

INTRODUCTION

LITERATURE (BUNGAJU 文学) TODAY: WHY QUESTION THE CONCEPT OF “LITERATURE” NOW?

What Can “Literature” Do?

We stand now at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The march of time is carrying us inexorably forward from the last century into the present one, but of course it is not necessarily true that the arrival of a new century means the appearance of something new. Needless to say, the very idea of “century” arose in the Christian world and is meaningless for those who measure time by a different calendar. Nowadays, however, those people too, if they have clocks, must set their local time to a standard defined by the state, and, as the existence of the International Date Line suggests, they must define the date according to an international standard. Only those who have looked into the history of the calendar know who set that standard, or when. We all follow it, quite unconsciously, and live by it daily. Such are the workings of habit.

In the case of Japan, all the clocks in the country have been set according to the solar calendar ever since the Meiji government decided to adopt it, and likewise the days and months that the calendar announces. Until World War II, farmers, especially in northern Japan followed the work and festivals of the agricultural year thanks to the “blind man’s calendar,” one devised according to wholly different principles and composed of schematic signs that even the illiterate may have been able to read. Nowadays, no one remembers the old, lunar calendar except historians and those who read the classics or ponder the “seasonal words” (*kigo* 季語) of haiku. Convention conceals its own origins and history, and so do words that have become conventional, unless one makes a point of looking into their origins. One such word is “literature.”

A glance back over the twentieth century, in accordance with a calendar that most of us take entirely for granted, reveals the spectacle of humans taking human life on a scale never seen before, menacing each other, taking more lives, and renewing their threats without end. The curtain rose on this spectacle during the early career of Lenin (1870-1924), who in his *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916) wrote of the “wars of imperialism.” During its first half, two fierce world wars spread unprecedented death and devastation, while during its second half the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union threatened all life with nuclear destruction. Meanwhile, the ecological disruption that accompanies advanced industrialization, and especially the vast pollution caused in the postwar period by the wide release of chemicals, continues to threaten every living thing on earth. Anyone who recalls all this may well wonder what “literature” can do.

On December 9, 1964, at a literary forum sponsored by *Clarté*, the organ of the Union of Communist Students of France (U.E.C.F), the writer and eminent postwar French philosopher

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) asked that very question: “Que peut la littérature?” Earlier that year Sartre had aroused considerable interest—interest he had not enjoyed for some time as a writer—with a novel based on his youth and entitled *Les Mots*. He said in an interview with *Le Monde*, “A work like *La Nauseé* means nothing when infants are dying of starvation,” and, “The writer must stand on the side of two billion starving people, and to that end he must for a time abandon literature.”¹

After becoming a university student in April 1966, I myself was immediately caught up in the turmoil of the anti-Vietnam War movement and in the debate surrounding Sartre’s declaration. I learned then that in the Japan of the early 1920s, the nascent “Proletarian Literature” movement had been dismissed on the grounds that literature is superfluous,² and that within that same movement literature had been defined as a tool for political propaganda. I remember all that as though it were yesterday, and yet it is also true that Sartre’s question, “What can literature do when infants are dying of starvation?” sounds like a faint voice out of the distant past.

It probably sounds that way because the world has changed so dizzyingly, so drastically in the four decades since then. In 1968, the United States was routed in Vietnam, Soviet tanks crushed the liberalization movement in Czechoslovakia, and the student rebellion against the postwar order threw every region of the world into chaos. Then, in the late 1980s, the Soviet Union and the whole constellation of “socialist states” grouped around it (countries where in the twentieth century socialism, the proper aim of which is to abolish the state, strove instead toward a state conceived as the “homeland of the workers” and gave rise to a strange but undeniably powerful force) collapsed; confrontations between people and religions, hitherto barely contained by the “cold war order,” broke out everywhere; military clashes such as the Gulf War increased rapidly in number; and India and Pakistan gained the status of “nuclear nations.” In the first year of the twenty-first century Islamic extremists attacked the United States, even as the situation in Palestine went from bad to worse. Such changes as these during the last forty years have by now made the decade of the 1960s seem like another world.

Of course, “infants dying of starvation” are as much a reality in our world as ever. Meanwhile, it is even clearer than before that we humans pose a threat to every form of life on our planet. In contrast, “literature” has grown so weak that it seems hardly more than a traditional custom, one that, unlike the old clocks and calendars, just happens to have survived.

The Decline of “Literature”

In his entry on “literature” in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams (1921-1988) succinctly reviewed the concept of literature and the shifting values associated with it, then went on to evoke in these terms the relative drop in the position accorded literature in present-day England. He wrote:

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- 1 English translated from the quotation in Hirai 1966, a translation of Jean-Paul Sartre, *Que peut la littérature?*
 - 2 See for example Kawasaki 1923. Kawasaki wrote, “In the present, capitalist age, the desire for artistic creation is inevitably the product of bourgeois consciousness,” and, “Proletarian consciousness refuses any mediation by the arts.” This article is included in Suzuki Sadami 1990b.

Literature [is] problematic [today] not only because of the further specialization to *imaginative* and *creative* subject-matter (as distinct from *imaginative* and *creative* writing), but also because of the new importance of many forms of writing for speech (*broadcasting* as well as *drama*) which the specialization to books seemed by definition to exclude.

Significantly, in recent years **literature** and **literary**, though they still have effective currency in post-C18 senses, have been increasingly challenged, on what is conventionally their own ground, by concepts of *writing* and *communication* which seek to recover the most active and general senses which the extreme specialization had seemed to exclude. Moreover, in relation to this reaction, **literary** has acquired two unfavorable senses, as belonging to the printed book or to past literature rather than to active contemporary writing and speech; or as (unreliable) evidence from books rather than ‘factual inquiry’. This latter sense touches the whole difficult complex of the relations between *literature* (poetry, fiction, imaginative writing) and *real* or actual experience. Also, of course, *literary* has been a term of disparagement in discussions of certain other arts, notably painting and music, where the work in its own medium is seen as insufficiently autonomous, and as dependent on ‘external’ meanings of a ‘literary’ kind. This sense is also found in discussion of film.³

England is not the only country in which literature has lost prestige, overwhelmed by the development of the audio-visual media. The same drop has occurred all over the world. It may also be fair to say that the development of electronic data processing and communications systems (which completely bypass the legally defined copyright, translation rights, and so on, long attached to print) is causing the relative value of printed books to fall even further.

“Richly creative” work is valued as highly as ever in contemporary Japan, but it is also true that the expression “the end of literature” (*bungaku no shūen* 文学の終焉) became a staple in the literary criticism of the 1980s and 1990s. What, then, did this “literature,” the end of which was allegedly approaching, mean, and why did people talk that way? To what did the expression refer? The answers remain vague to this day, even as the very memory of that time begins to fade. In the meantime, there is a growing tendency among those who study literature to treat a literary work as little more than a document in cultural or intellectual history.

As things are now, this gravely weakened “literature,” together with literary criticism and literary studies, may well be called pathetic when considered in association with “infants dying of starvation”—indeed, in association with the totality of human actions that continue to threaten all life. However, more than just literature is at stake. Surely these actions demand a fundamental reevaluation of all our knowledge and values. If so, then however powerless literature may be in the presence of “infants dying of starvation,” has it not at least resolutely and consistently decried everything that we humans do to endanger life on our planet? “What can literature do?” and “What has literature done?” are in truth valid questions both for the present and for the years to come.

Conversely, it may be fair to say that some ten years after Sartre brusquely, even violently,

3 Williams 1985, pp. 187-88.

contrasted literature with the image of two billion people dying of starvation, thus warning against the tendency to regard literature as an absolute, still other voices began to be heard: voices calling for a radical reconsideration and relativization of all our accepted knowledge and values. Once of these was that of Raymond Williams, quoted above.

By restoring cultural concepts to the context of their ever-changing, interrelated histories, Williams sought to bring out in *Keywords* their origins and evolution. In this small book he skillfully showed that the underpinnings of our current values and ideas are highly unreliable, and so at a stroke greatly furthered our own efforts to relativize them. His work, among others, inspired the method of historical relativization, effected by resituating all cultural concepts in relation to each other and grasping their social basis anew, first developed under the name “cultural studies” by the *New Left Review* at the University of Cambridge. Naturally, cultural studies in turn commended to critics and scholars the task of relativizing the reality of the cultures to which they themselves belong, and the bases of their own systems of knowledge. In the last analysis, that task involves historically relativizing one’s own point of view. One manifestation of this trend has been a rising interest in the popular culture of modern times (*kindai* 近代) and of twentieth-century mass culture—areas hitherto dismissed by the academic worlds of North America, Europe, and Japan. With respect to Japanese popular literature (*taishū bungaku* 大衆文学), works such as Cécile Sakai’s *Littérature populaire et lecture de masse dans le Japon du XXe siècle* (1983) demonstrate the influence of this trend outside Japan as well.

The Significance of Questioning “Literature” Now

In contemporary Japan, especially since the latter half of the 1980s, fiction such as that of Murakami Haruki 村上春樹 (b. 1949) and Yoshimoto Banana 吉本ばなな (b. 1964), published in “pure literature” (*jun bungaku* 純文学) magazines, has acquired a wide following among middle-school, high-school, and university students; and it has gone on from there to achieve best-seller status. Meanwhile, many of the historical or detective novels appearing in middlebrow fiction (*chūkan shōsetsu* 中間小説) magazines, weekly magazines, and newspapers are of such high quality that the boundary between “pure literature” and “popular literature” is vanishing before our eyes. This situation inspired the outstanding detective novelist and critic Kasai Kiyoshi 笠井潔 (b. 1948) to publish in *Kaien* 海燕 (February 1993) an essay entitled “Soshite ‘jun bungaku’ wa shōmetsu shita” そして「純文学」は消滅した (And then “pure literature” died). It aroused considerable controversy and was received much as talk of “the end of literature” had been earlier. What it announced was the vanishing of the assumption that “literature” means “pure literature” and that “pure literature” is superior to “popular literature.”

It was in this context that I attempted my own historical reconsideration of the notions of “pure” and “popular” literature (“Jun bungaku to taishū bungaku: Kono ashiki inshū” 純文学と大衆文学—この悪しき因習, *Bungakukai* 文学界, October 1993-January 1994). My work generally agreed with the views espoused by Kawamura Minato 川村湊 (b. 1951), Shimizu Yoshinori 清水良典 (b. 1954), and other key literary critics, but the diehard partisans of “literature” mounted a vigorous counterattack. Odagiri Hideo 小田切秀雄 (1916-2000), a leading postwar critic, was

especially prominent in the controversy.⁴ However, the positions adopted by the two sides had so little in common that nothing came of the debate, which moreover displayed a marked tendency to treat my work as itself responsible for the disappearance of the boundary between “pure” and “popular.”

Having dared to criticize the strategy underlying the various histories and encyclopedias of literature and to demand their radical revision, my work was also vulnerable to attack on the grounds that the slightest understanding of it required immediately, before any attempt at a historical critique of the ideas of “pure” and “popular” literature, a radical clarification of the very concept of “literature” in Japan. However, even those who talked of “the end of literature” remained silent on that issue. No doubt naturally enough, they had little interest in it.

The task of radically reconsidering the concept of “literature” that originated in the modern period of Western Europe assumed distinct form already in the work of Raymond Williams, that is to say, in the 1970s. René Wellek (1903-1995), a major student of the concept of literature in mid-twentieth century Europe and North America, likewise wrote in his article on “Literature and Its Cognates,” “One should realize that the very notion of literature (and art) has been increasingly questioned in recent decades.”⁵ Wellek linked this “growing suspicion” to the late nineteenth-century German aesthetics of empathy (*Einfühlung*), which reduced aesthetic experience to perception and experience, that is to say, physiology; and he touched as well on the indictment of aesthetics by the analytical philosophers of the 1950s. With respect to more recent trends, Wellek cited Ihab Hassan’s suggestion that “Perhaps the function of literature, after all, is not to clarify the world but to help create a world in which literature becomes superfluous” (*Comparative Literature Studies*, 1, 1964, p. 266). He also mentioned, in France, Maurice Blanchot (*Le livre à venir*, 1959), who, citing Hegel and the negative aesthetics of Mallarmé, acknowledged that literature had reached its “zero point”; and he remarked that “the paradoxical celebrations of silence indulged in by the loquacious George Steiner [b. 1929], Susan Sontag [b. 1933],” among others, seem actually—in the 1970s—to welcome “the death of the last writer.”

Their remarks readily remind one of Roland Barthes’ (1915-1980) declaration that “the author is dead.” Moreover, Wellek concluded his article on “Literature and Its Cognates” as follows:

A humanist with a sense of history will doubt that literature can ever disappear as long as man wants to speak, and hence to commemorate his speech in writing and print.

Wellek’s talk of “humanists with a sense of history” makes him sound firmly camped within the intellectual sphere of the nineteenth century. In apparent contrast, Barthes set out in his *Essai*

4 Odagiri’s comments appeared in *Bungaku jihyō* 文学時評, no. 71 (January 15, 1994); *Tōkyō shinbun* 東京新聞 (March 22 and March 23 [evening edition], April 4 [evening edition], June 8 [evening edition], 1994); and *Subaru* すばる (July and September 1994). Suzuki Sadami’s remarks appeared in *Bungakukai* 文学界 (May 1994), *Asahi shinbun* 朝日新聞 (April 14 [evening edition], 1994); *Tōkyō shinbun* (June 8 [evening edition], 1994); and *Subaru* (August 1994).

5 Wellek 1973-74, vol. 3, p. 88. The further references to Wellek, below, are drawn from the same source.

critique (1964) to combat the author-centered reductionism embraced by positivist critics, by demonstrating the various critical possibilities inherent in the work itself.

However, while Barthes steadfastly rejected the established notion of “influences,” in “La mort de l’auteur” (1968) he saw the text as a “tapestry of quotations” woven into a multi-dimensional *écriture* derived ultimately from diverse cultures. In this sense it may be fair to say that Barthes’ work aims to link a new theory of literature to a new theory of culture. Moreover, Wellek’s faith that “literature can never die,” coupled with Barthes’ declaration of the death of the author, frees one from the conceptual categories that have long held sway and completely rebuilds them. Their words therefore fairly represent our own efforts to make literature our own once more.

One may even discern in such views the wish to posit a most difficult hope. Maurice Blanchot’s perception that literature has reached a dead-end opens the way for literature to escape from that same impasse by means of a radical denial of self. This idea follows a pattern often seen in the twentieth century: literature and art progress by critiquing their own concepts and thus constantly achieve self-renewal. In this way they have striven to reshape their ideas fundamentally, from within. In a similar spirit Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) attempted in 1919 to enter a toilet in an art exhibition, while in *Les faux-monnayeurs* (1926) André Gide (1869-1951) presented the reader with a novel about the very process of writing a novel, a novel that reflects on the novel itself. In short, the contest of ideas about art and literature has moved forward polyphonically within art and literature themselves, in a process that defines the history of art and literature in the twentieth century.

Toward Reconstruction

Whether one stands within literature or outside it, within or outside the text, or whether one adopts the strategy of moving back and forth between inside and outside, the question of how to reconstruct René Wellek’s “humanist endowed with a sense of history” may well be one of the critical problems of today. It must be addressed if one is to ask what literature can do and what it has been unable to do.

The purpose of this book is to make a fundamental contribution toward answering this question. In that sense the book is meant to address the needs of its time, and for just that reason it takes a first step toward a kind of basic study hitherto ignored by literary critics and scholars in Japan. It therefore proposes at the same time to treat not only the history of the concept of literature, but also the issue of when and how now-accepted views of “literature” and “literary history” assumed their basic configuration. It may not be clear today what the future holds, but we need at least to understand where we have come from.

One might ask why “a sense of history” is so important, and why I am so concerned with the history of “literature” and “literary history.” In reply I will first quote a passage from René Wellek.

Every work of art is existing now, is directly accessible to observation, and is a solution of certain artistic problems whether it was composed yesterday or a thousand years ago. It cannot be analyzed, characterized, or evaluated without a

constant recourse to critical principles. “The literary historian must be a critic even in order to be a historian.”

Conversely, literary history is also highly important for literary criticism as soon as the latter goes beyond the most subjective pronouncement of likes and dislikes. A critic who is content to be ignorant of all historical relationships would constantly go astray in his judgments. He could not know which work is original and which derivative; and, through his ignorance of historical conditions, he would constantly blunder in his understanding of specific works of art. The critic possessed of little or no history is inclined to make slipshod guesses, or to indulge in autobiographical “adventures among masterpieces,” and, on the whole, will avoid concern with the more remote past, content to hand that over to the antiquarian and the “philologist.”⁶

As this book will show, the lack of “a sense of history” leads certain writers on the subject unconsciously to commit basic errors and distortions. As will be seen in Chapter 9, in particular, critics and scholars of modern literature (*kindai bungaku* 近代文学) often avoid touching on anything earlier and gladly leave the past to specialists of the classics. As a result they ignore the Tokugawa period and proceed to elaborate error-filled arguments on the basis of the flawed, arbitrary hypothesis that “modern literature” has its origins in the Meiji period. In truth, the currently governing view of literature and literary history, founded as it is upon wholly arbitrary notions, actually coalesced only after World War II, and a great many cross-currents of opinion are to be seen within it. No matter how obvious these may be, however, the view as a whole is based on the post-defeat call to “re-launch modernization,” and on the errors inherent in that call. This book will demonstrate that correcting these errors is vital to the construction of a new history of literary art (*bungei shi* 文芸史). That is because, as I wrote at the outset, our present demands of us a fundamental reappraisal of all received knowledge and values.

However, this book does not represent an attempt to copy and apply directly to Japan the questions raised by Raymond Williams, René Wellek, Roland Barthes, and others. There are far too many familiar examples of the errors caused by trying to do just that with outstanding work from Europe or North America. Perhaps we have learned something from the scholars and critics there, but we must take a path more circuitous than theirs. When Japan adopted Western ideas, the Japanese ideas that acted as receptors introduced biases that gave rise to new ideas, and these, as history shows, were then incorporated into a transformed “tradition.” Whoever takes this transformed “tradition,” in other words “literary history,” for granted, remains blinkered and will never find a way out of the maze. In this book the reader will encounter various examples of such blinkered criticism. Finally, the effort made to reduce “literature” to perception, cognition, and experience, noted by René Wellek—that is to say, the effort to erase what makes literature literature—has been made here in Japan as well, in a particular form; this book will touch on that phenomenon as well.

Throwing light on the particularities of the Japanese situation will also serve, conversely, to illumine the special character of “literature” as it has developed in Europe, North America, and

6 Wellek and Warren 1949, pp. 36-37. My view of these matters is outlined in 11.2.

Australia, and so to relativize the concept. Doing so will certainly be useful as well to those in Asia or Africa who, despite accepting modern European ideas, write, critique, or study literary works in a mood of profound doubt directed toward the Western concept of literature.

Attempting as it does cautiously to remove the blinders and take an initial step, this book will often advance hesitantly. It will be able to deal with the changing concept of literature in Europe and China only to the minimum extent necessary for examining the same topic in Japan, and its treatment of pre-Tokugawa Japan will be kept similarly to an indispensable minimum. It will also be obliged to take a critical attitude toward hitherto predominant views, and it may therefore now and again leave the impression of lacking balance. Sometimes, too, the desire to avoid complicating the discussion may have encouraged me to neglect a topic I had hoped to take up. Moreover, my consistent focus on the changing concept of literature may have led me to slight related topics that merit parallel attention, such as the formation and development of concepts of the various genres. In general I have sought to avoid touching on the unknown and, instead, to step gingerly across it. Many matters raised here undoubtedly demand more attention than I have given them, but the nature of the book itself renders this shortcoming inevitable. In this regard I beg the reader's indulgence.