Temptation of Genres

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The French academy in the later nineteenth-century launched a nationalist claim for romance in defiance of German aggression. Chanson de Roland was situated in this nationalist movement as the expression of French unity. It was in this context that Gaston Paris introduced the phrase “amour courtois” in his article on Lancelot and Guinevere (“Études sur les romans de la table ronde: Lancelot du Lac,” Romania 12 [1883]). The concept of “courtly love” soon became a part of our common vocabulary, inasmuch as it shows how a concept or system invented at one historical moment assumes a power to constitute an ideological artifact. Whether the real historical existence of “courtly love” is denied or not, it already put on a hermeneutic role for literary works and also a formative role for the history of literary studies. The political uneasiness of France in the later nineteenth-century led literary critics to image their country as the one centered on courtly values. Further, France claimed itself as the founder of European literature by inventing “courtly love” and by doing so claiming romance as its proper genre.

National identity easily becomes the crucial issue in the apparently apolitical domain of literary criticism. As French critics tried to demonstrate the French national unity and solidarity by inventing “romance” as the foundational genre which originated and developed in France, W. P. Ker as the defender of English literary tradition, recontextualized epic in an evolutionary schema. Ker’s Epic and Romance, published in 1896, defines epic and romance as two orders of literature,
which belong to the earlier Middle Ages and the later Middle Ages respectively. It is the attempt not only to establish epic and romance as the literary forms which define the historical periods but also to prove superiority of epic over romance. He says: "whatever Epic may mean, it implies some weight and solidity; Romance means nothing if it does not convey some notion of mystery and fantasy." 2) Epic was invested with value—the value which is pre-French influence and therefore originally English.

A motive governing the concepts of romance and epic is, in this way, nationalistic in its impulses to identify a specific genre with the genetic origin of a people. The antiquarian desire for the origin of the nation encourages critics to elevate romance as the expression of the grandeur of Norman aristocracy. The English nationalism, as in W. P. Ker, defines epic as the paradigm of literature, which is expressive of Englishness. The opposition of epic and romance has been invented by literary critics in Europe at various historical points. Once the opposition is launched, it is repeated. To choose either epic or romance at the sacrifice of the other is simple enough to deny a formative role of criticism that creates the very way of posing questions.

We wonder what is fascinating about epic and romance. Endless debate over epic and romance makes us crave for the final answer to this old question. Unfortunately, however, it is impossible, because any definition of epic and romance is not an essential distinction at all, and also because epic or romance does not matter when critics argue about epic or romance. They are not concerned with the actual possibilities of specific genres as essentially different from other genres. Literary artifacts called romance or epic are tempting for its spurious ancientness, which gives us an illusion that we can go back to the original moment of literary traditions through epic or romance. We are likely to imagine that somewhere as we
go back in history we could find the mythic moment of culture—the existential locus of authentic identity, pre-foreign and with an archaic outlook. The primordial appearance of epic and romance encourages critics to authenticate their own literary traditions by imagining the unbroken tradition from the ancient until their contemporary. What exists there is the desire to authenticate the past, by inventing a literary tradition—unique and distinctively ours.

Instead of trying to define epic and romance, encountering endless anomalies from our definitions, we can call both epic and romance “higher narrative” following Earl Miner. The fact is that the English-speaking critics call the particular mode of narrative “epic” or “romance” using their vocabulary at hand, simply because English language has the terms “epic” or “romance.” What Earl Miner means by “higher narrative” is that everything is put on a higher plane than ordinary. Heroes are stronger and more handsome than ordinary people. Heroines are always beautiful and virtuous. Earl Miner’s “higher narrative” refuses to set up an East-West internal oppositions by enveloping epic and romance in a halo of unintelligibility beyond the boundary of Western countries, where the terms “epic” and “romance” can be translated without losing much of their significances. Nor does he idealize the non-West by mythologizing it as an alternative to the West. He creates a framework of reference so that all cultures could be accommodated and so that a single culture might not be prioritized.

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“Higher” of “higher narrative” of Earl Miner might remind us of Ernest Gellner’s famous definition of nationalism or T. S. Eliot’s “higher culture,” although we have to notice that the intents and results of these
three critics are quite different from one another. Gellner defines a nation as a society with a high culture, that is, a specifically cultivated, standardized, education-based, literate culture. And he thinks nationalism replaces old, wild, low culture by high culture. T. S. Eliot’s “high culture” is something to be transmitted by elites for the sake of unification and continuation of European culture. It is only the selected that are admitted to the impersonal order called “Tradition.”

T. S. Eliot’s “higher” of “higher culture,” thus, conveys an exclusivist notion:

Now there are of course higher cultures and lower cultures, and the higher cultures in general are distinguished by differentiation of function, so that you can speak of the less cultured and the more cultured strata of society, and finally, you can speak of individuals as being exceptionally cultured. The culture of an artist or a philosopher is distinctive from that of a mine worker or field labourer; the culture of a poet will be somewhat different from that of a politician; but in a healthy society these are all part of the same culture; and the artist, the poet, the philosopher, the politician and the labourer will have a culture in common, which they do not share with other people of the same occupations on other countries.  

While he mentions the culture of “a mine worker or field labourer” as one of the diversity of cultural activities, he thinks that the “cultural elite” should transmit the culture through the “groups of families persisting from generation to generation, each in the same way of life.”

I referred to T. S. Eliot in order to clarify that “higher” of “higher narrative” of Earl Miner is not identical with “high” of “higher culture” of T. S. Eliot, which has resonance from Matthew Arnold’s “high culture” and
thus upholds an aristocratic ideology. We should keep it in our minds that his idea of culture is imbued with nationalist ideology in the same way as Gaston Paris and W. P. Ker’s idea of romance and epic are.

T. S. Eliot delivered a lecture, Unity of European Culture, for Germans in 1940, when people were unable to “visit each other at private individuals.”⁵ He meant his speech as an appeal to European people toward unification through their common cultural heritage. His concern is to “preserve [the] common culture uncontaminated by political influences.”⁶ One effect of his speech is that it acts as a part of war propaganda. While he emphasizes the unification of European culture, he is more articulate in his attempt to display the cultural superiority of English:

I simply say that the English language is the most remarkable medium for the poet to play with. It has the largest vocabulary: so large, that the command of it by any one poet seems meager in comparison with its total wealth.⁷

Eliot’s apparently non-ideological discussion of culture as something extricated from the political sphere conceals his political commitment in the wartime ethnic prejudice, although we cannot be sure how much he identified himself as an English, being an American elite born in St. Louis and educated at Harvard.

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World War II was engaged not only in Europe but also in East Asia. In 1940 T. S. Eliot found himself on the war front of Germany to speak for the unity of European culture through the leadership of English as a
superior nationality among European peoples. Around the same time in East Asia, Japan was engaged in creating “East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” with China and Korea under the aegis of the allegedly superior ethnicity, which is Japanese. Japanese literature in Japan during World War II acted as a staunch ideological maneuver. It did not pretend to belong to the higher sphere of culture; instead, Japanese scholars in Japanese literature were more explicit in expressing the sense of Japanese literature’s being superior among East Asian literatures.


This novel [The Tale of Genji] perfectly evinces the themes and ideals which Japanese novels should have. In these terms, it is absolutely different from Chinese novels . . . . Courtly literature in Japan extends its scope beyond the court and the palaces of aristocracy as far as landscapes and lives in foreign countries: courtly literature or fairy tales in China, on the contrary, limits its scope to the gardens of aristocratic houses and abodes of fairies. To be concrete and realistic are our national characteristics.8)

What Orikuchi is saying here is that Japanese literature is concrete and realistic and that it has more scope than Chinese literature. He attributes these characteristics of Japanese literature to the “innate superiority of Japanese literature.”9) What Orikuchi implies is that Japan, although it had much influence from China, eventually surpassed it and became a superior
country than China.

Only when one compares Japanese literature with its presumed opponents such as Chinese literature, one gets concerned with how to prove its superiority. Only then one might want to consolidate the greater tradition of Japanese literature against foreign literature. The obsession with originality of Japanese literature would not make much sense except in relation to what is different from it. To call Japanese literature as “one’s own” as Orikuchi does necessarily comes with the awareness that “one’s own” literature is being challenged by foreign/other literature. Orikuchi’s favorite topic was the “the emergence of Japanese literature” and its development which sees its culmination in The Tale of Genji. What he attempted to do was to encapsulate the anchoring moments of Japanese literature and to foster the myth of Japanese literature as pure and original, distinct from its rival, Chinese literature, and thus to legitimize Japanese literature in relation to its inferior opponent, Chinese literature.

It was The Tale of Genji, not Sōseki Natsume or Ōgai Mori or others that Orikuchi picked up as his ideological maneuver. T. S. Eliot was fascinated by the Grail legend so that he organized his Waste Land through the images of Fisher King—the barren land and its eventual regeneration. It is because of the appeal of ancientness that The Tale of Genji and the Grail legend have. Their primordial appearance tempts us to make a trip back toward the putative origin of our nations or cultures. Modern “monogatari” criticism in Japan are eager to posit “monogatari”—“tale” of The Tale of Genji—as a precursor of the novel and a successor of oral poetry, thus making a continuous history of Japanese literature. Many critics are concerned with at what moment monogatari was born by being separated from antique rituals.

Anthropological desire gravitates toward the origins of monogatari, piercing through the density of new and old monogatari. This is nothing
surprising, nor is it to be blamed. We need to reach what remains silently anterior to written texts. We need to be aware, however, that the way we understand the present of our culture shapes the way we are related to its historical past. Monogatari described as pre- and post-Genji Monogatari, produced as such through critical discourse, retroactively make their own legitimacies through their alleged canonicity. Forgetting or pretending to forget Japanese literature’s indebtedness to Chinese literature, Orikuchi narrativizes history of Japanese literature from its putatively primordial past, when an emperor already always existed, and thus fixates the origins of the national tradition as an image of an absolute past sanctified by sacredness of the imperial house. Benedict Anderson’s remark concerning the formation of “imagined community” is quite relevant here. He says that “an imagined community” “loom[s] out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glide[s] into a limitless future.”¹⁰ He continues:

Because there is no Originator, the nation’s biography cannot be written evangelically, ‘down time,’ through a long provocative chain of begettings. The only alternative is to fashion it ‘up time’—towards Peking Man, Java Man, King Arthur, wherever the lamp of archaeology casts its fitful gleam. This fashioning, however, is marked by deaths, which, in curious inversions of conventional genealogy, start from an originary present. World War II begets World War I; out of Sedan comes Austerlitz; the ancestor of the Warsaw Uprising is the state of Israel.

Anderson says that history, which consists of multiple and fragmented meanings and diverse and separate events, needs to forget some things to remember other things. Homi K. Bhabha remarks in a similar vein: “It is
this forgetting—a minus in the origin—that constitutes the beginning of the nation’s narrative.” 12) He further observes that when “the unified present of the will to nationhood” as the enunciatory present is intersected with the pedagogical object of past, history of the nation and the nation-people is articulated:

To be obliged to forget—in the construction of the national present—is not a question of historical memory; it is the construction of a discourse on society that performs the problematic totalization of the national will. 13)

“The national will” of Japan was abnormally keen on constitution of a totality by excluding inassimilable elements in 1944, when Orikuchi published his article. At its height of imperialism, Japan’s national will was in favor of justification of its invasion into China and Korea. As imperial Japan claimed its superior position among Asian countries in order to dominate in Asia, so did Orikuchi’s Japanese literature claim superiority over Chinese literature. Although it is not easy to notice unconscious ideologies and unconscious effects of modern Japanese criticisms inspired by Orikuchi, something political should be deciphered from them and problematized in order for us to avoid being complicit with the nation’s totalizing will to homogeneous history.

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Epic and romance are retroactively defined as such by nostalgic feelings of the people of the later ages. Epic and romance tempt us toward the putative origin of a nation and a culture by its spurious ancientness. Monogatari tempts us in a similar way. Monogatari advocates a sense of
the continuing literary tradition of Japan by its ancient outlook. It tempts
us toward the existential locus of Japanese identity preforeign and
therefore traditional. Masao Miyoshi calls for what is indigenous to
Japanese literature with monogatari as one of his advocates for the return
to the traditional Japanese literature:

Just as the novel form took its shape form an ensemble of epic,
Renaissance drama, folktale, and ballad, so does the shōsetsu range
over the monogatari and utamonogatari, noh, nikki and tabinikki,
Buddhist sermons, renga, kabuki, and so forth . . . . Ise, the noh, and
linked poetry are not marginal elements in Japanese writing. In fact,
their salient features are evident in such other genres as prose tales,
essays, and diaries, and they are conspicuous in the shōsetsu. In all of
these forms, textuality is perceived of not in terms of autonomy, but of
interrelation. Authorship is seen as more public and communal than
private and individual. The modality of art tends to be not
representation and mimetic, but presentational and linguistic; not
“realistic,” but reflexive. Less emphasis is placed on the acute sense
of separation between the inside and outside, subjectivity and
objectivity, artistic space and life space, than on the intense experience
of fusion and collapse of such isolations. Taxonomical perception, too,
seems focused on the rejection of separation and discreetness rather
than the insistent detection of difference.14)

Miyoshi argues against the first world’s attempts to “domesticate or
neutralize the exoticism of the text” in the third world. He is quite keen
to the colonialistic encounter of Japan and the West so that he posits Japan
in the third world, at least culturally. In the site of the interactions of the
colonizing and the colonized, the texts of the third world are easily
domesticated by the point of view of the first world. Miyoshi’s acute sense of Japan’s subjugation to the Western hegemonic discourse tries to exoticize Japanese literature in its “native grain” against the domesticating efforts of the first world. To retreat to an antiquity authenticating it by presumably enduring cultural forms and claiming total differences of Japanese literary forms from those of the West is to establish a binary opposition of Japan and the West. It is true that “the monogatari and utamonogatari, noh, Nikki and tabinikki, Buddhist sermons, renga, kabuki” are Japanese literary forms; what is necessary is, however, to situate them on the international scene claiming not only differences but also similarities, in other words, simultaneously constructing and deconstructing what is putatively indigenous to Japan.

It is Kōjin Karatani’s argument in The Origin of Modern Japanese Literature that monogatari was defined as such only retroactively. He observes how monogatari was retrospectively perceived as a genre in the perspectival configuration that came as an effect of construction of modernity in the particular milieu of the Meiji period (1868-1911). With a sudden confrontation with Western countries after two hundred years of seclusion policy by the Edo government, the Meiji government tried to break with the past through a deliberate and hurried strategy of modernization and Westernization. The encounter with Western civilization at the end of the nineteenth-century confused Japan enormously as it still does to some extent. One of its effects in literature was that the novel as a new genre was introduced through translation of European novels. The sudden appearance of those novels written in a fashion quite new in the eyes of Japanese people shifted a paradigm of criticism radically. Things that came before were labeled as pre-modern, as Karatani argues. The emergence of the novel prompted people to go back in history toward the original moment of Japanese literary tradition, in a search for
authenticity. A linear history of progress from monogatari to novel was constructed at this moment. It is not the case that “monogatari” as a pre-modern form and the novel as a modern form have independent and autonomous realities; the division between “monogatari” and the novel is made possible only when we get a particular paradigm. Monogatari was conceived as a genre when it was retroactively defined by the perspective of the novel. Karatani says: “Monogatari may be seen as a space that was excluded, becoming visible in the process of being excluded by what was established as system in the third decade of the Meiji period and by the homogeneous space of one-point perspective.” When the novel came to Japan with its Western and therefore modern outlook, monogatari was pushed back along with history to be designated as pre-modern. The modern gets itself defined in the trace of the premodern, which, in its turn, defined retroactively by being excluded by the modern, leaving a trace in the semantic layers of the modern. Karatani’s deconstruction of modern Japanese literature, putting the very concept of “modern Japanese literature” into a bracket to deny its autonomous existence, should be understood as a ground-breaking attempt to free critics of Japanese literature from their obsession with equating the modern type of novel with the Western type of novel and to consider it superior to pre-modern genres such as monogatari.

We should be aware that our own language tries to appropriate what came before in the interest of our own age. It is not the case that as we go back in history we find the origin of our literary traditions through those ancient-looking genres—epic, romance, and monogatari. We, who think to have arrived at history belatedly, construct the resemblance of canonical histories, tempted by spurious primordialness of epic, romance, and monogatari. Our nostalgia acts as an ideology to inscribe the image of the untroubled sublimity of the native traditions back in the idealized antique
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ages. It makes the attempt to define literature as a higher culture—higher than lower and higher than the higher of other national literatures, for the reason that literature seems to convey the essence of a nation or a culture, and therefore it looks higher. W. P. Ker, Gaston Paris, T. S. Eliot, Shinobu Orikuchi, and Masao Miyoshi—those critics we have seen evince the fact that ideologies are at work when we are not quite aware of them.

NOTES

1) This is a modified version of the paper I read at the meeting of the Society for Intercultural Comparative Studies, held at Princeton University from March 30 to April 1, 2001. I appreciate the travel grant offered by the English Society of Japan, which enabled me to have a travel to the United States.

2) Ker 4.

3) Eliot, “Notes Toward the Definition of Culture” 122.

4) Eliot, “Notes Toward the Definition of Culture” 122.


7) Eliot, “Unity of European Culture” 188.

8) Orikuchi 273-74. The translation is my own.

9) Orikuchi 281. The translation is my own.

10) Anderson 12.

11) Anderson 205.

12) Bhabha 310. Italics are Bhabha’s.

13) Bhabha 310-11. Italics are Bhabha’s.

14) Miyoshi 159-165.

15) Karatani 232; De Bary 162.

16) The subsequent part of this paragraph is a paraphrase of the chapter 6 of “Kōsei ryoku ni tsuite” (“On the Power to Construct”) in Karatani 189-242; De Bary 36-170.

17) Karatani 232; de Bary 162.
Works Cited


Orikuchi, Shinobu. “Nihon no sōi—Genji Monogatari wo shiranu hito ni yosu”
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