A NOTE ON MODERN JAPANESE LITERATURE

By Tomoji Abe

What I want to do in this essay is not to give a comprehensive survey of our literature to-day nor to exalt its beauty before the eyes of the foreigners, but rather to reflect upon the reality of the present state of affairs. More than half a century has passed since the start for the new civilization was made after the Restoration of Meiji (1867), and during this period Japan has undergone a great change under the influence of western civilization. In regard to literature alone, this half a century is not an uneventful one. We have seen many new movements, authors, and works which furnish problems worth our consideration, and it seems to me that we have now come to a point which demands our reflection upon the meaning of these problems. The necessity is felt more strongly than ever, as the possibility of future development depends upon the capacity of the younger generation to discriminate the essential from the superficial in the complicated phenomena which have been caused by the contact.

I shall now make quite a brief survey of a few prominent facts in the field of literature since the Restoration to illustrate some instances of these complications. The current of western civilization rushed into every sphere of our life, public as well as individual, spiritual as well as material. In literature we earnestly welcomed the voices of foreign authors through imperfect and hastily done translations of their works even in the early days when the storm of the political upheaval had not yet subsided. But it can safely be said that the real daybreak in our new literature was "The Quintessence of the Novel" by Dr. Shoyô Tsubouchi (1860-) published in 1885. He was inspired by a few writings of English critics which fell into his hand in the poor libraries of those days, and from those scattered glimpses of the western theories of art he manifested a
new idea of novel writing, discarding the conventional one of romance and making it clear that the aim and function of the novel lies in the truth and criticism of life. It was laying a new and definite basis in the field of literature at large, and after that many an ambitious young man took to the labour of creating works of new significance in the line of western models,—English, French, German, Russian, and American. But from these remarks it should not be inferred that Japan was devoid of any artistic culture or achievement before that time. She had more than a thousand years of tradition which had produced many famous works of permanent beauty. Nor must it be thought that there was no western influence before that. The influence of the Jesuit missionaries dates as far back as the end of the 16th century. After all, the race which fervently commenced to grapple with the new civilization was not in the state of blank paper at that period, but had already cultivated and matured a very high order of artistic sentiments in her own way. What will be the result of this fact is really a question that is very difficult but at once important and interesting. Forerunners of Meiji literature showed a remarkable degree of understanding and artistic susceptibility whenever they met with the works of the European people, because they had already been well trained by long tradition. That was a great advantage, but there was a disadvantage also. As I have said, they were not the blank paper. Whenever a new idea or sentiment came in it found an obstinate resistance in the mind. The traditional way of thinking or feeling was too deeply rooted in them to let the new one take the place and supplant the former, the result often being the awkward mixture of the two elements. And what is very important is the fact that this resistance has lost very little of its strength even to this day. It will continue in the future, if not forever.

But I will leave the discussion of this problem for a while and take up some main facts from this point of view. Dr. Tsubouchi, the author of that "Quintessence of the Novel" is one of the greatest figures in the whole field of our modern literature. He has
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since translated the complete works of Shakespeare by himself, has
done much to the reformation of the stage, and contributed not a
little to the advancement of literary criticism and education. He
also wrote several works of his own creation and here comes an
interesting question. "The Quintessence" was accompanied with
the publication of his first novel "The Ways of Students" which was
in all probability intended as the practice of his new theory. But
it is noticeable that the novel quite falls short of the theory and its
whole air and execution little escapes from the convention of the
fiction of the Yedo period. It is a fact that sometimes the
understanding or reasoning faculty runs right ahead of the
creative emotion, and we must admit we have suffered much from
this inconsistency in the making of our new literature. This failure
of Dr. Tsubouchi's ambition is the symbol of the fate that has over-
taken many an artist since that day.

Nevertheless, the start once made, the main current ran definitely
in that direction, though there were a few writers of the traditional
bend among whom may be noticed such an excellent one as Ichiyō
Higuchi (1872-96), a woman writer whose sentiment was almost as
beautiful as that of the court ladies of the Heian period. Why then
did we undertake the hard course of westernization when it is safe
to surrender ourselves to the genuine tradition of our own? Most
of the foreigners deplore the change and we also have often
asked ourselves this question. The answer seems to me not so
difficult. Let us see the "life" of Japan since Meiji. Literature
is nothing but the expression of life, and considering that Japan
has changed in every direction, from politics, law, military system,
economical life and industry, to the manners and habits of every-
day life, it is no wonder that literature also must suffer the change.
It was not a matter of choice or taste, but a necessity. Thus
the foreign influence became more manifest as the days advanced.
The next important figure after Dr. Tsubouchi was Shimei Futabatei
(1869-1909), who is known as the early translator of Russian
literature and the author of the novels "The Floating Cloud" and
"Mediocrity" which came shortly after that of Dr. Tsubouchi
and were esteemed as the first success in our attempt after the realistic novel. German influence was felt through the writing of Ogai Mori (1892–1920; D. M. and the sergeant general); the scholar, critic and author, who besides many admirable works of his own creation translated into Japanese many works of modern literature of nearly all the nations of Europe and greatly helped the new tendencies. Between the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese War the most famous were Koyo Ozaki (1866–1903), and Roka Tokutomi (1867–1927), the latter being influenced by the humanitarian spirit of Leo Tolstoy. After the Russo-Japanese War came the school of naturalism. To speak of naturalism in Japan requires a little time, as it has been much modified in our land to fit our nature and then has become the most deeply rooted tendency. As has been in the history of European literature, so there were two "naturalisms" in Japan. In the earlier days many young authors, chiefly poets, were affected by the nature worship of the romantic poets of the 19th century England and wrote many works after that fashion though more or less mingled with the Japanese sentiment of nature love well known as one of the most precious gifts of long tradition. But the "naturalism" after the Russo-Japanese War must be distinguished from this, being born in the influence of the two currents which rushed into Japan at that time, the French "naturalisme" of Zola, Flaubert or Maupassant and that of the Russian literature of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky or Tchehov. (It is often said that we won the war with Russia, but that war brought the great invasion of Russian literature.) Why we caught so fervently those currents will be explained from two sides. In the first place, the mental depression or disillusion after the war drove us to that direction. That is the negative side of the matter and the positive cause lies in the fact that the awakening of "the ego" or the bold assertion of individualism which had gradually been fostered in the four decades of westernization was now mature enough (it seemed) to make its own expression in art and fight against the rather romantic view of life long nourished since the days of feudal times. The writers of this school seemed
to find a joy in revealing ugliness of life. But it is to be regretted that these Japanese naturalists lacked the power to grasp the human life in the sociological or philosophic breadth and profundity and gradually settled into the milder and narrower range. Moreover, whether according to the propensity of our mind or to the conditions of journalism, the development of the novel was mainly in the field of the short story, and these facts altogether helped to the perfection of one type of the short story called Shinkyō Shōsetsu, namely "the novel of the state of mind." Now naturalism had gradually lost its strength, but found a new life in the formation of this Shinkyō Shōsetsu. The nature of this type of novel is hard to be explained, for it is of a very subtle kind. To find a counterpart in foreign literature we must go to the stories of Tchekhov. Our naturalism, in its disregard of imagination and in its incapacity of intellectual or theological development, became blended with the traditional love for miniature or delicacy and took to the depiction of the nuances of every day life with minute labour and skill and sincerity, and thus inaugurated Shinkyō Shōsetsu, and then this was taken up by many an able writer again and again and was brought to perfection, and there are even to-day some people who think that this is the necessary and inevitable goal of our novel writing. Among the writers of naturalism some are still active and regarded as the masters of the present day. They are Toson Shimazaki (1872—), Shüsei Tokuda (1871—), Hakucho Masamune (1879—) and others.

It will not even be impossible to relate the rise and fall of many tendencies since that day in the term of the struggle between this naturalistic bend and the opposite schools that have sought to go against that cult. The first reaction came in the name of the new romanticism or "the art for art's sake" school. In this the influence of a foreign teacher, Lafcadio Hearn should not be overlooked. His successor in the chair of English Literature in the Tokyo Imperial University, Soseki Natsume (1866—1917) was an eminent novelist of the anti-naturalistic tendency in the beginning, but his writings took the colour of Shinkyō Shōsetsu later. Jun-ichiro Tanizaki
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(1886–) is the most brilliant of the "art for art's sake" writers and has since become the biggest name of our time. The humanitarian writers then held the sway and of these Saneatsu Mushakōji (1885–) was the leader. Takeo Arishima (1878–1923) was later interested in the proletarian movement. Naoya Shiga (1883–) of that group was not exactly a humanitarian and according to many critics, the ultimate perfection of Shinkyō Shōsetsu was accomplished in his hand. The above writers and a few others formed the Shirakaba (birch) Society and these men mostly came from the families of the old nobility or from the wealthy class. They left a certain trace in the mind of the younger generations, but as a movement it was rather short-lived, and then came the younger disciples of Natsume. They had not so conspicuous a tendency, but on the whole their attitude was intellectual. Hiroshi Kikuchi (1889–), Yūzo Yamamoto (1887–), and Ryūnosuke Akutagawa (1892–1927) are famous among them.

The writers from Natsume to Akutagawa worked chiefly in the reign of the Emperor Taisho while Japan enjoyed peace and prosperity and while "culture," "liberalism," or "democracy" was the catchword in the mouths of the people. But the great earthquake (1923) and the subsequent financial depression changed the air not a little and it became rather similar to that of the post-war period of the western countries and consequently the literary artists were divided into two opposite camps—roughly speaking, the Marxists and the Non-Marxists. The Marxists or the proletarian writers of Japan first formed a group in 1920. The intelligentsia and men from the working class combined their forces, having at one period a sweeping influence not only on literature but on culture at large until the strong reaction came with the outburst of the Manchurian incident and quite diminished their power. The youngest generation of the anti-proletarian tendency at one time revealed a bias somewhat resembling that of the futurists or the expressionists of Europe, but they gradually became psycho-realistic after that spasmodic current gave way. Riichi Yokomitsu (1898–) is the representative of these young men. He combines the power of
psychological delineation with the beauty of traditional sentiment and expresses the vague inquietude of young people of our day. The young aspirants to literature of to-day are more or less caught with this inquietude. Some are troubling themselves with the problems of social disturbances and others are thinking of the fascination and vice of modern life and rather led to despair in spite of themselves. To some such names as M. Gide and Mr. Joyce are the everyday words on their lips while others are thinking of an escape to the old traditional sentiment.

So far I have dealt chiefly with novels and novelists because I think the main current of our modern literature has run that way. Poetry or drama will need no less attention indeed, but generally speaking, they are subject to similar phenomena and so I think I may be allowed not to give the detailed history of these departments of art. Only a word must be spent to draw attention to the fact that in poetry or theatre the opposition of Japanese and western elements is more conspicuous than in the novel. Whereas in the novel it is the matter of commingling, in the poetry or in the drama the two elements stand apart clearly. There is scarcely any relation between the Tanka or Haiku and the new form of poetry after the western fashion, or between the stage of Kabuki and the new movement of drama. Indeed, some attempts have from time to time been made to harmonize the two, but it must candidly be said that they have nearly always failed.

It seems to me that what I ought to do after this short survey is to point out the general characteristics derivable from it and then try to make out the real nature of our literature to-day, but as it is difficult or almost impossible for one to understand and judge the nature of one's contemporary literature, I will be content only to set forth some problems and not to make haste after the conclusion. The conditions surrounding the serious efforts in our literature are not so favourable. The number of the readers of serious literature is quite small, while the popular novels are drawing in the vast number of the public. It may be said that this is not a special case in Japan but evident in all the modern countries
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of the world, but it is nevertheless important to inquire if there are not some particular features in our present case, and the speculation of that will, I believe, lead to a certain realization of the nature of our literary activities. The reason why serious literature is not exercising such a degree of influence as might be expected from this art-loving nation is the topic very often dwelt upon by critics.

Firstly, the difference in the attainment of the cultural standard in the people is very remarkable. While comparatively a small number of intelligentsia in Tokyo and a few other big cities has gained, or is trying to gain, an intellectual standard equal to that of any civilized nations of the world, the vast populace, especially in the country parts, are lagging far behind them and have little to do with their effort. Then it is not only a matter of degree, but also of nature. As can be seen from the hasty glimpse I have made, very many kinds of culture rushed into Japan in a short span of time and in rapid succession. There are English, French, German, American, and Russian influences. Moreover, old and new tendencies and "isms" came at the same time. I am afraid there even may have been one or two comical instances in which a new tendency which was the necessary development of another older one came first and then the latter came as if it were the development of the former. But that is nothing to laugh at; all is done in the zeal to come up with the advanced standard of the western countries as soon as possible. This zealous endeavour has brought another remarkable feature in the character of nearly all the departments of our civilization. That was the specialization. I do not know whether there had been such nature in our former civilization, but it is quite evident in modern times. We had to specialize in order to make progress in a short time. Scientist, engineer, militarist, politician, economist had each to pursue his own business with little regard to the relation with the other field, and literature being no exception, has gradually come to assume a colour of the work of virtuosos, so to speak. Literary artists have, with the aid of the traditional sensibility, cultivated to the utmost the refinement of feeling and the technique of expression,
but in the course of that endeavour rather lost the habit of grasping life as a totality of experience and thus failed to acquire any powerful influence upon the thoughts and feelings of the general public not particularly interested in such refinement. We are used to call that kind of literature distinguished from popular one by the name of "pure" or "genuine" and this may illustrate our attitude or conception (at least to this day) toward the nature of literature. The authors who are considered of the first quality are often those who have showed little or no concern with the questions of politics or economical life, or with moral or religious aspirations, but have polished their art in the field of the so-called Shinkyō Shōsetsu or highly imaginative art. As I have said previously, the short story has been the centre of literary activity. Professor A. C. Bradley, in one of his essays, enumerates five representative modes of beauty, namely, the sublime, grand, beautiful, graceful and pretty. With the first two we have had little to do with, while we have made amazing achievement in the remaining three. The hard study of the great masters of the 19th century novel has brought no remarkable result until now. But here it might be asked—what of the activities of the proletarian artists who produced so many radical novels on materialistic ideas, observing the doctrine of Marx or Lenin to the letter and forsaking anything spiritual or traditional? I might answer that this activity also was the result of the specialization which I have pointed out. Specialization often leads to extremity and in the earnestness to probe into the material reality they lost sight of life as a harmonized whole of spiritual and material elements. Now they are reflecting upon this and making a new start, warning themselves not to be too one-sided. The question of curiosity may be considered in this connection. Though we do not at all think that what we have done hitherto was merely out of curiosity, it must not be denied that there was a little bit of that in some movements of modern times. Curiosity is indeed an active faculty, but it has also a weakness to be easily satisfied as soon as it finds emotional stimulus in the object, and thus seldom develops itself to the state of persistent enquiry after truth.
It is often said that we lack the quality of mind for abstract ideas such as truth or good and evil, so we have failed to create the literature of the grand scheme treating such problems in relation to the realities of life. This censure seems to me to be a half-truth. It is true we have not troubled ourselves over much with the conflict of good and evil and have produced few works of deep significance in that line. We have, so to speak, lived with nature and not against it. That is often considered as the particular attitude of the oriental mind. We do not deny that, nor want to lose this virtue (or defect?), but we never think ourselves incapable of abstract thoughts or profound moral ideas. The humanism which, I think, is the outstanding characteristic of the modern European thought which was introduced to Japan in these days, has already been deeply rooted in us. It has awakened the sense of individualism and is now seeking its growth in every direction. It must now find the wholesome relation with the evolution of social life. That is the first great problem we are now faced with. We have in some cases made blunders by treating these two phases of life's reality separately. We were not incapable of handling the two, only we sometimes failed in finding the method of connecting them, and if our effort at present to grasp the two in close relation meets with any success, our literature will have many a work of the grand scale and deep significance hereafter. The next problem for us is how to harmonize the individualistic view of life with the traditional. But that is only one of the great difficulties so often repeated in this essay; that is, the problem of present Japan as a melting-pot of the two kinds of civilizations. The content of the problem is manifold. For instance, materialization is already an established fact in the life of modern Japan and can not be ignored, and the problem is to harmonize it with tradition, though some thinkers of conservative or nationalist bend, imagining it to be the antithesis of the traditional virtues, are only eager to censure it unreservedly. Then there is another question troubling the mind of the cultured Japanese. Generally, they think in the western way but feel in the oriental. Intellect and feeling are often against each other in the same mind,
and the result of such irrelevance may be detected in many works of literature. All these and many other obstacles must be conquered before we build a new and firm tradition of literature in our country.

We are struggling after the establishment of that new tradition and do not despair of eventual success. Sometimes a voice whispers, "East is East, and West is West", but it is too hasty a conclusion as far as literature goes. Literature has something essentially international as well as national. Then the following fact must be considered well before we make any final judgment. Transplanting, or adaptation of the new civilization in the sphere of material life can be completed easily and swiftly, as is seen in the case of Japan in these years. However, the perfect harmony of the entirely different kind of civilization in the spiritual sphere is not a thing so easily done as building ships or railways. I think the introduction of the western civilization into Japan is such a remarkable thing as we can hardly find any similar case in the whole area of the world's history. Then in the sphere of spiritual life, it seems to me that fifty years or so is too short a time in which to judge of its result. Even five hundred years will not be long enough before anything definite can be said of it. It is a great and dangerous adventure in the history indeed. We may face with more great difficulties in future than that which we have experienced by now. It may even be supposed that it may lead to no happy consequence. But it is an indisputable fact that we are now tackling this hard task with all our powers and with a firm hope in gradual achievement toward the goal.