

Crosscultural Problems in Literary Theory Course Description

William E. Naff

Lecture/Discussion. An exploration of the cross-cultural aspects of the problem of the narrative voice, linguistic borrowing and the questions these raise about the cross-cultural validity of criticism and of the translator's enterprise.

The examination of some important new developments in the criticism of Japanese literature will provide fresh points of view from which to test the universality of critical techniques developed primarily out of the study of European literatures. Resulting questions will be pursued through close comparisons of representative European and Japanese literary and critical texts and through the individual research of members of the seminar in their own areas of specialization. Those who work with literatures other than those of Japan and Europe would be in a position to make especially valuable contributions.

For the first ten weeks, lectures and class discussions will center around readings, first from Fowler and Pollack and then from the writings of English, French and, to the very limited degree they are available in translation, Japanese critics. These will be examined to see what kind of answers they may provide or what kind of help they may give us in reaching our own conclusions. The readings will be reenforced with sample passages from Japanese, Chinese and various European literatures. Term paper topics will be chosen by the end of the sixth week. The tenth and eleventh weeks will be devoted to brief presentations on term paper topics by each member of the seminar for comment by the other members of the seminar. The final two sessions will be devoted to summing up the semester's findings.

Requirements: 1) Active participation in class, including a brief oral presentation of the term paper topic for peer comment. 2) A term paper taking up some question about Japanese literature from the point of view of another literature.

Texts: Fowler, Edward. *The Rhetoric of Confession: Shishösetsu in Twentieth-Century Japanese Fiction*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988;

Pollack David. *The Fracture of Meaning: Japan's Synthesis of China from the Eighth through the Eighteenth Centuries*. Princeton University Press, 1986.

Crosscultural Problems in Literary Theory

Context

Japanese literature has yielded very slowly to modern critical methods, in part because of a certain conservatism in the field but also because of difficulties in applying critical approaches developed in the study of European literature. The application of such approaches to Japanese literature has expanded rapidly over the last few years. The gulf that seems to separate Japanese linguistic and literary assumptions from those of Europe make Japanese literature an ideal context in which to test the universality of

critical strategies developed primarily out of the study of European literatures and to examine whether some of the findings being reported by pioneering scholars are really as peculiar as they may seem at first sight. Are Japanese perceptions of the self, and consequently of the role of the narrative "I," really alien to the European consciousness or can we find European texts that do anything that a Japanese text might do and vice versa? Are there really entire rhetorical categories and narrative strategies in Japanese which do not have analogs in the European languages?

The seminar will use two recent critical studies of Japanese literature as a point of departure. In *The Rhetoric of Confession*, Edward Fowler bases his argument on two observations, both of which are beyond serious objection.

The first has to do with the peculiarities of the Japanese language, which are numerous. There is the extreme complexity and ambiguity of pronominals, particularly those of the first person*Japanese has nothing that corresponds exactly with the pronoun "I." There is a strong tendency to omit the subject of the sentence and to avoid the use of pronominals. This, combined with an absence of grammatical gender, number, and person, can make it impossible to be certain whether the voices of even extended narrative passages taken out of context are in the first or third person (the question is not even likely to occur to readers unaccustomed to thinking in a European language). There is a dominance of the verb, of subject over predicate that naturally places emphasis on state or action rather than on actor or agent. This is not a language class and discussions of the language will not proceed beyond the point necessary to establish the fact that Japanese literary activity takes place in a profoundly different linguistic milieu from that of any of the European languages.

Fowler's second observation has to do with characteristic habits of both the scholarly and general reader in Japan. These have to do with an ongoing tension, often not consciously recognized, between largely-assimilated European intellectual constructs and traditional epistemological assumptions, and with the "myth of sincerity," a Japanese preoccupation. All this, Fowler argues, has caused Japanese literature to develop a paradoxical obsession with the self and a range of narrative stances that reflect a definition of realism through the immediacy of authorial presence rather than through verisimilitude.

While Fowler's insights make important contributions to our understanding of the way that certain types of modern Japanese fiction work, they also raise a number of new questions: Is the character of the Japanese language so radically different from that of European languages to make literature in Japanese a fundamentally different thing? Many Japanese critics would say "yes," basing their positions on usually extraneous arguments. Fowler argues both sides of the proposition. His arguments point implicitly toward the affirmative, yet at several points he explicitly rejects the proposition of Japanese uniqueness in the strongest terms. What might we find in European literature and literary theory to support either side of the question? To what extent can we even talk responsibly in English about the peculiarities of a Japanese narrative voice that is absolutely impossible to reproduce in English?

In *The Fracture of Meaning*, David Pollack makes a long-overdue examination of the way that Chinese loan vocabulary actually functions in Japanese. Chinese loan vocabulary plays much the same role in Japanese that Greek and Latin loan vocabulary plays in English, but with the important difference that Chinese and Japanese are not only unrelated but are entirely different in syntactical and morphological character. Even though the Chinese literary tradition is the product of an almost completely unrelated line of development, the subjective effects of its rhetorical and literary functionings would seem to have more in common with the European languages than with Japanese. Pollack shows that traditional Japa-

nese literary expression grows out of the tension between Japanese norms and values and a vocabulary of educated discourse dominated by Chinese loan words that reflect cultural values and epistemological assumptions that often remain intractably alien. These findings retain their validity in modern Japanese where the recent linguistic and intellectual borrowings from Europe represent only an additional layer of a very old problem in Japan. Again, the Japanese experience provides an excellent point of departure from which to examine comparable problems in other literatures including those of Europe. Just how complete and seamless is, for example, the assimilation of Latinity into English? Are tensions between the two really limited only to certain residual attempts to apply the norms of Latin grammar to a language in which they are irrelevant?

Such questions of fact and methodology lead us back into the European critical tradition from which they draw their methodological approaches. Selected readings from them will provide a starting point for comparative examinations of the narrative voice in Japanese and other literatures and the relationships between preference in narrative mode in a given language and the grammar and vocabulary of that particular language. This will raise broad problems of cross-cultural criticism and translation: Given seemingly incommensurate linguistic systems, patterns of literary development and epistemological assumptions, is it possible to make critical statements in English about literature written in Japanese that are both comprehensible and useful to those who do not know Japanese and yet plausible to those who do?

Some Possible Sources of Readings

Banfield, Ann. *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction*. Boston: Rutledge and Kegan, Paul, 1982.

Barthes, Roland. tr. Richard Howard. *The Empire of Signs*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1982 (L'empire des Signes. Genève: Editions d'Art Albert Skira S.A. 1970)

_____ : tr. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith. *Writing Degree Zero*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1968.

_____. : tr. Stephen Heath. *Image, Music, Text*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.

Bowring, Richard John. *Mori -gai and the Modernization of Japanese Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

Cohn, Dorrit. *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978.

Eco Umberto . *The Role of the Reader : Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979.

Field, Norma, *The Splendor of Longing in The Tale of Genji*. Princeton University Press, 1987.

Fowler, Edward. *The Rhetoric of Confession: Shisōsetsu in Early Twentieth-Century Japanese Fiction*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

Gessell, Van G. *The Sting of Life: Four Contemporary Japanese Novelists*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989.

Hibbett, Howard. "The Portrait of the Artist in Japanese Fiction." *Far Eastern Quarterly* 14 (May, 1955): 347-54.

Hutcheon Linda. *Narcissistic Literature: The Metafictional Paradox*. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1980.

Keene, Dennis. *Yokomitsu Riichi: Modernist*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.

Kellman, Stephen G. *The Self-Begetting Novel*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980

Kinmouth Richard . *The Self-made Man in Meiji Japanese Thought: From Samurai to Salary Man*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981.

Kuroda, S. Y. "Reflections on the Foundations of Narrative Theory from a Linguistic Point of View," In Teun A. van Dijk, ed., *Pragmatics of Language and Literature*, 107-40. Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Co. 1976. (Also in *The (W)hole of the Doughnut*, 185-203.)

_____ : "Where Epistemology, Style, and Grammar Meet: A Case Study from Japanese." In Stephen R. Anderson and Paul Kiparsky, eds. *A Festschrift for Morris Halle*, 377-91. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973. (Also in *The (W)hole of the Doughnut*, 205-21.)

_____ : *The (W)hole of the Doughnut: Syntax and its Boundaries*. Ghent: E. Story-Scientifica P.V.B.A., 1979.

LaFleur, William . *The Karma of Words: Buddhism and the Literary Arts in Medieval Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

Miyoshi Masao. *Accomplices of Silence: The Modern Japanese Novel*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974.

_____ : "Against the Native Grain: Reading the Japanese Novel in America." In *Critical Issues in East Asian Literature: Report on an International Conference on East Asian Literature*, 221-48. Seoul: International Cultural Society of Korea, 1983.

Morris, Mark . "Sei Shōnagon's Poetic Categories." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 40 (June, 1980): 5-54.

Peyre, Henri. *Literature and Sincerity*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963.

Pyle, Kenneth. *The New Generation in Meiji Japan*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969.

Rimer, J. Thomas. *Modern Japanese Fiction and Its Traditions An Introduction*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978.

Rubin, Jay. *Injurious to Public Morals: Writers and the Meiji State*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984.

Said Edward W. *Beginnings: Intention and Method*. New York: Basic Books, 1975.

Shirane, Haruo. *The Floating Bridge of Dreams*. Stanford, 1987.

Strong, Kenneth L. "Downgrading the 'Kindai Jiga': Reflections on Tōson's Hakai and Subsequent Trends in Modern Literature." In Japan P.E.N. Club, ed., *Studies in Japanese Culture* 1: 406-11. Tokyo: P.E.N. Club, 1973.

Thornbury, Barbara E. *Sukeroku's Double Identity: The Dramatic Structure of Edo Kabuki*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for Japanese Studies, 1982.

Todorov, Tzvetan . Tr. Richard Howard. *The Poetics of Prose*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977.

Walker, Janet A. *The Japanese Novel of the Meiji Period and the Ideal of Individualism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979. Watt, Ian. *The Rise of the Novel*. Berkeley: University of California press, 1957.

Waugh, Patricia. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction*. London: Methuen, 1984.

White, Hayden. "Fictions of Factual Representation." In *Topics of Discourse*, 121-34. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

White, Hayden. *Metahistory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973.

Marguerite Yourcenar, Alberto Manguel, tr. *Mishima, A Vision of the Void*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf Company, 1986 (Mishima ou la vision du vide. Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1980.)

An examination of these new developments will enrich the resources of the scholar of European or other literatures, produce an enhanced appreciation of the contrasting linguistic resources, cultural lore, and epistemological assumptions of Japanese and the European languages and provide new insights into both.