Introduction

Karatani Kōjin's *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature* (*Nihon kindai bungaku no kigen*) was first published in book form in 1980, but consists of six chapters which were originally published as discrete essays: chapters 1 through 4 appeared in the literary journal *Kikan Geijutsu* (Arts quarterly) between 1978 and 1979; the two final chapters were published in the January and May–June issues respectively of *Gunzō* (The group) in 1980. This English translation, then, will appear over a decade after the writing and initial publication of the text in Japanese. Against a history of relative inattention to modern Japanese critical writings on the part of Western scholars, however, this lag time may be said to have been rather brief.[1]

The writing of Karatani Kōjin's book, as well as this translation of it, certainly represent attempts to redress some of the striking disparities that have characterized the relationship between Japanese criticism and the non-Japanese, primarily Western, world. At the time of its publication in Japan, *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature* was seen as one of the most provocative and controversial articulations of what came to be known as "modernity critique" (*kindai hihan*), an intellectual movement that gained momentum in the early 1980s as Japan completed its transition to what many have called a postmodern society. Although Karatani soon sought to distance himself from an amorphous postmodernism that he saw as too easily accommodating the demands of the corporatist state, and although he has often criticized the limitations of his own methodology in *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*, we have urged him to publish the original argument in its entirety in this English translation, for it remains one of the most sustained challenges to the conception of modernity (and the various models of East-West relations implicit in it) that has informed Japanese literary studies throughout this century.

Some remarks about the method and context of Karatani's argument may be helpful, especially for readers unfamiliar with Japanese criticism. We might characterize the agenda of this book as one of ideology critique, of an aggressive defamiliarization. Not unlike Western studies stimulated by the reconceptualization of issues of

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ideology and culture in the 1960s by writers such as Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, and Roland Barthes, Karatani's text made that which seemed most natural and self-evident—the categories by which textbooks and newspaper columns, bookstore shelves and university departments were identified—the object of analysis. As he wrote in the afterword to the first edition of his book, each of the words of its title, "the words 'Japanese,' 'modern,' 'literature,' and especially 'origins,' should in fact be bracketed."[2] Only by making strange these utterly commonsensical terms, Karatani implied, can we begin to arrive at a new understanding of Japanese modernity.

Why a new understanding of Japanese modernity is desirable and what it might be are two quite simple questions that have been posed with surprising frequency by readers of Karatani's text. That they have to be asked, even by those who supposedly know the answer, may be taken as evidence both of the difficult, ambiguous, and highly protracted nature of the Japanese debate on modernity and of the idiosyncratic style of Karatani's argument itself. As several scholars have pointed out, the efforts of Japanese intellectuals in the early 1980s to critique the notion of the "modern" as desirable, or even as a neutral descriptive or chronological term, paralleled a similar movement in the late 1930s and early Pacific War years calling for Japan's "transcendence" of the modern. In both cases, arguments represented some form of resistance to Western economic and cultural hegemony and to the notion that modern world history might be, as Naoki Sakai has phrased it, "no different from the history of progress toward the complete domination by one center."[3] Yet, in his brilliantly nuanced analysis of the relationship between Japanese intellectuals and state ideology in the wake of the outbreak of the Pacific War in December 1941, Sinologist and philosopher Takeuchi Yoshimi observed that those who exhorted Japan to "overcome the modern" not only lacked consensus on what Japanese modernity might be, but found themselves facing logical and practical conundrums. While most asserted that the problem with Japan's modernization was that it had been taken to be identical with "Westernization," distinguishing between foreign elements to be repudiated and the indigenous strata to which Japanese could "return" (a distinction which, in any event, did not neatly conform to a "material" vs. "spiritual" dichotomy) proved to be no easy task. The extended discussion on "Overcoming the Modern" recorded and published in the September and October issues of the journal *Bungakkai* (Literary world) in 1942 was described by its

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moderator Kawakami Tetsutarō as a response to Japanese intellectuals' shocked realization, brought on by the early "successes" of the war, that "our Europeanized intellects and Japanese blood were at odds with each other."[4] Yet, as Takeuchi observed, throughout these discussions the relationship between a decadent modernity and what, in the Japanese context, has long been called *bummei kaika* (a term loosely describing technological, scientific, and political "progress" in post-Meiji Japan) was vexing. While some ideologues took the extremist position that science and technology be included in a thoroughgoing rejection of the modern, Japanese Romanticists, an influential group of nationalistic critics affiliated with the journal *Nihon Roman-ha* (*Japanese Romanticists*, 1935–38) found they had reached a logical impasse when they attempted to condemn Western imperialism. As Takeuchi noted, "some kind of universal values had to be posited in order to judge imperialism," yet "any system of universal values subsuming East and West could not be admitted" by the Japanese Romanticists because they saw it as "divorced from tradition."[5] Other thinkers, such as the philosopher Shimomura Torajirō, insisted that since "the West was no longer the Other" for Japan and it was therefore impossible to reject modernity, it was "a new spiritual outlook" which should be the focus of efforts. Influential Kyoto School philosopher Nishitani Keiji, similarly acknowledging that "the modern in Japan is based on European elements," identified as problematic only the *manner* of "piecemeal importation, without coordination, of the various aspects of modern culture," and advocated Japan's development of a synthesizing, "spiritual outlook."[6] As Nakamura Mitsuo observed, however, "even the notion that the task of the present is to 'overcome modernity' was developed by a group of contemporary Western philosophers." To "borrow Western concepts as a way of rejecting the West is an absurd contradiction."[7] The logical bankruptcy of wartime efforts to identify and locate "pure" and indigenous elements of Japanese culture was perhaps most strikingly illustrated in Yasuda Yojūrō's 1940 essay, "The Originality of Japanese Culture" (*Nihon bunka no dokusōsei*), which ultimately and ironically could only conclude that it was the ability to adapt, even to imitate, that constituted the uniqueness of Japanese culture.[8]

As the boldest revisionist critique of modern Japanese literary history to appear since the end of the Pacific War, *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature* shares with efforts of the 1930s and 1940s the impulse to resist hegemonic narratives which, blatantly

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or subtly, reinforce the notion of the West as center, origin, and arbiter of modernity while marginalizing, suppressing, and depriving of self-respect the cultural productions of the non-West. It was no doubt recognition of an impassioned articulation of such an impulse that made the opening chapter of Karatani's book arresting for many Japanese readers, a chapter in which Karatani strikingly reverses the conventional evaluation of the Meiji literary giant Natsume Sōseki (1867–1916), typically credited with refining Japanese techniques of modern, psychological narration in his depiction of rootless, urban characters. For Karatani, what was significant were the tragic failures of Sōseki's career—his despair over mastering English, the book of literary theory abandoned before it was completed and which—despite the supposed universality of "literature"—Sōseki correctly suspected would not be taken seriously beyond the borders of Japan. Born just a year before the Meiji Restoration of 1868 and steeped as a child in the study of Chinese classics, Sōseki never overcame his sense of estrangement from, and skepticism toward, conceptions of literature that later modern writers saw as utterly natural.

This was because at the time of the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the inclusive term "literature," or *bungaku*, did not yet exist in Japanese, and different genres were referred to by their specific names. Karatani therefore emphasizes Sōseki's relationship to *kanbungaku*, a modern Japanese term we have carried over into the English translation to emphasize its specificity in the Japanese context. Literary Chinese, much like Latin in Europe prior to the seventeenth century, was the common written language of the Chinese, Japanese, and Korean intelligentsia into the late nineteenth century. This written language came to be generally referred to in Japanese as *kanbun*, referring to the practice of writing texts in Chinese ideographs accompanied by annotation in the phonetic syllabary enabling the Japanese reader to reconstruct Chinese sentences according to Japanese grammatical patterns. As Karatani notes in chapter 1, the modern term *kanbungaku* does not only refer to Chinese literature, but most precisely to any text that could be read in *kanbun*: the broad corpus of canonical *kanbun* texts an educated Japanese reader of Sōseki's time would have been familiar with, therefore, could in no way be seen as having constituted a "national literature." *Kanbun* texts, however, could be said to have been canonical insofar as they were the basis for the education of the Tokugawa elite. Such texts included Chinese Confucian classics; Chinese poetry,

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historical writing, and essays, as well as writings in diverse genres produced by Japanese. In the early years after the Meiji Restoration, the Japanese male intelligentsia wrote, not only poems and compositions for formal occasions but even diaries, in *kanbun*. It is by juxtaposing Sōseki's acute historical awareness of *kanbungaku* to the emerging modern paradigm of literature—as simultaneously "universal" (in its essential characteristics) and yet susceptible to classification on a "national" basis—that Karatani opens his study.

Yet if *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature* shares with the work of certain earlier thinkers a stance of resistance to modernity, it is vulnerable to the same dilemmas. If anything, Karatani appears to differ from some predecessors in his stoic refusal of the escapist belief that Japan's modernity might, indeed, be "overcome." One would hope (although Karatani's argument does not raise this point explicitly) that this attitude is in some part born of a postwar generation's realization of the disastrous consequences of the earlier Japanese attempt to accede to the West's status as "subject" of modernity by forcefully transferring the status of "the Other of the modern" to nations on the Asian continent. At any rate, the notion that modernity cannot be transcended is one rigorously adhered to in this text, in a way that both powerfully informs Karatani's argument and leads it in paradoxical twists. These are paradoxes such as that pointed out to me by an American student reader of Karatani who once asked, gingerly but with unassailable logic, "If Karatani wishes to reject a linear concept of history, how can he say that there was no concept of interiority in Japanese literature before the third decade of the Meiji period?" This apparent contradiction is inseparable from Karatani's epistemological stance vis-à-vis modernity, which may be best characterized as historicist. In each essay of his book, Karatani seeks to analyze the ideological nature of what have been seen as the simply existing objects (objects which are taken as "objectively" existing, as Karatani repeatedly asserts, as if they were "out there") of modern Japanese literary representation—be it landscape, the inner self, the child, illness—by asking readers to be mindful that what appears to them to be timeless nature in fact has a point of origin, a historicity which has been repressed. Karatani reminds us that young Japanese studying Western oil painting in the early Meiji period, for example, could not in fact "see" the scenes their Italian teacher, Antonio Fontanesi, sent them out to sketch. Janine Beichman, in her study of the poet Masaoka Shiki (1867–1902), who first developed techniques of modern "realism"

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in haiku, narrates this anecdote told by a friend of Shiki who had studied with the Italian painter:

> Asai Chū told the story of how he and his classmates had been assigned by Fontanesi to make sketches of the Marunouchi district [of Tokyo]. Dutifully arriving there, they all looked around, but could find nothing suitable to sketch. When they confessed their failure on the next day, Fontanesi scolded them, saying that there was nothing wrong with the place, but with them, and that if they would only look around them there was enough there to keep them busy drawing for two generations.[9]

Yet Karatani's call for a historicizing awareness must be self-contradictory, for in relativizing modern perspectives or common sense it raises the question of the historical epoch as a "limit," a boundary of understanding, beyond which understanding itself cannot penetrate. As a historicist, then, Karatani faces a problem similar to that confronted by Georg Lukacs in his consideration of the relationship between history and consciousness. "The most basic question to which Lukacs' theory of class consciousness is addressed," writes Andrew Feenberg, "concerns whether any vantage point exists *inside* a given culture from which that culture appears, not as a transhistorical limit on consciousness, but as a merely historical stage in the development of consciousness."[10] Although Lukacs posited that the proletariat alone could achieve a perception that was not finally limited by the boundary of capitalist culture, Karatani in *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature* appears closer to the Foucault of *The Order of Things* in insisting that any conceptual system or discursive formation is ultimately determining of what is seen to constitute truth within it. Thus, while on the one hand he uses the concept of history and origins to defamiliarize the natural and commonsensical in Japanese modernity, Karatani on the other must insist on the radical unknowability of the other-than-modern. For Karatani, Sōseki, despite his youthful studies of the Chinese classics, was already engulfed by modernity in a way that made it impossible for him to retrieve any kind of pristine and direct knowledge of the past: Chinese literature "by his time had already become something which could only be imagined, as it were, on another shore, beyond 'literature.'"[11] Furthermore, "I myself," Karatani as narrator disclaims, "cannot break away from this sphere."[12] William Haver has lucidly analyzed the reasons for this paradoxical quality of Karatani's historicism by elaborating on Karatani's notion of an

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inversion, or *tentō*, as the origin of Japanese modernity. Karatani's inversion, Haver notes, presents us with a model of knowing, or "discovery," which is doubled, constituted in equal parts of "blindness and insight." As Haver writes, " 'origin' or *kigen* in Karatani's deployments refers both to the originary 'event' of a dialectical *tentō*, and at the same time to the *forgetting* and repression of that event . . . origin as the originary forgetting of one's historicity."[13]

It should certainly be noted here that Karatani's theorization of a limit of consciousness, like his concept of modernity itself, is blurred by his failure to rigorously delineate the multiple and overlapping concepts of "landscape," "literature," "epistemological constellation," "system," and "écriture," used prominently and in varying contexts within the book. At some points, Karatani appears to equate Japanese modernity *in toto* with what he calls "landscape" as an "epistemological constellation" (*kigōronteki na fuchi*). It is impossible not to see resemblances between this concept and that of the Foucauldian *episteme*, although Karatani rigorously (and, for reasons that in themselves deserve analysis, quite sensibly) avoids wholesale "application" of this term within his argument.[14] Yet at many points Karatani insists on the relative dependence of modern Japanese discursive practices on the state, appearing to pursue a rather different analytical tack. As a result, it is impossible to pinpoint in *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature* an exact delineation between inclusive spheres such as modernity (an "epistemological constellation") and the modern state, on the one hand, and medicine, literature, or confession as "systems," on the other. What is consistent, however, is Karatani's demand that the "truth claims" of Japanese modernity, be they those of the confessional novel or those of medical science, be effectively bracketed, and thus historicized, so that the terms of debate about that modernity may be shifted. Moreover, by repeatedly calling attention to the problem of the state and of authority, *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature* seeks to remind us of often well-camouflaged relations between knowledge, or culture, and power. He demonstrates a similar concern with knowledge-power relations when he seeks to shatter the pervasive view that so-called "cultural developments" of Japanese modern history evolved in a sphere separate from the unequal West/non-West relationship: "it was in the face of the overwhelming dominance of the West that the establishment of both the modern state and interiority in the third decade of Meiji became ineluctable" (p. 33). Why, despite his concern for ideology critique, Karatani in

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Origins of Modern Japanese Literature does not attempt to provide us with a more explicit, historically specific analysis of power in modern Japanese culture (which might include rigorous formulation of his position vis-à-vis what must have been for him the compelling models of the Foucauldian episteme, discursive formation, and system) is a question critical readers may wish to pursue. It is a question Karatani explicitly addresses in the afterwords appended to this volume.

Also, readers will be pleased to note that Mr. Karatani has provided for this English edition additional notes after each chapter of the original text, as well as one new chapter entitled "The Extinction of Genres." These new materials, appended after the translation of the original text, convey some sense of his more recent thinking on certain problems taken up in *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*.

Finally a note on Karatani's references to year-periods is in order. Those unfamiliar with Japanese history may be puzzled by frequent mention of the Edo period (or Edo literature), the Meiji period (Meiji literature), and the Taisho period (Taisho literature). The term Edo period refers to the roughly two and half centuries (1600–1867) when Japan was ruled by Tokugawa shoguns, who established their capital in Edo, the site of modern Tokyo. Partly because of their fear of alliances that might develop between Europeans and powerful former rivals, the Tokugawa rulers terminated relations with representatives of Western nations in the 1630s, imposing a policy of relative isolationism. Because of his interest in recasting the terms of the debate on Japanese literary modernity, however, Karatani's writing in this book deals largely with literary developments in year-periods immediately following the collapse of the Tokugawa shogunate, known in Japanese as the Meiji (1868–1912) and Taisho (1912–25) periods. These periods are coterminous with the reigns of the Meiji and Taisho emperors respectively and roughly cover the first half-century of Japanese modernization beginning with the overthrow of the last Tokugawa shogun and the proclamation of an Imperial Restoration in early 1867. (Matthew Perry and his squadron of "black ships" had arrived in Edo Bay some fourteen years earlier. This had led by 1858 to the "opening" of Japan to the West: the signing of treaties with Townsend Harris that provided for commercial exchange and rights of extraterritoriality for American citizens in Japan.)

In post-World War II Japanese scholarship, conventional practice has been to refer to cultural and artistic developments through

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the use of such terms as "Edo literature," "Meiji literature," or "Taisho literature," but to use numerals from the Western calendar for specific dates and other chronological references. Yet in *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*, Karatani breaks with this convention, using Japanese imperial reign names to situate many developments chronologically. For example, in stressing that the firm establishment of Japanese literary realism took place only after the leaders of the Meiji Restoration had suppressed a widely supported movement for the establishment of representative political institutions (the Movement for Freedom and People's Rights, referred to hereafter as the People's Rights movement, initiated in 1874), Karatani repeatedly calls attention to "the third decade of the Meiji period," instead of using the more conventional "1890s." In order not to dilute the polemical force of these deliberate usages, we have often translated Karatani's references to the year-periods literally rather than using the Western calendrical references that would have been more familiar to non-Japanese readers.

About the Translation

The original translations of chapters 4, 5, and 6 were prepared by students in a graduate course on postwar Japanese literature and criticism that I taught at Cornell University in fall 1989. Subsequently, I edited and revised each of these chapters. My aim was not only to maintain continuity in the style and terminology used throughout the book, but also to attempt to make sure that the movement of Karatani's argument, and the conceptual resonances between different parts of that argument, would emerge as clearly as possible for readers of the English text. Final responsibility for errors of translation or interpretation, therefore, is mine. Also, to make the rich intertextuality of Karatani's book more easily accessible to non-Japanese readers and scholars, we have extensively annotated the text, providing sources for all citations. (Because of differences in Japanese publishing conventions, these sources and annotations do not appear in the original book.)

After reading the translated manuscript, Mr. Karatani repeatedly expressed his concern that his book, intended for a Japanese audience, would not be accessible to non-Japanese readers. Although he would have preferred to substantially revise and restructure his argument, we were anxious about further delaying

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the appearance in English of the book. Mr. Karatani therefore confined his revisions to the explanatory "afternotes" that we have appended to each of the chapters. These notes help to provide historical context for the chapters and also suggest directions in which Mr. Karatani hopes to develop related arguments in the future. At the urging of Fredric Jameson and Reynolds Smith (our editor at Duke University Press), I have also added a glossary to the text. There, at the risk of considerable oversimplification, I attempt to identify proper names and other important terms.

I am grateful to Ayako Kano for her assistance in the time-consuming process of annotation, and to Reynolds Smith for astutely suggesting that I provide explanations for a number of other terms in the text that might be confusing for nonspecialist readers. In the course of bringing this project to completion, the support of family and friends was also crucial. I would like to thank Asai Kiyoshi, Karen Brazell, William Theodore and Fanny de Bary, Fredric Jameson, Masao Miyoshi, Victor Nee, Naoki Sakai, Etsuko Terasaki, and Phyllis Granoff and Koichi Shinohara for their encouragement. James Fujii and William Haver provided penetrating insights into Karatani's text in the guise of anonymous reader's reports. Coraleen Rooney saw the word processing of the manuscript through to the end, despite the interruption of major surgery. Finally, I would like to express my appreciation to Karatani Kōjin—first, for his patience with a project that extended longer than both of us had foreseen and, second, for the uncommon turn of mind that enabled him to peruse the final translation, less with a proprietary sense of accuracy than with a philosopher's willingness to be led to consider new interpretations of the "original."

Brett de Bary
Ithaca, New York, 1992

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