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## **WORLDING THE JAPANESE LITERATURE. THE LONG ROAD FROM THE PERIPHERY TO INTERNATIONALISATION**

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**Abstract:** The present essay analyses the evolution of the Japanese literature considering the dynamics of the influences exerted in the modern age by two major cultures, namely the Chinese and the European cultures, placed in confluence with the Japanese culture. The four-stroke dynamic is analysed as part of a historical evolution that overlaps certain distinctive periods in which the Japanese literature was placed, between the sixth-eighth centuries, in the periphery of the Chinese culture and, beginning with the modern era (1868), in periphery of the Western culture. In the intermediary periods, the Japanese culture tended to assimilate the forms imported from the two dominant cultures, as well as to develop local original forms. However, while the influence of the Chinese culture was part of an inferiority-superiority relation, given that in its early period (the sixth-seventh centuries) the Japanese literature imported and assimilated an entire series of cultural forms from the continent, the relation between the Japanese literature and the European literature was placed in terms of a conflict between tradition and modernity. Until the consequences of this ambiguous conflict are mitigated and overcome, one possible means of globalising the Japanese literature could be the development of its *exotic* nature.

**Keywords:** Japanese literature, (semi)peripheral literatures, world literature, global studies, modernity

In 1899 W.G. Aston's *History of Japanese Literature* was published in London and it passed almost unnoticed. The Japanese art of prints and ceramics represented an astounding discovery for the European artists and collectors, which would eventually lead to the Japanese-inspired trinkets trend and to the undeniable influences in the European painting of the time. However, not the same can be said about literature, which, for a long time, remained unknown to the public at large in Europe. Naturally, the primary obstacle in this respect was the Japanese language as well as the cultural interpretation codes of a literature over a thousand years old. W.G. Aston's work, written in the form of a chronological history, focuses on the most representative works of Japanese literature and describes the historical and cultural context of their creation. From the very preface of the volume, the author insists on the numerous difficulties in translating Japanese literature, but he does optimistically note that the interest in Japan had begun to grow as early as the Meiji period:

Forty years ago no Englishman had read a page of a Japanese book, and although some Continental scholars had a useful acquaintance with the language, their contributions to our knowledge are unimportant. Much has been done in the interval. (Aston v)

In order to adequately research the Japanese culture and literature, scholars cannot overlook the influence of Chinese culture and civilisation, given that between the sixth and the eighth centuries the journeys undergone by the Japanese emissaries on the mainland had facilitated a number of significant cultural imports that during the Nara era gave rise to a true cultural renaissance. One could even say that the Japanese literature of that time had risen and developed on the *periphery* of the Chinese literature from the Tang era – if by *periphery* here we mean not necessarily a forced political subordination, but rather an accepted influence of a dominant culture with a considerable age and representing a superior civilisation.

The Japanese poets of that time were aware of the great Chinese poetry, as proved by the fact that some, as was the case of Sugawara no Michizane (845 – 903), had written poems in *kanshi* (漢詩), a term that defines the poetry written in Chinese. For the poetry written in Japanese the term used is *waka* (和歌), which highlights the

distinction between the two styles. However, the Chinese culture was not only a superior culture from which the Japanese intellectuals had drawn their inspiration, but also the Chinese language itself – which continued to be studied in Japan almost continuously until the Meiji era – had a considerable influence on the Japanese thought and mentality. In Asia, the Chinese language is said to have played the same role that Latin played in Medieval Europe, with one amendment, as Sukehiro Hirakawa also notes:

First, many European languages belong to the same linguistic family as Latin, whereas Japanese and Korean do not belong to the same family as Chinese. The origins are different. Second, some Europeans may regard themselves as the inheritors of classical Latin culture, but it is impossible for the Japanese to think that they are the direct inheritors of Chinese culture. (Hirakawa 11)

Between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, due to certain historical aspects and political decisions, the Japanese culture distanced itself from the Chinese one. In the Heian period it reached a remarkable artistic peak through a sustained process of assimilation of the cultural forms brought from the mainland, while also creating a local, original culture. The example most frequently used in support of the detachment from the Chinese dominant culture is that of certain new literary forms appearing within the Japanese literature. The most representative such form is the novel (*monogatari* 物語), an entirely locally created genre, since in the Chinese culture this literary form would only manifest itself much later, in the fourteenth century. Thus, having initially emerged as a culture born at the periphery of the Chinese culture, the Japanese culture gradually built its own specificity and became increasingly more autonomous by creating forms and styles that reflect the Japanese view on the world. By cultivating its unique character and, because of the country's isolation, by continuing to develop without many outside influences, the Japanese literature, despite its intrinsic value, would remain unknown to the world for centuries. This unawareness can naturally be explained both historically and geographically – the isolation from the continent, the country's insular nature, and the isolationist trait that had become a state policy during the Edo period (1600-1868). Consequently, both the great classical Japanese literature and the medieval literature, written in a style that was accessible only to scholars, were

associated with the high culture that was most often hermetic and too little known, even by the general Japanese public, until the end of the nineteenth century. Therefore, the Japanese literature between the sixth and fourteenth centuries can be considered to have been under the influence of the dominant Chinese culture, and the eleventh-fourteenth centuries represent a period of detachment from the dominant culture. Nonetheless, between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries the Japanese literature developed as an autonomous organism that produced new seeds that would sprout original literature. Theatre genres as *nō*, *bunraku*, and *kabuki* or poetic forms as *renga* and *haiku* are characteristic of this and they developed within the local cultural space.

The fourth phase of development began with the Meiji Restoration (1868) and can be regarded as a need for cultural revival, given the fact that the already existing forms had exhausted their creative potential. The Chinese culture itself was exhausted in the same sense and thus no longer represented a model culture. In accordance with the Westernisation spirit manifested in that time, the inclination towards the European culture thus seemed to be the only viable option. Yet, there was a possible problem: the fact that there were no prior connections between the Japanese and the European cultures. Definitively freed from the influence of the Chinese culture, which was in a deep crisis towards the end of the Qing Dynasty (1636-1912), modern Japanese culture shifted its gaze towards the West. By establishing new contacts with Europe, it aimed to reinvent itself as a powerhouse similar to those in the west. For the sake of modernisation, the renouncement of the Asian system of thought in favour of the Western one was the only possible approach, no matter how radical of a solution it may have seemed at first. During the Edo period, the *bakufu* government justified its authority through an ideology that was based on the Neo-Confucian thought and teachings. The reformers of the Meiji government, however, understood that reaching a level of civilisation similar to the European one could only be achieved through a rapid modernisation of the country by connecting with the European culture. The coronation of Emperor Meiji on January 3<sup>rd</sup> 1868 also brought forth the adoption of the new policy to end the country's isolation and to propel its modernisation (Westernisation). The policy once again drew the Japanese intellectual elite's attention towards the discourse on peripherality or on the state of being a marginal nation compared to Europe. From a literary point of view, this also implied the creation of a national literature that, as

understood by Marko Juvan in the volume *Worlding a Peripheral Literature*, can be accepted and assessed within the network of both national and global literary relations. The only problem was that the Japanese people did not have a national poet who could represent a starting point in the establishment of a literary pantheon.

In order to facilitate the national education system, the primary Japanese universities set up *kokubungaku* (national literature) majors, which included courses on the history and evolution of the Japanese literature. The already well-known work edited by Mikami Sanji and Takatsu Kuwasaburō in 1890 entitled *Nihon bungakushi* (日本文学史) is a three-volume history of the Japanese literature and it is not merely an inventory of literary works from the beginnings to the Meiji period. In fact, it is implicitly an attempt of literary canonization of the primary literary texts and, following the European model, an attempt to create a *national* literature. In the case of poetry, the fast assimilation of the European poetic models was no easy task, considering the strict poetics of the fixed-form poetry (*haiku*, for instance). However, the adoption of certain narrative techniques borrowed from the European realist novel seemed easier to accomplish in the case of the Japanese novel.

In 1885 Tsubouchi Shōyō (1859 –1935) published *The Essence of the Novel* (小説神髓 *Shōsetsu shinzui*), in which the young author tried to endow the novel genre with an artistic value, in addition to the aspects related to leisure (which the previous period also acknowledged). In an attempt to define “the essence of the novel,” the author began his approach from the Western-type realist novel, in which the focus is on the notion of poetic truth and on the realist description of daily life, depicting characters and situations borrowed from a realistic social environment. Tsubouchi Shōyō introduces the novel as a genre, explains its typology, lists several structural rules, conveys the nature of the style and of the plot development, describes the nature of the characters without neglecting the roles played by the *protagonist*, and ends by defining the notion of *narrativity*: “[...] all the non-dialogue parts of the novel, whether accounts of the background to characters and events or descriptions of temperaments and scenery” (Shōyō). This essay actually represents the birth of the Japanese realist novel,

sanctioning the adoption of the conventions of realism as a norm for modern writing. Despite the young age of its author, the essay's influence at the time was enormous:

It was then that he realized for the first time the difference of literary standards in the West and East, and his book is nothing but the endeavour to harmonize the two. He resolutely rejected the only norm which the Confucianist morality of Tokugawa feudalism had known, the principle of Kanzen chōaku ('Punishing vice and re-warding virtue') and, passing beyond the melodramatic conception of letters which had characterized the bourgeois Edo epoch, he advocated an objective description of human life from an aesthetic point of view. If Tsubouchi had not quite succeeded in reconciling two conflicting literary conceptions, he had at any rate with his challenging manifesto provoked a healthy reaction against the then prevailing stagnant ideas on art. (Oda 204-205)

The move away from the literature of the Edo period equally occurred at a terminological level, with the phrase of *pure literature* (純文学 *junbungaku*). The term *junbungaku* was first used by Mikami Sanji and Takatsu Kuwasaburō in *Nihon bungakushi* 日本文學史 (1890) in order to outline a clear distinction between the *pure literature* and the *tsūzoku bungaku*, or the popular literature that was aesthetically unpretentious and that approached certain slices of contemporary life leisurely and with no aesthetic goal.

Thus, this relation between subjective understanding (the involvement of the narrator) and realist prose was precisely what underlies the construction of the *modern literature* (*kindai shōsetsu*) canon by including (in different categories) the most important authors of that time, such as: Shimazaki Tōson (1872-1943), Natsume Sōseki, Tokuda Shūsei (1872-1943) and Orikuchi Shinobu (1887-1953), in a relation of cognizance towards modernity through the individualisation of subjectivity. Regarded as a continuation of the classical aristocratic literature, *junbungaku* (純文学) primarily approached in the modern tradition the *crisis of subjectivity and interiority* (Marra 263). The supporters of this direction were the editors of *Literary World* (文学界 *Bungakukai*), a magazine whose first series was published between 1893-1898 with the purpose of promoting the ideas of literary romanticism and those of the new literature.

The discourse on Japanese identity and on the meaning of *Nipponism* emerged in the Meiji period, together with the establishment of several direct contacts with the Western civilisations. This type of discourse, beside its implied political aspects, also had a cultural dimension, an attempt to establish a position in relation to both the Asian and the European spirituality. Similarly to the establishment of modern European nations, this discourse initially played the role of ideologically supporting the reinforcement of Japan as a national state in relation to the states in both Asia and Europe. Subsequently, in the interwar period, against the background of the right-wing ideology, the identity discourse added the idea of the *uniqueness* of the Japanese culture and people, which implies, if not the complete lack, at most a minimal influence of the neighbouring cultures. In order to define this discourse, the scholarly works use the concept of *nihonjinron* (日本人論). This discourse on the difference between Japan and the other Asian countries, with which it does, however, share certain cultural and religious traditions, justifies the concepts of *nihonjinron* or Japanese uniqueness (Vande 64). The idea of Japanese uniqueness did not disappear after World War II. In the '70s-'80s it merely converted into what Kosaku Yushino regarded in a well-known sociological study as *cultural nationalism* or a Nipponism supported by a cultural tradition which the Japanese people deemed as one of a kind all across Asia despite the fact that over the past two decades, due to a globalisation that has favoured the new virtual technologies and the global spread of the internet, the concept of *nihonjinron* has suffered a form of vacuum, as Harumi Befu explains (26).

For Harumi Befu the definition of national identity can be outlined beginning with the symbols that are widely known to define identity, such as the *national flag, the national coat of arms, the national emblem, the national monuments and rituals*. These sacred and intangible symbols represent the source of defining the identity of a modern nation. The *nihonjinron* discourse was prolific during World War II, but after the country's defeat the militarist ideology that spawned it lost its essence, leaving a vacuum of meanings behind. After examining each of the national symbols, Harumi Befu demonstrated that after the war the new *nihonjinron*-type discourse returned to its original forms within the matrix of ethnic essence, namely its form before the war and the ascension of the imperialist-militarist ideology. However, in the absence of the

possibility of anticipating the ultimate consequences of globalisation or the effects of this unprecedented phenomenon in human history, one question that arises is whether the national identity crises will increase or, quite the contrary, it will serve as an incentive for the establishment of new local, ethnic or religious identities.

Nonetheless, in Japan, the definition of the national identity is not devoid of dilemmas and it generates a need for a stance taken by the Japanese people in relation with the west as well as with the rest of Asia – with China in particular, since throughout its history they maintained cultural, economic or conjecturally political relations. Thus, the question that emerges is: in relation with whom does Japan build its national cultural identity? The two options are: on the one hand, the modern Western civilization compared to which it held a peripheral position and on the other hand, the Asian civilization in which, once freed from the dominant Chinese influence, the Japanese culture seeks to take on the role of the dominant/dominating culture. For Bruce Stronach, the *identification* issue seems rather simple, considering the Japanese people's attitude towards foreigners, and he identifies a discrepancy between their treatment of Europeans and their treatment of other Asian peoples. This *double standard* in relation with foreigners, depending on their race and provenance, proves that, from this viewpoint, the Japanese people consider themselves to be closer to the Western world than to Asia (Stronach 56), given that they had borrowed the model of the European institutions.

The Japanese literary tradition had indeed formed as a result of the cultural borrowings from China. Be that as it may, the modernization of literature is almost exclusively due to its encounters with the European literature. The synchronisation of the Japanese literature with the European models from the beginning of the twentieth century became a fundamental premise for the evolution of literature in Japan. Paradoxically, the two Japanese authors who received the Nobel Prize for literature, namely Kawabata Yasunari in 1968 and Ōe Kenzaburō in 1994, were rewarded by the Swedish Academy precisely for the deep “Japanese” nature of their works.

Kawabata represented the generation that debuted in the 1920s and after the war he became the most important writer of Japanese literature. His international recognition came with the awarding of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1968. He was rewarded for the exceptional value of his literary work and the year he received the prize

fortunately coincided with the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Meiji Restoration, the year the modernisation of Japan began. Donald Keene noted, in Kawabata's case, an ambiguity in his reception abroad, which actually emerged from the writer's view on the modernisation process:

Kawabata was unquestionably a modern man, and his works dealt exclusively with the lives of contemporaries, but the Nobel Committee honoured him because of the special affinities his works revealed with Japanese traditions. (Keene 786)

What is truly both enlightening and equivocal in Kawabata's work – which also generates the ambiguity of his reception – is the fact that the Japanese writer managed to integrate the traditional Japanese elements through certain modern narrative techniques. Hence, he debuted as a modern author who, at the beginning of his career, was drawn to Neo-Sensualism (*Shin Kankaku-ha*) and became the head of this school of thought. Despite the fact that he was a contemporary of Tanizaki, the two authors represent literary modernism from different angles, as that they are both the beneficiaries of the evolution imposed in Japan by the Japanese literature's need for synchronisation with the European literature. Still, the directions undergone by each of their approaches to modernism are different. Tanizaki's literature depicts modern expressions of traditional themes, while in Kawabata's writings the sentiments and expressions are traditional, but the themes are modern (in view of the courage with which certain aspects of the intimate couple or family life are approached). One of the characteristics of literary modernism in Kawabata's works is the use of the stream of consciousness technique, a subtle game of reflecting the character's inner life despite the fact that his novels do not use first-person narration.

However, from a European modernist perspective, Kawabata's view is not avant-garde, but rather rear-guard. After the war, as Roy Starrs also notes, it gains an additional cultural-nationalist touch – “Kawabata's gentle cultural-nationalist view of Japanese culture” (Starrs 230) – in the sense of a recovery of the classical, old culture sensibility whose aristocratic-feminine dimension is the opposite of the virile militarism of the interwar years.

The refined elitism cultivated by Kawabata corresponds with the rigors of high modernism. However, the writer also reveals its true sources, which can actually be found in the classical and medieval culture, sources to which he also paid homage in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech. In his novels and short stories Kawabata manages to merge in an outstanding way, on the one hand, the subtle, anti-modern critique of the modernisation of society while reaffirming the traditional forms and, on the other hand, the acceptance of the modern aesthetics that liberate the narration from the constraints of the mimesis while aspiring to a “poetise” and rehabilitate high lyricism in form and expression.

Nevertheless, with the implosion of the empire after World War II and the resettlement between the country’s old borders, there was also a change in the literary imaginary and a repositioning of the literary groups in relation with the ideological discourses. In their writings both Mishima Yukio and Ōe Kenzaburō approached the political situation by adopting different, opposing stances with respect to the subject of identity, which they each depict in accordance with their own political options. Since his teenage years Mishima Yukio had been attracted to the militarist discourse and was fully devoted to the imperial idea, which he deemed sacred. Ōe Kenzaburō’s attitude was quite the opposite, condemning the militarist policy during the war, precisely the policy that was supported by the emperor.

Ōe Kenzaburō was born on 31 January 1935, in an isolated village in the Shikoku province. He was the second Japanese writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature (1994). He wrote short stories, novels and essays that confused the Japanese literary world, because they approached certain topics that the Japanese culture deemed controversial or even taboo. Due to the subject and the direct style that had no stylistic flourishes, Ōe Kenzaburō’s literature was neither convenient nor easy and in 1994 refusing the highest cultural distinction offered by the Emperor of Japan scandalised the public opinion. His dissent from the traditional imperial view and his criticism towards the Japanese mentality came to light in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1994 – a speech in which Ōe’s stance was the polar opposite of that of Kawabata Yasunari regarding the relation to tradition and modernity. The discrepancy in thought and vision is clear from the very title of the speech, which is visibly polemic with that of his predecessor: *Japan, the Ambiguous, and Myself*.

During this speech, Ōe made a statement that was rather surprising for the Japanese world, namely that his affinity was for the Irish poet W. B. Yeats (1865-1939) rather than for the medieval Buddhist monks Dōgen and Myōe, invoked by Kawabata twenty-six years prior during the similar Nobel Prize ceremony. In an attempt to provide an explanation for this attitude, Roy Starrs traced the evolution of the reception of modernism in the twentieth century Japan and the most important writers he identified each of their milestones with respect to the relation between tradition and modernity/postmodernity:

Ōe's modernism is thus opposed to Kawabata's, which is centred exactly on the modern nation-state and on cultural modernism. For Ōe it was this central imperial state that destroyed regional cultures and led Japan into the disasters of its fascist period, including a profound alienation from the rest of Asia. (Starrs 218)

In his speech, Ōe was extremely polemic with Kawabata and, paradoxically, despite being aware of the peripheral nature of the Japanese literature in relation with the Western literature, he opted for a spiritual connection with the European authors and distanced himself from Kawabata and his cultural nationalism.

To tell you the truth, rather than with Kawabata my compatriot who stood here twenty-six years ago, I feel more spiritual affinity with the Irish poet William Butler Yeats, who was awarded a Nobel Prize for Literature seventy one years ago when he was at about the same age as me. Of course I would not presume to rank myself with the poetic genius Yeats. I am merely a humble follower living in a country far removed from his. As William Blake, whose work Yeats revalued and restored to the high place it holds in this century, once wrote: 'Across Europe & Asia to China & Japan like lightnings'. (Ōe 114)

The term *ambiguity* used by Ōe perfectly reflects his outlook. The Japanese writer thus perfectly understands the specific nature of his country's culture, which is compelled to make choices that, by drawing nearer to one dominant culture, distance it from another one:

After one hundred and twenty years of modernisation since the opening of the country, present-day Japan is split between two opposite poles of ambiguity. I too am living as a writer with this polarisation imprinted on me like a deep scar... This ambiguity which is so powerful and penetrating that it splits both the state and its people is evident in various ways. The modernisation of Japan has been orientated toward learning from and imitating the West. Yet Japan is situated in Asia and has firmly maintained its traditional culture. The ambiguous orientation of Japan drove the country into the position of an invader in Asia. On the other hand, the culture of modern Japan, which implied being thoroughly open to the West or at least that impeded understanding by the West. What was more, Japan was driven into isolation from other Asian countries, not only politically but also socially and culturally. (Ōe 117)

The period between 1968 and 1994 was less marked by great or tragic historical events compared to the years of war, but it did bring great and fast changes in the Japanese society, which was much more willing and much more ready to endure and to accept the effects of modernisation than it proved to be during the Meiji period. Between 1968 and 1994, when Kawabata and Ōe received the Nobel Prize, literature also underwent a deep process of reinvention and repositioning towards the literary tendencies that manifested immediately after the war. Until the consequences of this ambiguous conflict are mitigated and overcome, one possible means of globalising the Japanese literature could be the development of its *exotic* nature, a direction successfully explored by authors such as Haraki Murakami, Ryū Murakami, Yoko Tawada, whose works have already been translated into numerous languages.

From a historical viewpoint, an assessment of the Asian literatures in relation with the Western canons, in the case of a corpus compiled of standard texts (Thornber 461) would indeed aid in the interpretation of and positioning towards the beginning of literature's modernisation. However, as Karen Laura Thornber also notes, such an endeavour proves to be rather inefficient with respect to certain literary works that, particularly after World War II, entered an intra-Asian network of contacts and reciprocal influences. The number of intra-East Asian literary contacts increased and became more active after 1945, once the political discourse lost its influence on the literary artistic sphere. Within this sphere the repositioning of the cultural influence

centres barely abided by rules of literary canonisation in the case of certain Japanese authors known globally and, implicitly, known throughout Asia, regardless of the nature of the linguistic and/or political dominance. Kawabata's success in Asia can be explained by more than just the universal acknowledgement of his work (obtained upon receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature). His success was also given by the nature of his work, as Karen Laura Thornber also shows in her analysis, in terms of the intra-East Asian influence (Thornber 466), of the projections of an intertextual dialogue between the novel *The Old Capital* (古都, *Koto*) and the novel bearing the same title written by the Taiwanese writer Zhu Tianxin. In 1968, the moment Kawabata was awarded the Nobel Prize appeared to be the triumph of an entire nation. In 1994, however, when Ōe Kenzaburo received it, the achievement belonged not only to one writer and one nation, but also to the entire continent of Asia, a fact that Ōe himself admitted during his discussion with the South Korean poet and activist, Kim Chi-ha (Ōe and Kim 287). Nonetheless, this is a utopia. The aesthetic tradition dictates that a literary work is a unique and unrepeatable creation. In this sense, the complexity of the historical circumstances from which it emerged, the cultural relations that facilitated its circulation in a specific space, and the acknowledgement of its influence can be analysed and rethought in accordance with the new world literature theoretical approaches. Therefore, the cultural spaces are reconfigured not merely through research conducted on individual authors and canons, but by identifying the relations between and within the literatures present in the same geographic area.

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