


A Note from a Country of Amnesia to a Country of the Unforgettable
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Recently, my main academic concern has been to find a way (or ways) to compare post-bellum American southern literature and Japanese modern literature.

I understand that those two literatures share a common trait or, as I would like to call it, a fate, of being a literature produced from “the culture of defeat” (Wolfgang Schivelbusch, 2001). Theirs was a kind of defeat, involving in itself a military surrender, a political crisis, and a total uprooting and humiliation of moral and esthetic values, which made a decisive historical severance between what was before it and what has followed it.

As for the U. S. South, it was obviously the defeat in the Civil War in 1865, while Japan experienced it, for the first time, as the termination of the national isolation enforced by Euro-American powers during the 1860s, and then underwent another in World War II in 1945. Differences in these two cultures of defeat may abound, but the most important is, in my understand-
ing, that the southern defeat was simply decisive (I don’t say the southern culture of defeat is simple—actually it’s anything but simple), while the Japanese defeat was twofold, as the first defeat led to the second.

Each defeat brought about the destruction of an ancien régime through “modernization”—emphatic and forceful introduction of democracy, industrialism, individualism, etc.—in each of these two “benighted countries.” However, as the intellectual and psychological legacies of the ancien régime still remain and have by no means vanished, so the southern culture of defeat, since the end of the Civil War, has been a long extended and consistent reaction against modernization or a recalcitrant process of incorporating it. A serious socio-historical study of the modern South, published just a couple of years ago, is entitled Still Fighting the Civil War.

On the other hand, the second phase of the Japanese culture of defeat is primarily a re-modernization. This involves a deep-rooted ambivalence toward the first modernization—i.e. a deep yearning or nostalgia for the strong leadership and the national solidarity that made the country the first modernized country in Asia, and a profound aversion to the very same that led the country into total annihilation and brought about millions of casualties in the country as well as in the adjoining Asian countries.

This ambivalence is somehow reflected in the historical fluctuation, after the Second World War, in the way of evaluating Soseki Natsume, a pioneering novelist in the first phase of Japanese modernization. It seems as if there were two Sosekis in Japanese literary history. Soseki (A): praised for his deep knowledge of Western civilization and for his creation of a totally independent and individualistic, therefore Westernized and fully “modernized” personality in his writings. Soseki (B): praised, above all the contemporary writers who call themselves “modern,” for not being easily infatuated by imported cultural and literary fads and for being a severe and penetrating critic of Western and “modern” values. Generally, Soseki (A) was more emphasized just after the Second World War, while Soseki (B) became more blatant in the 1970s.
To react to modernization, when it invades from outside and follows a cultural defeat as is almost necessarily the case, means to experience a "cultural disjunction" as if, to borrow a famous phrase from the Bible, by "putting new wine into old wineskins." Thereby, a disjunctive culture remains haunted by the past and lost, and has to find a way to deal with "the return of the repressed." How the repressed returns, or how it is repressed—that is a crucial difference in cultural landscape between the post-bellum South and modern Japan.

Clearly differentiated from the South, a country that is never allowed to forget (like Quentin Compson in Absalom, Absalom!), Japan, particularly after the second cultural defeat, is apparently a country of "amnesia," whether forced or voluntary. It is partly due to the total devastation in the second defeat, or partly due to the political maneuver of the U.S occupying force in its contention in the maze of a new global power game called "the Cold War."

But probably it is more due to the historical process of twofold modernization and cultural defeat through which Japan has lost a basis from which to see, analyze, and estimate what the first modernization achieved and failed to achieve. So the Japanese re-modernization after the Second World War is not actually re-modernization; it's just modernization, in its style and content, but without what naturally follows it—without a stern awareness of cultural disjunction or a distinct fear of the repressed that is to return.

I do not say that the Japanese repressed past will never return. I would say that Japan forgets how to remember. The country seems as if it never knows what was repressed in its history, how it will return, when it will return or even whether it is already returning.

This national "amnesia" could never fail to smuggle its way into Japanese creative imagination after the second phase of "modernization" cast its anchor and its anchor hit the bottom. Technically speaking, therefore, to compare the post-bellum southern literature with the literature of Soseki is one thing, and quite another to compare it with, say, that of Haruki Murakami, a representative figure in the contemporary Japanese literary
climate—an author who appears to fit more comfortably in modern American literature than in Japanese literature.

The climate has been constantly changing in the southern literary world, too. They used to have Faulkner; now they have Fred Chapell. They used to have Ellen Glasgow; now they have Bobbie Ann Mason. But it still seems to me that there is an important difference between what separates between Soseki and Murakami and what separates between Faulkner and Chapell.

And that difference—and how grave it is—will still lead me on, at least for the time being. A possible candidate for the next target will be women, writers and characters, or more precisely how the cultural defeats have made them what they are—tenacious, impulsive, enigmatic, trite, unreasonable, candid, reticent, frail, and steel-strong. Mr. Compson of Absalom says to his son: “Years ago we in the South made our women into ladies. Then the war came and made the ladies into ghosts. So what else can we do, being gentlemen, but listen to them being ghosts.” Then what happened to yamato nadeshiko—a Japanese equivalent of “southern belles”—and who were they then or who are they not now? Sounds intriguing, and here I fearlessly confess, being a gentleman or not.

"California Dreams, California Nightmares"

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Out of several projects that the Hokkaido Branch of the American Literature Society of Japan has recently been working on, I would like to introduce one research project I have been carrying out with some members for the past few years here in Hokkaido, the northernmost island of Japan. It is titled “California Dreams, California Nightmares,” and its main aim is to study California Literature which keeps chronicling the fascination and disenchantment with the Golden State. Below I will outline its contents and show its latest results.

California had already existed in the imagination of Europeans long