Forum:

The Future of American Literary Scholarship in Japan

Foreword

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The Tokyo branch and some other branches of the American Literature Society of Japan, founded separately a few years before they were united into the nation-wide federation in 1960, will celebrate their fiftieth anniversary this year. It thus seems a timely idea to ask our members to look back to our activities in the past and to discuss the courses we should take in the future. That is why we have held a forum-on-paper as follows, and I appreciate the contributors, important members of the branches all over Japan, whose essays aptly examine the present situation of the Society and Japanese study of American literature in general from various points of view.

When this English number comes out in the spring, 2006, my term as president of the Society will be coming to an end, but the Society will go along still more lively with Hisao Tanaka as my successor and Masashi Orishima as new vice-president. My guess is that one of their first tasks will be to read the forum carefully and give considerations to many observations and proposals described in it.

If I may talk about my own view, I am rather optimistic about the future of the Society. For after the two, three decades of flourishing literary theories from structuralism and deconstruction to feminism and new historicism, it seems to me that we are now witnessing a rise of a new type of criticism, which may be called "personal" criticism, on this side as well as on the other side of the Pacific. It is the kind of criticism that would be characterized by strongly individualistic approaches to literature, in which the authors often disclose and argue personal reasons why they have chosen particular literary texts and particular critical approaches. Such a criticism may be an aftermath of the age of theory, for when we are faced with many
theories going on concurrently, we are made to select one or two out of them according to our own different preferences. But I would also like to regard it as a mark of the strength of our literary minds, as it were, which seem to have survived the age of theory and have now begun to make themselves felt in direct, noticeable ways, guiding our individual literary study through the jungle of theories.

For a good example, there is Kazuhiko Goto's recent book, *Literature and Defeat*. In it he examines literature of the 20th century American South while drawing a close parallel between the South after the Civil War and the post-war Japan, and one of his stimulating discussions is concerned with the history of his own family, which made its own progression from "defeat" to literature through the three generations after the war. For another example, in 2002, when Kazuko Takemura made a well-informed argument against the modern ideology of heterosexuality in her *About Love*, she reinforced her standpoint by disclosing her deep daughterly love of her mother in her emotional address included in the last part of the book. Goto's view of literature is quite different from Takemura's; however, both of their books would seem to demonstrate the common inclination to combining literary theory and criticism with personal experiences, scholarship with autobiography, reading with living, which I am happy to find in many other works by our colleagues.

It may be true, as some contributors in the forum point out, that we are in the age of a-literacy, in which the public is not interested in literature nor in anything that is not immediately useful; but I believe that books such as Goto's and Takemura's will surely help a wide range of people, in and outside the Society, to understand the shape of our lives, which only literature can reveal in personal and vivid ways. It is worth saying as many times as necessary that out of such an understanding comes due recognition of the meaning and necessity of literary scholarship.