

Swarthmore College

Works

Japanese Faculty Works

Japanese

Summer 2009

Review Of "When Our Eyes No Longer See: Realism, Science, And Ecology In Japanese Literary Modernism" By G. Golley

William O. Gardner

Swarthmore College, wgardne1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-japanese>

Recommended Citation

William O. Gardner. (2009). "Review Of "When Our Eyes No Longer See: Realism, Science, And Ecology In Japanese Literary Modernism" By G. Golley". *Journal Of Japanese Studies*. Volume 35, Issue 2. 377-380.
DOI: 10.1353/jjs.0.0119

<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-japanese/8>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Japanese Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

perts on Buddhism may find much here to amplify their understanding of the relationship between Buddhism, language, and the secular arts in Japan, a problem that also occupied some of Shinkei's contemporaries, the monk poets of the elite Zen temples.

When Our Eyes No Longer See: Realism, Science, and Ecology in Japanese Literary Modernism. By Gregory Golley. Harvard University Asia Center, Cambridge, Mass., 2008. xii, 394 pages. \$39.95.

Reviewed by

WILLIAM O. GARDNER
Swarthmore College

In his much-loved story “Ginga testudō no yoru” (Night of the Milky Way railroad, 1933), poet and children’s author Miyazawa Kenji describes the heavens with a striking mixture of artistic imagination and scientific terminology. His child protagonist Giovanni, riding in a fantastic train across the stars, even reaches out the window to touch the “water” of the Milky Way galaxy (*ginga*, or “silver river” in Japanese) and observe it up close. “However,” Kenji writes, “when he looked more carefully, he saw that its beautiful water was more transparent than glass or hydrogen, and sometimes, as his eyes seemed to adjust, he saw that it was flowing silently with delicate shining purple waves glittering like a rainbow” (Golley’s translation, p. 198). Kenji’s description, attributing a waveform and elusively material quality to the “empty space” of the galaxy, bespeaks both a poetic imagination and the author’s serious engagement with contemporary chemistry and physics, stemming from his training in agricultural chemistry and deepened by his passionate reading of works such as Katayama Masao’s *Kagaku honron* (Fundamental issues in chemistry, 1915) and Charles Steinmetz’s *Four Lectures on Relativity and Space* (1923). In his fascinating new study *When Our Eyes No Longer See: Realism, Science, and Ecology in Japanese Literary Modernism*, Gregory Golley offers new perspectives on the ethical dimensions of twentieth-century literature by his rigorous consideration of both the art and the science of Kenji’s work, together with that of his fellow members of Japan’s modernist generation, Tanizaki Jun’ichirō and Yokomitsu Riichi.

Central to Golley’s argument is the assertion that modernist authors explored a “realist” view of a world that surpassed direct observation with the senses (hence the book’s title) but nevertheless could be taken to exist as a “real” world of phenomena outside the individual subject—and could be at least partially mapped or rendered through abstract representations.

Such a definition of “realism,” which Golley ties to Japanese literary modernism, is clearly removed from the standard association of literary realism with the descriptive techniques of the nineteenth-century novel that are typically contrasted with the deformation, alienation, and radically warped or fragmented subjectivity associated with modernism. Golley, by contrast, grounds his definition of “realism” in the context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century science. In a far-ranging opening chapter, he outlines a new “realist” consensus emerging in twentieth-century physics and related disciplines, in reaction to a nineteenth-century radical empiricism exemplified by the “positivist” stance of physicist and philosopher Ernst Mach (1828–1916), who suggested that scientists could not trust in the existence of anything beyond the highly subjective experiences of their own senses. In Golley’s account, the positivist viewpoint is reflected in the Japanese literary world in the skepticism of linguistic abstraction and metaphysics expressed in Natsume Sōseki’s 1911 lecture “Gendai Nihon no kaika” (The civilization of modern Japan).

While the skeptical stance of positivism, together with its insights into perception and consciousness, effected a crucial stage in the development of science and philosophy, Golley writes, its ultimate denial of the existence of anything outside of perception and consciousness had to be overcome for a new twentieth-century science to take hold. In its place emerged scientific models such as quantum physics and relativity, suggesting ways of understanding the universe that went beyond what could solely be observed by the senses but which nevertheless offered a new purchase on a “reality” outside of the perceiving subject. For Golley, then, the “realism” of Japanese modernism lies in its affinity with an array of scientific theories and disciplines, including electrical field theory, ecology, quantum physics, and Einstein’s relativity, in mapping out possible *relationships* between the subject and a totality that lies beyond direct observation or the constraints of traditional “realist” depiction. “For Japanese modernists of the 1920s,” he writes, “external reality was understood neither as some metaphysical entity severed from the body nor as an illusory figment of the body’s organic sense, but rather as an evolving set of relationships between the body and a surrounding universe: a space of interconnection” (p. 17).

One of the most striking examples Golley offers of this modernist “realism” is left-leaning modernist Kataoka Teppei’s story “Tsūshin kōshu” (The linesmen, 1930), in which telephone line repairmen overhear snippets of conversation—discussions of body parts, stock purchases, or police activity—that form a surreal verbal collage: fragments heard through an electromagnetic system knitting together the Japanese empire and connecting it to a global information and capital exchange. This grotesque collage is far from traditional “realism” but offers a “diagrammatic” way to understand the totality of the Japanese state. Golley concludes, “To ‘see’ the capi-

talist system could mean *to listen to fragments of unrelated conversations through a handheld receiver across miles of copper wire*. The empire was both ‘visible’ and representable, then, but only as a non-mimetic model, a diagrammatic construct” (p. 47; author’s italics).

Golley also finds strong support for his thesis in the writings of Kataoka’s fellow Shinkankakuha (New Perception School) modernist Yokomitsu Riichi. Focusing on Yokomitsu’s major work *Shanghai* (Shanghai, 1928–32), Golley outlines how the bodies of colonial subjects, taken as “objects,” act and are acted upon in a geopolitical field of energy flows and exchanges, where competing imperialist and nationalist projects intersect on the streets of Shanghai. Offering close readings of several passages of *Shanghai* together with a discussion of Yokomitsu’s theoretical essays (several of which draw directly on the ideas and idioms of Einstein’s theory of relativity), Golley ties Yokomitsu’s literary expression not only to the new physics but also to the emergent science of ecology: “From class conflict to sexual desire, *Shanghai* pictures history in these grimly ecological terms, as inseparable from an immense, bio-material network of matter and energy, of geopolitical ‘velocity’ and time” (p. 134). Most impressively, Golley traces the ethical dimensions of Yokomitsu’s depictions of “geopolitical ‘velocity’” and offers an incisive and clear-eyed critique of the naturalizing, nativistic aspects of Yokomitsu’s work.

Golley sustains this remarkable balance of literary analysis, ethical scrutiny, and the charting of relationships to scientific theory in his final three chapters on Miyazawa Kenji. The first of these chapters focuses primarily on the role of Einstein’s physics and the concept of the fourth dimension in the aforementioned children’s story “Ginga tetsudō no yoru.” The second and third chapters on Kenji examine the ecological implications of his work, particularly the short stories “Oinomori to Zarumori, Nusutomori” (The hills of Oino, Zaru, and Nusuto, 1924) and the posthumously published “Nametokoyama no kuma” (The bears of Nametokoyama). The serious scrutiny that Golley bestows on Kenji is especially welcome, not only because of the timeliness of these works’ ecological dimension but also because of the relatively scant scholarly attention paid to this author in English-language studies, despite the celebrity that Kenji has obtained in Japan. We still await a full-fledged critical biography of Kenji that will examine the multifaceted and sometimes contradictory elements of his brief life and relatively small but luminous literary corpus in all its personal, social, and ideological complexity. Nevertheless, in elaborating the important role of physics and biology in these works, with careful attention to the actual scientific works available to the author, Golley has accomplished a significant advancement in Miyazawa Kenji studies.

To this reader, the chapters on Yokomitsu and Miyazawa Kenji, together with the intriguing introduction, are the strongest components of

the study. The chapter on Tanizaki's *Chijin no ai* (A fool's love/*Naomi*, 1924), while engaging and fluidly written, offers the least convincing contribution to Golley's theme regarding the scientific dimension of a "realist" modernism. As a whole, Golley's analysis often slides rather easily from one scientific paradigm to the next, which begs some questions about the implied isomorphism of diverse scientific disciplines such as field theory, relativity, quantum physics, and ecology. More often than not, "interrelationship" and "interdependence" emerge as the common denominators to these theories and the literary works Golley examines, and at his study's best moments, these concepts are elaborated with great complexity, specificity, and richness. At its least persuasive moments, "interrelationship" threatens to expand into a broad and even banal concept that could be just as easily applied to works of any era or artistic school. As a whole, however, Golley's study makes for compelling reading and represents a major contribution to the growing body of scholarship on Japanese modernism. Moreover, together with a handful of previous studies such as Karen Colligan-Taylor's *The Emergence of Environmental Literature in Japan* (Garland Publishing, 1990) and Joseph Murphy's *Metaphorical Circuit: Negotiations between Literature and Science in 20th Century Japan* (East Asia Program, Cornell University, 2004), Golley's work points the way to new fields of inquiry in Japanese literary studies by initiating a serious examination of the relationship between Japanese literature and the history of science.

Overcoming Modernity: Cultural Identity in Wartime Japan. Translated and edited by Richard F. Calichman. Columbia University Press, New York, 2008. xvii, 227 pages. \$45.00.

Reviewed by

YASUNARI TAKADA
University of Tokyo

For those concerned with problems relating to "modern" (and, for that matter "postmodern") Japan, the significance of *Overcoming Modernity*¹ is obvious. As a compilation of the collected papers and the report of round-table discussions from a 1942 symposium involving Japan's leading intellectuals, not only does it serve as a mirror, if sometimes refractive, where one can see the summary consequences of the modernization movement ("civilization and enlightenment") at that critical moment. It also provides a useful frame of reference to set in context the postwar politico-cultural state of

1. Kawakami Tetsutarō et al., *Kindai no chōkoku* (Tokyo: Sōgensha, 1943).