature.[3]

Even so, there was a considerable gap between prose forms of the classical era – the Heian period (793-1185), for instance – and the *gesaku* ("playful") prose forms that marked the Edo period. Donald Keene (1998) notes of nineteenth-century *gesaku* writing that "the literary content, rarely more than thrice-recast versions of old gesaku stories or Kabuki plays, could hardly have engrossed any but the least discerning readers."[4] Indeed, even at its height – arguably, the late-seventeenth century writings of avowed *gesaku* master Ihara Saikaku (1642-1693) – prose fiction of this sort was marked by type-cast characters, and formulaic plot lines that led to readily anticipated moral conclusions. They were entertaining, and wildly popular, but by modern standards required little creativity beyond the construction of variations on a theme. Seldom did *gesaku* writing deal with the complexities of the individual self.

Developing the Subject through Literature

Two forces drove the development of literature – and the Japanese arts in general – during the Meiji period: one was the perceived need to develop art that would equal or surpass that produced in the West; the other, as stated above, was to construct and express a modern, individual "subject." With regard to the first, as Christine Guth (1997) argues, "[t]he

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3   Walker, J. "Reflections on the Entrance of Fiction into the Meiji Literary Canon." In Hardacre, H. and Kern, A.L., editors, *New Directions in the Study of Meiji Japan*. Leiden, New York, Köln: Brill, 1997, p. 42.

4   Keene, D. *Dawn to the West: Japanese literature in the modern era*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, p. 11.

Meiji recontextualization of art, which was part of the effort to gain parity vis-à-vis the West, sparked much dialogue among government officials and their spokesmen, artists, critics, and collectors both within and outside of Japan"[5] (Guth 1997, 35), suggesting that the project of establishing a "modern" artistic canon was not only politically motivated, but also that it was to be a collaborative effort between artists and the Meiji State. In the area of literature, and particularly the fiction genre, there was a drive to posit "a new sort of subject, one that could view the world outside it as an object and, by means of that power, criticize and reflect on the reality of the day."[6]

"Reality" is the key word here, for in contrast to pre-Meiji literature, which tended to utilize established plot structures and type-cast characters, as noted above, the modern Meiji novel was presented as a realistic genre, and tended to focus on the individual, a concept that, until recently, had been deemed not only unsuitable, but unseemly.[7] But if the early Meiji era was marked by an implicit struggle between the old guard of *gesaku* writers – men such as Kanagaki Robun (1829-1894) and Kubota Hikosaku (1846-1898) – and the avant-garde work of writers influenced by translations of Western works, the struggle did not last for long; by 1885 Tsubouchi Shōyō (1859-1935) had published his seminal text *Shōsetsu shinzui* (1885; Essence of the novel), in which he outlined the basic parameters for *modern* Japanese literature, and defined its most effective structure as realistic long-prose narrative. The following year Futabatei Shimei (1864-1909) began to write *Ukigumo* (1886-89; Drifting cloud), widely regarded as Japan's first modern novel, and a study in individual character. *Ukigumo* explores not only a variety of characters in early Meiji, but more importantly their motivations for acting, their individual personalities, and thus represents an early example of literature that establishes and explores the nature of the self.

This was the origin of what would very shortly be termed *junbungaku* (pure literature), a word coined in 1893 that corresponds, superficially at least, to "serious literature" in English, or the French *belles lettres*.[8] For purposes of this essay, however, it is important that *junbungaku* and its origins be closely tied to the inception of modern literature and the modern

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5   Guth, C. "Some Reflections on the Formation of the Meiji Artistic Canon." In Hardacre, H. and Kern, A.L., editors, *New Directions in the Study of Meiji Japan*. Leiden, New York, Köln, Brill, p. 35.

6   Walker 1997, p. 43.

7   Keene 1998, p. 51.

8   The term *junbungaku* was first used by poet Kitamura Tōkoku (1868-1894) in his "Naibu seimei-ron" (Theory of interiority) in 1893.

Meiji subject because, as will be shown below, *junbungaku* as a practice contributed significantly to the conception, growth, and maturation of the modern Meiji subject upon whose shoulders the new Japanese State was built.

In Other Words

One of the challenges facing those who would develop the new form of literature known as the *shōsetsu* (commonly translated simply as "novel"[9]) was the lack of a written language that accurately reflected the speaking patterns of the Japanese in the early Meiji period. Japanese writers at the dawn of the Meiji period still wrote prose either in Chinese, or in a modified form of classical Japanese that bore little resemblance to the language spoken on the streets of the new capital of Tokyo (Twine 1991, Orbaugh 2003). To understand this in Western terms, imagine that Lord Byron's language options, or Mark Twain's, had been limited to either Latin or to the Middle English of Geoffrey Chaucer.

Efforts to rectify this situation led to several decades of linguistic experimentation that came to be known collectively as the *genbun itchi* (concordance of written and spoken language) movement, in which verbal inflections, vocabulary, and even spelling underwent a comprehensive overhaul, while space was made in the language to import words from Western languages. By the turn of the twentieth century, a Japanese written language had been developed that was versatile enough to express the complex ideas of the new Meiji society, while mirroring the modern vernacular being used by the common people.

Lack of a modern written Japanese was a serious obstacle not only to the construction of new modes of literature, but also to the expression and intelligibility of the new Meiji "subject" who would be at the heart of those narratives; how, for instance, was a middle-aged man supposed to recognize himself in a literary character who spoke in antiquated language he could barely understand? Would he recognize himself in these characters and their speech patterns? Would those linguistic forms be able to sort out the complex layers of hierarchy that marked Japanese society? As Orbaugh

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9   The term is adopted from the Chinese *xiao shuo*, meaning "little story," referring to prose fiction written in the Chinese vernacular during the classical period. Ironically, the *xiao shuo* genre seems to have favored fantastic or supernatural elements, in contrast with the Japanese redefinition of the term as "realistic prose." For more on the history of the *xiao shuo* (or *hsiao-shuo*), see Mair, V. (ed.), *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press), 2001. See also Orbaugh 2003, esp. p. 11.

notes, "the new language would have to be able to express the new, *modern* subjectivity that Meiji intellectuals wished to create. Would readers understand it, or would they be frustrated by their inability to read the narrator's and their own 'position' in the social web?"[10] What we see here is that the *gembun itchi* movement was not merely a bid for a new mode of literary expression, but an effort to establish the actual building materials by which the new Meiji citizen-subject would be constructed in language, and thus potentially a means by which the newly established "Japanese citizen" could learn more about his or her position in society, and his or her duties within that society.

Thus, one could argue that the fictitious subject who appeared in the *junbungaku* of the early and mid-Meiji period fulfilled both a reflective and a constitutive function: he or she was reflective of what authors saw on the streets around them, and of course, what they saw in their own imaginations; but the literary hero also provided a model for readers to follow, an example of one individual confronting a series of dilemmas in the modern era. There is, in other words, a strongly didactic aspect to Japanese literature from this period, and its principal educational goal was to show Meiji readers by example how to be individuals, imperial subjects, and even Japanese. This last was particularly important when we consider that Japan was in the midst of an unprecedented period of importing things Western; what more crucial time could there be imagined to assert what it was to "be Japanese"?

In other words, *junbungaku* – and specifically, the Meiji *shōsetsu* – was constructed as a form of writing *by*, *for*, and *about* Japanese people, and one of its most crucial functions was to define for readers who they were as Japanese. In addition to offering a new and exotic mode of literary entertainment for readers, it served the wider national purpose of strengthening the newly formed Meiji state and its goal of constructing an educated, obedient, and morally conscientious populace of citizen-subjects.[11]

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10 Orbaugh, S. "The Problem of the Modern Subject." In Mostow, J., editor, *The Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003, p. 28.

11 Novels abound from this period that express, among other things, the tension between the traditional beliefs of the late Edo period and the demands of the new Meiji state. Ozaki Kōyō's (1868-1903) *Konjiki yasha* (1897; Gold-loving she-demon) deals with a conflict between opportunistic materialists and moral obligation; Natsume Sōseki's *Sorekara* (1909; And then) and *Kōjin* (1912; The wayfarer) both deal with men attempting to navigate the liminal space between old and new, though in the former the protagonist seeks to embrace the new, while in the latter he rejects it; and Mori Ōgai's *Gan* (1911-1913; Wild Goose) deals with a young medical student who must choose between continuing his medical studies in Germany and indulging in his romantic feelings for the hapless mistress of a moneylender.

From Political Expedient to Pure Art

The success of these efforts is indicated by the fact that, by the second decade of the twentieth century, the aesthetic demands of *junbungaku* began to supersede the perceived need to invent the modern subject and its relationship to the State. By 1914 the Meiji state had grown strong enough that celebrated novelist Natsume Sōseki (1867-1916) felt compelled to critique its power over the individual subject in a speech to the students at the Gakushūin (Peers School) entitled "Watakushi no kojinshugi" (1914; My individualism).[12] Novelists who also worked as translators, such as Tayama Katai (1872-1930) and Mori Ōgai (1862-1922) had transplanted the seeds of Naturalism and Romanticism into Japanese literature, and a new generation of younger writers, including Tanizaki Jun'ichirō (1886-1965), Kikuchi Kan (1888-1948), Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1892-1927), Satō Haruo (1892-1964), and future Nobel laureate Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972) were beginning to experiment in earnest with the concept of literary art for its own sake.

It would be wrong, however, to suppose that *junbungaku* made a seamless and wholly spontaneous transition from being a tool for the strengthening of the Meiji state to what the French would term *l'art pour l'art*. While there can be little question that writers of the early twentieth century were concerned about producing literary art, particularly in the Taishō (1912-1926) era, it is also true that the political functions of literature also occupied an important role in writing of this period, particularly in the so-called Proletarian writing of the late 1910s and early 1920s. How could these apparently opposing concepts be reconciled? The matter was discussed in a series of lively literary debates (*ronsō*) that occurred between 1923 and 1935, and involved nearly the entire literary community. Beginning as a reaction against the recent politicization of literature by Marxist writers in the wake of the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 in Russia, writers and critics carefully stripped *junbungaku* bare of all political function, declaring that literary art must be for its own sake, without reference to political or social realities; however, they retained the realism and introspection that had marked serious Japanese writing from the start. The real winner of the debates, arguably, was the so-called I-novel (*watakushi shōsetsu* or *shishōsetsu*), a form of confessional writing developed in the early twentieth century in which the writer lays bare his most personal thoughts, feelings, and reactions to everyday minutiae, forming an intimate, dialogic connection of trust and disclosure with the reader (Fowler 1992, Keene 1998). By

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12   A translation and introduction to this text by Jay Rubin is available in *Monumenta Nipponica* 34.1 (Spring 1979), pp. 21-48.

the end of the debates, the I-novel was understood to be the quintessential form of *junbungaku* (Hirano 1972, Strecher 1996).[13]

It is significant that the I-novel should have emerged from the Proletarian literature debates as the quintessential form of *junbungaku*, if only because it established, as perhaps no other form of literature could have done, an intimate relationship between author and reader. Celebrated examples of the genre include the aforementioned Tayama Katai's *Futon* (1907; The Quilt),[14] detailing Katai's sexual obsession for a female writer who lived in his home as an apprentice; and Shimazaki Tōson's (1872-1943) *Shinsei* (1918-19; A New Life), about Tōson's love affair with a niece, and his subsequent flight from Japan after she becomes pregnant. However one chooses to view such works – it would seem that readers were less than sympathetic with Tōson's embarrassment of his niece – there can be no doubt that the relation of unadorned personal facts to the reader established a sense of personal familiarity between author and audience.[15] That is to say, the I-novel came to facilitate a sense of confidentiality between author and reader, an intimate literary space in which the author might lay bare his or her most private thoughts, feelings, sensations, and even transgressions, quite as though the two participants in the reading-writing process were close friends.

This is by no means to suggest that all confessional literature expressed such sordid events. Indeed, one of the finest examples of confessional literature from my own reading experience is Shiga Naoya's (1883-1971) short story "Kinosaki nite" (1917; At Kinosaki), in which the narrator (Shiga himself), meditating intellectually on the nature of death, carelessly tosses a stone at a lizard sunning itself atop of rock in a stream; it is an unlucky shot that kills the lizard, leading the narrator to reflect on how thoughtlessly he has deprived another living creature of its life. It is such minutiae that mark confessional literature, and to a great extent pre-war *junbungaku*

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13 The debates began with a brief essay by Arishima Takeo (1878-1923) entitled "Sengen hitotsu" (1923; A declaration), in which Arishima questioned the true purposes of *junbungaku*. For a thorough discussion of this text see Strecher, M., "Arishima Takeo's 'Sengen hitotsu' and the Origins of the Proletarian Literature Debate" in *Gengo to Bunka* No. 2 (Spring 2002). For more on the development of the debate on pure literature, see Strecher, M., "Purely Mass or Massively Pure? The Division Between 'Pure' and 'Mass' Literature" in *Monumenta Nipponica* 51:3 (Autumn 1996), pp. 357-374. For a detailed rendering in Japanese, see Hirano Ken, "Junbungaku to taishūbungaku" (Pure literature and mass literature) in *Gunzō*, Dec. 1961, pp. 154-172; and Hirano Ken, *Bungaku: Shōwa jūnen zengo* (Literature: Around 1935; Tokyo: Bungei Shunjūsha, 1972).

14 See especially Henshall, K., *In Search of Nature: The Japanese Writer Tayama Katai* (Leiden and Boston: Global Oriental), 2013, pp. 107-123.

15 See Keene 1998, pp. 264-65.

itself. More to the point, details such as these reveal to readers a close sense of humanity on the part of the writer, onto which the reader may superimpose his own experiences, consider similar moments in her own life.

In broad terms, *junbungaku* prose up until the early years of the Second World War may be understood as extremely realistic, confessional stories exposing the most intimate thoughts and impressions of an author, initially as a means of positing the modern Japanese subject, but later for the purpose of interrogating that subject – the author – in relentless detail. It was, moreover, rendered in a deliberately constructed new form of written Japanese that was initially meant to reflect accurately the speaking patterns of modern Japanese, but that would itself gradually be refined into an art form. *Junbungaku* was, by the start of the Second World War, deliberately a-political, socially disinterested, focused on the emotional state of the writer, and expressed in well-crafted – "experimental" would not be an overstatement – literary language.

Creating Models of the Contemporary Age

The re-politicization of traditional *junbungaku* occurred after the Second World War ended in 1945, as many writers came to realize that the rupture between literature and politics had rendered them voiceless during Japan's period of militarist expansionism throughout Asia and the Pacific. By the late 1950s writers such as Ōe Kenzaburō (b. 1935), Abe Kōbō (1924-1993), Oda Makoto (1932-2007) and Kaikō Takeshi (1930-1989) had risen to the forefront of this latest rendition of *junbungaku* as socially and politically activist literature. These novelists, among many others, carried with them vivid memories of Japan's wartime past, and spoke out in both fiction and nonfiction against the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty (AMPO), the Vietnam War, the continued U.S. occupation of Okinawa, and nuclear weapons.[16] Their work, broadly speaking, expressed the hopes and frustrations of rebuilding Japan, but did so under the shadow of the political domination of Japan by the United States. At the same time, like their prewar forebears, writers of postwar *junbungaku* continued to demonstrate a penchant for deep introspection, investigating their most minute thoughts and impressions. From Abe's explorations of identity in *Tanin no kao* (1968; Face of

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16 For an excellent introduction in Japanese to the student movements of this period, see Takagi M., *Zengakuren to Zenkyōtō* (Tokyo: Kōdansha Gendai Shinsho, 1985). For a treatment in English, see Strecher, M., *Dances With Sheep: The Quest for Identity in the Fiction of Murakami Haruki* (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan Press, 2002), esp. pp. 8-21.

Another) to Ōe's existentialist crisis in the semi-autobiographical *Kojinteki na taiken* (1964; A Personal Matter) and Kaikō's equally autobiographical experiences as a war correspondent in Vietnam in *Kagayakeru yami* (1968; Into A Black Sun), writers of this period, consciously or unconsciously, brought a unique – and uniquely Japanese – perspective to their fictional output that was grounded in the experience of being on the losing side of a long and bitter war. More than the physical destruction of Japan's cities, or even the experience of being bombed or strafed, as Kaikō was, this was a crisis of identity; when the Emperor Shōwa (Hirohito) announced to his people on 1 January 1946 that he was not a deity but only a man, the entire purpose of the past fifteen years of war and sacrifice and hardship, all carried out in the name of the Emperor, became meaningless. As John Nathan writes in his introduction to Ōe's *Teach Us to Outgrow Our Madness* (1977):

> In a single day, all the truth Ōe had ever learned was declared lies. He was angry and he was humiliated, at himself for having believed and suffered, and at the adults who had betrayed him. His anger resided; it was the source of the energy he first tapped when he became a writer. [17]

Mishima Yukio (1925-1970), whose apparently conservative politics and neo-romantic tendencies otherwise contrast quite starkly with Ōe, nonetheless expresses a similar sense of betrayal in his 1966 work *Eirei no koe* (Voices of the Heroic Dead), in which the spirits of *kamikaze* pilots lament the voluntary declaration of humanity by the emperor for whom they gave their lives. [18]

The point to be taken here is that writers of the Japanese postwar era, which is sometimes declared "over" as of 1970, expressed a powerful experience that spoke quite specifically to Japanese readers who could relate to the historical events that had given rise to that message, particularly the war. [19] In many ways they continued to construct a new "subject," as their Meiji predecessors had done, and with an equal sense of urgency, for the Second World War, for millions of Japanese, represented the negation of

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17   Nathan, J., Introduction, in Ōe, K., *Teach us to outgrow our madness*. New York: Grove Press, 1977, p. xiv.

18   See Mishima Y., *Eirei no koe*. Tokyo: Kawade Shobō, 1966.

19   Economically, the "postwar" is defined by the periods of immediate postwar reconstruction in the late 1940s and 1950s, and economic "rapid growth" (kōdo seichō) in the 1960s; politically, its end coincided with the end of meaningful political dissent with the ratification of the AMPO Treaty in 1970. Culturally, the death by ritual suicide of Mishima Yukio on November 25, 1970 has been seen as the symbolic end of the postwar in Japan. See Strecher, M., *Dances With Sheep*; see also Karatani, K., *Shūen o megutte* (Concerning endings). Tokyo: Fukutake Shobō, 1990.

everything they had grown up believing about themselves as a nation and a race. As it fell to politicians to reconstruct the physical Japan, it fell to writers of *junbungaku* to reconstruct Japan's "soul," to establish models by which their readers could begin to understand themselves as Japanese in a postwar world.

1994 Nobel laureate Ōe Kenzaburō, perhaps the "purest" of these *junbungaku* writers by virtue of the fact that he has doggedly held to his dense, intellectual mode of expression for more than six decades despite a steady decline in his readership, succinctly expresses the task of the writer in his 1989 defense of pure literature:

> The role of literature – insofar as man is obviously a historical being – is to create a model of a contemporary age which envelops past and future and a human model that lives in that age.[20]

Ōe's underlying meaning here, I think, is that the postwar Japanese writer's duty is not merely to focus on his art (as prewar writers were wont to do), happily ignoring those annoying and distracting events and trends that occur around him, but rather to engage those trends intellectually, to provide guidance and leadership for the reading public, pointing the way toward a better Japanese society, better living through socially conscious and conscientious literature. It was both a familiar refrain and a battle cry, and would lead a great many postwar writers to engage in political movements, to resist Japan's uncritical alliance with the United States, to speak out against the war in Vietnam, against nuclear weapons and nuclear power, to demand an end to the U.S. occupation of Okinawa (which finally did end in 1972), to press for more rights for women and minorities (Japanese of Korean descent, descendants of the *burakumin*, for instance), and so on. In short, Japanese *junbungaku*, with few exceptions – Mishima Yukio, Kaikō Takeshi, Ishihara Shintarō (b. 1932) – became largely a voice for the Japanese liberal elite.

This did not mean, however, that writers were giving up on the artistic demands of their craft. Quite the reverse, again borrowing from the intellectual trends of the times, writers like Ōe, Abe, and the somewhat younger Nakagami Kenji (1946-1992), worked hard to balance their intellectual pursuits with new and innovative modes of literary expression. Ōe and Nakagami succeeded in devising literary styles so complex as to rival American novelist Thomas Pynchon's (b. 1937) prose in the English language (reflecting, perhaps, the complexity of the times, and of the subjects

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20 Ōe K., "Japan's Dual Identity: A Writer's Dilemma" in Masao Miyoshi and H.D. Harootunian, eds., *Postmodernism and Japan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989), p. 193.

about which they wrote), while Abe combined literary imagination with an impressive scientific background. Mishima carried out a sustained campaign of expanding the Japanese vocabulary, challenging readers to figure out his subtle nuances. And yet, throughout this period, Western philosophical thought – the Modernist impulse, French existentialism and absurdism, surrealism, magical realism – continued to make their presence felt even within these thoroughly *Japanese* literary modes.

Western intellectual systems notwithstanding, it remains true that the "model" of which Ōe writes, like its prewar counterparts, is generally constructed *by*, *for*, and *about* Japanese subjects, set predominantly within the context of a culturally and historically specific "Japanese experience."[21] To look at Ōe's own works, we notice two things: first, that the protagonists are nearly always introspective intellectuals, closely modeled on Ōe himself; and second, that Ōe seldom leaves the reader in any doubt about what his protagonist is thinking. The experience of reading Ōe is not unlike sitting through a lecture, in which the author explains himself to us in painstaking detail. His model is extraordinarily well-crafted, clear, and precise. This, once again, follows the long-standing tradition of *junbungaku* I have outlined above. In this setting, the reader is a politely silent, respectful audience member rather than a part of the conversation.

What I mean to suggest here is that Japanese "pure" literature, from the Meiji period to the end of the postwar era, was dominated by a monologic discourse on the part of the writer, who assumed a particular type of reader, namely, one whose cultural, linguistic, historical, and social background was not markedly dissimilar to his own. In this sense one could imagine a continuum, at one end of which would be a reader whose experiences are virtually identical to the author, and who would intuitively respond to that author's text with an extremely high sense of familiarity and affinity, and at the other end an "uninitiated reader" whose cultural, linguistic, historical, and social background is completely different from the author's. In the absence of extensive training in Japanese language, culture, history and social structures, such a reader is likely to find most works of *junbungaku* – even translated into his own language – rather difficult to grasp.

This is, of course, true in any national literature, but one suspects that the gap between what we might, following Wolfgang Iser (1980), term the

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21   Naturally, there are important exceptions to this statement. Much of the science fiction and fantasy literature by Abe Kōbō, from the short story collection *Kabe* (1951; The wall) to the better known *Daiyonkan pyōki* (1959; Inter ice age 4) and *Suna no onna* (1962; Woman in the dunes) is marked by non-cultural-specific settings and characters; some of Kurahashi Yumiko's (1935-2005) later works, such as *Amanonkoku ōkan-ki* (1986; Chronicle of the Amanon highway), show a similar tendency.

"ideal reader" of *junbungaku* and the "uninitiated reader" of such writing is rather wider. Iser contrasts the "ideal reader" with the "implied reader," the latter being a figure both real and imaginary, a generic reader who is assumed to apprehend and "concretize" the text, bringing its potential meaning to fruition through the act of reading/writing. The ideal reader, on the other hand, he presents as disadvantageous, if even possible, since "he would have to share the intentions underlying [the] process" by which the author re-codifies prevailing contemporary codes. In such a case, "communication would be quite superfluous, for one only communicates that which is *not* already shared by reader and receiver." [22]

This might be true if we could determine exactly what "codes" are being transmitted by the author (and which ones matter to the reader), but we are not necessarily speaking here of hidden messages in the text; this is not about the mysterious or artistic meta-aspects of a text, but about its social and historical points of reference, its connections with the reality that surrounds the author and give a sense of realism and actuality to his work. It is about the depiction of experience, of culture. The "ideal reader," or something close to it, does in fact exist; it is someone whose *general* upbringing, whose cultural milieu, education, and linguistic background are similar to the author's. Such a reader may not be capable of discerning the symbolic or metaphorical meanings in an Ōe Kenzaburō novel (nor, for that matter, should we assume that Ōe himself is aware of them all), but he will probably respond to the sense of hopeless despair that pervades Ōe's descriptions of the final day of the Second World War. He might well share Ōe's memories of shock and horror at hearing the emperor speak in a human voice.

Obviously, what I seek to describe here is less theoretical than commonsensical. We understand more clearly what we have experienced ourselves, and thus expend less energy on what is commonplace and focus more on what is unusual in the text. The "uninitiated reader" may experience pleasurably the exoticism of an unfamiliar culture, but for that very reason will not possess the experiential background needed to gain immediate access to the historical and cultural framework of the text – access that is necessary in order to look beyond it to its more significant aspects. As stated earlier, this is true of any reading situation, in any cultural or linguistic setting.

And yet, one cannot help but imagine that the gap is greater in Japan than in many other instances between "ideal" and "uninitiated" reader. This is almost entirely the result of what we might term the "closed

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22 Iser, W., *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), p. 29.

system" of Japanese culture. Seen both in terms of socialization and in linguistic terms this is quite clear to anyone who has lived for very long as a non-Japanese within the Japanese system. Education is rigorously controlled by Japan's Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sports (Monbukagakushō, sometimes called MEXT for short), which insists upon a largely uniform curriculum for all nine years of compulsory education. Much of that education is focused on mastery of the Japanese language – itself a closed system, containing an astonishing number of "ritual expressions" – but it is also designed to train young Japanese to navigate successfully the complexities of a thoroughly hierarchical society, so that each graduate of the education system understands his place and role within the structure. There is a very good reason Japanese are hesitant to travel outside of Japan, particularly alone: they cannot predict what specific social or linguistic situations they may encounter, and fear they will not know the correct formulas with which to respond. Japanese education – like the language – trains people to say the right thing at the right time; it does not teach them to adapt and improvise.

To sum up, traditional Japanese "pure" literature is a mode of writing that was – and to some extent still is – intended to depict the Japanese experience, for Japanese readers with the correct cultural, linguistic and historical experience. It is meant to express the Japanese subject, tell a uniquely Japanese story. And until the 1970s, this experience was assumed by many to be not only impenetrable to non-Japanese readers, but common to *all* Japanese, by virtue of their shared experience, a discourse that came to be codified in the postwar era as the *Nihonjinron*, literally, "theory of Japanese people." As Sugimoto Yoshio (1999) argues,

> At the core of the *Nihonjinron* discourse lies the notion of Japaneseness, a set of value orientations that the Japanese are supposed to share. *Nihonjinron* advocates share the fundamental assumption that Japaneseness, which every single Japanese supposedly possesses, has existed indefinitely, that Japaneseness differs fundamentally from "westernness", namely western orientations, and determines all aspects of Japanese ways of life.[23]

What we also find in the *Nihonjinron* discourse, however, is a thinly veiled reverse-Orientalist argument for the exoticism and uniqueness of the Japanese race, language, and culture, grounded in a valorization of the unusual or – dare one say it? – the *inscrutable* aspects of what it means to be "Japanese." Perhaps it was for this very reason that Kawabata Yasunari,

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23   Sugimoto, Y., "Making Sense of *Nihonjinron*" in *Thesis Eleven*, No. 57 (May 1999), p. 82.

a thoroughly modern man, elected to receive the Nobel Prize for literature in 1968 dressed in traditional Japanese robes and spoke in his acceptance speech, as a *de facto* representative of his people, about a Japanese fondness for understated beauty that he must have known would be difficult for non-Japanese to understand. One suspects that this assumption, that non-Japanese will never be able to "get it," is not uncommon in Japanese purveyors of *junbungaku*, and indeed may rank among its most important characteristics.

Murakami Haruki and the "Death" of Japanese Literature

One might say that history intervened in the postwar rendition of *junbungaku*, as the various causes that gave strength and life to the voices of protest in the 1960s, one by one, went by the wayside. The U.S.-Japan Security Treaty that offered a focal point for writers and students alike was renewed behind closed doors in 1970, Okinawa reverted to Japanese sovereignty in 1972, the Vietnam War ended in 1975, and while nuclear weapons and power continued – and continue even now – to be a serious issue in Japanese political discourse, activism after 1970 fell off sharply as it became increasingly clear that political protests, whether in the streets or in print, were simply not achieving discernible results.

In the area of writing, the general atmosphere of malaise surely affected what sorts of new writers emerged in the latter half of the 1970s. In 1976, Murakami Ryū (b. 1952) won the Akutagawa Prize for his short novel *Kagirinaku tōmei ni chikai burū* (1976; Almost transparent blue), a text that expressed the combined nostalgia and frustration of young students who watched the protests of the 1960s collapse so suddenly in 1970, a motif he returned to in 1987 with *69*, dealing with youth culture in the year 1969. Perhaps more important for the current discussion, however, was the 1979 début of Murakami Haruki with the even shorter novel, *Kaze no uta o kike* (1979; Hear the wind sing), which won the Gunzō Prize for new writers and, like Ryū's maiden work, reads as an effort to make sense of what happened to the sense of hope and excitement that marked the late 1960s.

What makes Murakami's emergence important to this discussion is not that he wrote about the death of the 1960s, but rather *how* he wrote about this. Consciously and deliberately eschewing the tropes, particularly the written style, of *junbungaku*, Murakami Haruki began his career with a meandering, occasionally touching story of youthful confusion in a language that was light and simplistic, a very far cry from the painstakingly-wrought, densely powerful prose of his literary predecessors.

But Murakami's writing style is more than just the product of his determination to break with the practices of *junbungaku*; it was also, arguably, the result of his generation's fascination and admiration – what the Japanese call *akogare* – of Western culture in general, and during that period, American culture in particular. Born in the early postwar, Murakami Haruki reached teenage in the early 1960s amidst the period of economic "rapid growth" (*kōdo seichō*) when Japan's industrial might was becoming a very real factor in the world economy. Unlike those just ten years older than himself, Murakami had no memories of American bombs raining down on Japanese cities, of hardship and survival. As a child he never went hungry, never worried about where he would sleep. Growing up in the Kōbe area, for Murakami's generation American soldiers were neither "invaders" nor "occupiers;" they were simply there.

The point here is that Murakami's generation, unlike those that preceded it, was capable of confronting "America" in a manner reminiscent of how early Meiji reformers looked at "the West:" as the key to something new and exotic. If the AMPO Treaty represented for older Japanese (those of Ōe's generation, for instance) the subjugation of Japan's moral and political sovereignty, for Japanese of Murakami's age, "America" was something presented through the new medium of television as clean, wholesome, and above all, comfortable. It was what Japanese saw in the imported reruns of *I Love Lucy* and *Leave It to Beaver*: an enduringly tidy, prosperous, predominantly white, middle-class society in which everyone drove their own cars, owned their own spacious homes, and had leisure time to spend with their children at the end of the day. In short, for Japanese of this period "America" was a reified image that represented the "good life," and it was highly attractive.

There is no way of knowing to what extent Murakami was exposed – or responded – to these manufactured and neatly sterilized images of America in the early 1960s as, along with millions of other Japanese middle school students, he began his formal study of English. What we do know, from the author's own accounts, is that during this formative period of his life he spent a considerable portion of his free time and pocket money on second-hand books in English, forcing himself to build his command of that language by reading the works of F. Scott Fitzgerald, J.D. Salinger, Raymond Chandler, Truman Capote, and others in their original forms rather than in translation. In so doing, Murakami must have encountered an "America" *not* presented in popular television re-runs; a nation of deep racial and social divisions, of sexual inequality, of homophobia, of alcoholism and drug addiction, of pedophilia and political fear. This was the *real* America.

Why, one may wonder, did Murakami not turn away from this disturbing image of "America" that he found in his extracurricular reading? Was

it, perhaps, because despite its many flaws, this was a more *genuine* America than he had been shown to this point? Even as many Japanese found themselves increasingly drawn to the sense of *akogare* that surrounded America at this time, Murakami may have been attracted to the very flaws that this *akogare* took pains to ignore.

We see this attraction to the more genuine America, I would argue, in Murakami's early fascination with American jazz music. When not spending his pocket money on used paperback novels, he was purchasing battered vinyl recordings of Miles Davis, Julian "Cannonball" Adderly, Bill Evans and Thelonius Monk. Murakami listened to everything, from big band to bebop to "acid" jazz. Perhaps it appealed to his slightly off-center tastes; jazz is structured, even mathematical, yet also irregular, never quite predictable, and always difficult to analyze or define. No two jazz performances are alike, and no two performers play a given tune the same way. Jazz is an enigma; asked once to define it, Louis Armstrong famously quipped, "man, if you gotta ask you'll never know." But anyone who has played jazz knows that it flows, maybe more than any other kind of music, straight from the soul, from the darkest places in the psyche. There is no room for pretense, for "faking it," or for copying. We play what we feel because, when we don't, everyone knows. Jazz is uniquely suited to express pain, joy, angst, loss. It may have been the only music, at least in those days, capable of expressing the true reality of "America."

Deconstructing "Pure Literature"

One suspects that Murakami's fascination with jazz was – and remains – a strong influence on how he tells his stories. He has claimed in numerous interviews that he does not plan his stories, but permits them to develop organically on their own. His method is not so much "stream-of-consciousness" as "improvisation," like a jazz performance. In a recent book of essays, in fact, Murakami likens his work to that of a musician: "when I'm writing a novel, I have not so much the sensation of 'writing sentences' as of 'performing a piece of music.'" [24]

A willingness to approach the act of writing from a new direction seems to have been present from the beginning, and is once again tied closely to Murakami's relationship with the English language, a tool that permitted him, as a new writer, to see the world he wanted to portray through new

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24 Murakami H., *Shokugyō to shite no shōsetsuka* (The professional novelist). Tokyo: Switch Library, 2015, p. 49.

eyes. This grew at least in part from his initial attempt to produce a novel, an attempt he admits was unsuccessful. "So I figured, 'well, this is probably about right,' and I spent months writing it out, but when I read over what I'd written, it wasn't all that interesting, even to me."[25] This, however, led to a more important realization: "There's no way I can write a good novel. So why not throw aside all my preconceived notions of what a good novel is, of what literature is, and freely write whatever I feel, whatever floats into my head?"[26]

Murakami goes on in the same essay to describe how he developed his rather unorthodox style of writing by producing his first chapter in English. Limited command of English forced him to adopt relatively simple sentence structures which, when translated back into Japanese, became the prototype for the Murakami style. This written style, straightforward and clear, yet devoid of decoration, of artistic sense, and above all, lacking any pretense at *seriousness* for its own sake, was the very antithesis of what postwar *junbungaku* had come to be and, whether Murakami intended it or not, posed a serious challenge to the primacy of the *junbungaku* model for literature.

At the same time, we see – or ought to see – a return to origins here as well, for modern Japanese literature, as we have noted, began with the invention of the *shōsetsu* form, and the concurrent creation, almost from nothing, of the modern Japanese written language. That language was refined from Meiji through the early Shōwa era. If, as I have argued above, Murakami Haruki's plainstyle prose, termed *mukokuseki* ("nationality-less") by some critics,[27] takes its stylistic inspiration from a *foreign language*, and its methodological approach – improvisation – from jazz music, then what remains of the essential quality of "Japaneseness" that has traditionally grounded *junbungaku*? In fact, Murakami's version of fiction, perhaps without meaning to do so, effectively deconstructed precisely those literary models that were so carefully developed in the postwar.

In other words, writers and critics from Ōe Kenzaburō to Maruyama Masao and Kuroko Kazuo who have viewed Murakami Haruki as the "death of 'pure literature' in Japan" are quite right. He is. But let us be quite clear on one point: the "death of 'pure literature' in Japan" is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, one could argue that it was inevitable, and is potentially a very good thing, and for three very good reasons.

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25 Murakami 2015, p. 44.

26 Murakami 2015, p. 45.

27 See Kim, Y., "Kankoku ni okeru Murakami Haruki no juyō to sono kontekusuto" (Murakami Haruki's reception and its context in South Korea). In Fujii, S., ed., *Higashi Ajia ga yomu Murakami Haruki* (Murakami Haruki as read in East Asia). Tokyo: Wakakusa Shobō.

First, it is important to remain cognizant of the fact that "pure litera-ture," despite its grounding in Western models imported during the Meiji period, was always intended as a wholly *Japanese* mode of writing, intend-ed for *Japanese* readers, meant to construct *Japanese* models of subjectiv-ity, to express, indeed, something essential about *being Japanese.* As noted earlier, this was part of a much larger project to produce a well-defined Japanese "citizen-subject" who was the equal of any modern European individual, but who was also quite unique as a subject of the divine Meiji emperor. What began as a geopolitical necessity – the need to transform an isolated, vulnerable island nation into a strong, modern nation-state – was eventually fetishized into such forms as "state Shintō" (with the unique, divine Japanese emperor at its center) in the prewar, and as we have seen above, *Nihonjinron* in the postwar. In other words, the conception of Japa-nese uniqueness served as a subterranean wellspring that fed the two dis-tinct ponds: *Nihonjinron*, and *junbungaku*.

There are good reasons to suppose that the idea of Japanese "unique-ness," whether it is used to ground *junbungaku* or the *Nihonjinron* per-spective or both, is at once outdated, and yet likely to remain a part of our discussions of Japanese culture for some time to come. The concept is outdated because, quite simply, while Japan remains an island nation, it is in no sense of the word "isolated," and it was Japan's relative isola-tion from the rest of the world prior to Meiji, like a "lost world," that gave rise to the idea that Japan's culture and bloodline had remained undilut-ed for millennia. But even had this been true (which is highly unlikely), such "isolation" surely ceased to a large extent with the advent of Meiji, and completely in the postwar era. Again, this is not theoretical but simply common sense. Like all post-industrialized societies, Japan is connected to the world through the most modern means of communications and trans-portation. More Japanese than ever before in history have traveled abroad, and nearly every Japanese carries or has access to the technology necessary to explore the outside world, at least in virtual form. Young Japanese today know more about the world outside of Japan than any generation that has ever lived. The same works in reverse; Japan is no longer a mysterious land about which little is known, but a major player in the global economy. Mil-lions of non-Japanese have visited, and thousands reside here.

This, however, may be precisely what keeps the *Nihonjinron* con-cept alive, even fueling new nationalist movements in the early twenty-first century. We have only to look at those moments when Japan was in its most "cosmopolitan" phases, when external influences were at their strongest – early Meiji, the "Taishō democracy" of the 1920s, the arrival of television at the end of the 1950s, and of the Internet in the 1980s – to note that these eras led to powerful movements to preserve and protect

"native" culture, to distinguish clearly between what *is* Japanese and what *is not*.

A second reason that traditional *junbungaku* may have run its course is that the Japanese people themselves are *not* the homogeneous, unified body of people they are so often portrayed to be. Like Japan's isolation, this is a myth perpetuated by those who would radically reduce the world to "Japanese vs. non-Japanese" or, more bluntly, to "us vs. them," an economy in which "them" does not fare too well. Certainly the "homogeneity" of the Japanese is central to the *Nihonjinron* theory, the idea being that all Japanese, sharing blood, education, and language, think and behave more or less the same way. That "homogeneity" is also, in some sense, central to the idea of "human models" that become the focal point of *junbungaku*, and the ability of readers to recognize themselves in those models. But such an expectation, though perhaps a possibility up until the end of the Second World War, and perhaps even into the postwar, has surely and steadily been eroded by increased contact with the outside world, and the resulting influence on the individual. Today (if ever!), it would be a serious error to imagine that "all Japanese" think or feel the same way about much of anything. Like other people in the world, today's Japanese are products of their interests and experiences, and with the world at their fingertips via computers, tablets and smart phones, those interests and experiences are virtually infinite.

Third, questions of "identity" and "subjectivity" – the principal reasons for the development of "pure literature" in the first place – have changed considerably even since the postwar period. One might argue, in fact, that today's Japanese is both better and worse equipped to address the question of self-identity; better equipped, because he has so many choices available to him – he may choose to be a company man, a rebel, a musician, an athlete, a nerd, or some combination of these. But precisely because there are so many choices, an infinite variety, he may find his identity difficult to pin down. This is not limited to Japanese youth, of course; one has only to note discussions of gender confusion among today's teenagers worldwide to realize that their increased variety of choices is a mixed blessing.

The point to be drawn from this is that the audience or readership of Japanese literature today is far too diverse to be served by strictly-defined "models" provided by Japan's intellectual elites. Ōe Kenzaburō's "model of the contemporary human" will work for a number of readers, but will be incomprehensible to many others.

Enter the "Empty Narrative"

This is no longer the age of "literary models," but rather what I would like to call, for want of a better term, "literary absence." "Models," as a producer of *junbungaku* might conceive of them, are ready-made entities whose beliefs are well established and are presented, fully formed, to the reader. Ōe's own characters – his models – are largely based on himself, on his experiences, as might be expected. They are, in fact, meticulously drawn, brilliantly-wrought models that may be analyzed by readers in great detail, closely studied by the reader or scholar possessing the skill to penetrate their depths. This is the traditional model of how literature works, and while one credits Ōe with having developed an innovative and exciting new model in his fiction, one must also note that his conceptualization of literature as a whole, its methods and its purposes, is of the Old School. His fiction appeals and makes sense to those equipped with the right experiences and education to recognize and analyze his models. It is likely to be less accessible to younger readers, however, who may not see enough of themselves in that model to form meaningful comparisons. For such readers, the task of bridging the gap between novelist and reader – of constructing a real-world application of Ōe's model, in other words – becomes a Sisyphean one, for the gap can never truly be closed.

A "literary absence," on the other hand, centers not on a specific "model" character but rather on an absence, or an outline – something like an Everyman – who could be any of us, but does not remain so, because the reader fills in the "absence" with a presence that looks, sounds, and thinks, by a shocking stroke of coincidence, exactly like the reader.

Even more important than the mirror-like character/absence, however, is the dual-layered narrative into which he is (or we are) placed, one in which the surface narrative is utterly bizarre, while a deeper, parallel narrative describes circumstances so commonplace that nearly any reader can relate to them. In the so-called "Rat Trilogy," for instance, the surface narrative describes mythic journeys, talking pinball machines, all-empowering sheep, and the resurrection of the dead; the deeper narrative is about a man dealing with lost youth, missing friends, and crushing nostalgia. It is an odd juxtapositioning of narrative – one fantastic, the other commonplace – and they represent a clash not merely of style, but of ontology. This is the mingling of the real and the unreal, matter and anti-matter, being and nothingness, and the two at once attract and repel one another. Interestingly, while Murakami's surface (fantastic) narrative comes to a recognizable *denoument*, its parallel, everyday narrative remains unfinished, open-ended, reflecting the everyday reality in which we live. Most interesting of all, as these two narratives – one complete, the other

incomplete – intertwine with one another, a *third* narrative space opens between the two, an empty space in which the reader, taking cues from the bracketing dual narratives, constructs a *third narrative, unique to that reader*. If we think of the two parallel narratives as a kind of latticework, or even the lines of a three-dimensional sketch, we can easily imagine the reader filling in the colors and textures to complete the narrative picture on a more personal, three-dimensional level.

To posit the "empty narrative" is not without risk; if the central space of the narrative is empty, as suggested in the above diagram, is it not also then meaningless? Not necessarily. The fantastic and commonplace narratives provided by Murakami contain a vast array of potential meanings, of signs and symbols, intentional and accidental that lend themselves to potential narratives that might grow, ivy-like, upon the latticework. These meanings, like the narratives themselves, are sketched, and must be filled in by the reader. In this fashion, Murakami constructs a narrative mode that actually succeeds in bridging the gap between author and reader, or rather, that eliminates the need to bridge the gap at all, for once the story has been sent out into the world in search of a reader, Murakami simply fades into the background, no longer relevant save as a quiet, vestigial voice.

An Indistinct Image of "the West"

As we have seen, Murakami used his unorthodox perspective on the West – specifically, his image of "America" – to develop his approach to the act of writing, and from there constructed a new mode of literature that is neither "Eastern" nor "Western," but rather a hybrid that might be described as "West filtered through East." Looking at the long history of modern Japanese literature, then, we may say the circle has now closed upon itself. Having encountered the West in the Meiji era, Japanese writers imported the tropes of Western literature in order to construct a uniquely Japanese literature that essentially excluded the non-Japanese Other; Murakami, on the other hand, having encountered the West, developed his nationality-less "empty narrative" (which by its nature contains no fixed cultural grounding) and promptly unleashed it back upon the West. We might say that Murakami encountered the West, *and then gave it back*, not as a rejection, but as a *transfiguration* of the West, one that is re-exported for consumption.

This phenomenon is not limited to the writing of Murakami Haruki, nor even to the field of literature. One need only consider how animator and writer Miyazaki Hayao (b. 1941) has influenced the industry standards of Walt Disney Studios and Pixar; or how Murakami Takashi

(b. 1962), following his exposure to "simulationism" in New York City in the mid-1990s, would later export his own so-called "superflat" technique into the Western art scene. Like Murakami Haruki, both of these artists encountered Western technology and aesthetics, reconfigured them, and exported them back to the West. Today Miyazaki is regarded by some as the greatest animator who ever lived, while Murakami Takashi's designs appear on Louis Vuitton merchandise, album covers for major American musical artists, and of course, in his own works of contemporary art.

And what has Murakami contributed to Western literature? This is not easy to gauge accurately, but numerous American and British authors, from Richard Powers to Ruth Ozeki, David Mitchell to recent Nobel laureate Kazuo Ishiguro, acknowledge interest in his work. Nor are his influences limited to the West; in fact, one might be more justified in speaking of the opaque, wispy image of "the West" that Murakami shares with other writers in Asia, from South Korea's Yun Dae-yon to China's Wei Hui and Annie Baobei. Murakami's internationally acclaimed *Sekai no owari to hādo-boirudo wandārando* (1985; Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World) inspired Chinese rock musician Lin Di to name his band "Cold Fairyland" after the Chinese translation of the novel's title. Simply put, Murakami has constructed a liminal space, albeit a reified one – "the West" – which like his own works is an "empty narrative" into which each writer, whatever his or her cultural background, may fill in the details, constructing new realities from the outline found in fictional structures pioneered by Murakami Haruki.

More than his influences on Western *or* Asian writers, however, one might argue that we gain more from considering what Murakami has done for – or *to* – the idea of *junbungaku* in and out of Japan. Simply put, he has transformed *junbungaku*, from an insular, "closed system" of writing by, for, and about Japanese, and created an opening through which a more global version of *junbungaku* becomes possible. From this perspective it may be only fair to ask, did Murakami really *give back* the West? Or did he merely *open the system* that has, until recently, kept "West" and "East" distinct from one another? We might argue, rather, that Murakami has deconstructed firm definitions of "Japaneseness" as they emerged from the debates on *Nihonjinron*, as well as grounding longstanding definitions of *junbungaku*; at the same time, he has deconstructed conceptual perceptions of "the West," even as these were developed to oppose and yet, paradoxically, to define that very "Japaneseness" that grounds *Nihonjinron* and *junbungaku*.

Murakami accomplished all this, as I have sought to demonstrate, not through theoretical or philosophical interrogation, but simply by creating narratives that were so open-ended, so thoroughly malleable, that nearly any reader could access them and rewrite them in her or his own image.

To suggest a twenty-first century metaphor, in a world of Microsoft Windows and Apple-Macintosh computers, Murakami has constructed the literary equivalent of Linux, an operating system that is free, open-source, and most important, may be reconfigured by anyone with the ability and willingness to develop their own unique system, tailor-made for their own needs and interests.

Junbungaku will probably never be the same after Murakami Haruki. He has altered the model, to return to Ōe Kenzaburō's expression. But in the age of global economics, global trade, global communications, and even global studies, is it not about time that literature, too, had a global model? This is not the end of *junbungaku*, but a new departure for a global "pure literature."

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