

Studying Transcultural Literary History

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Offprint

Walter de Gruyter · Berlin · New York

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Janus Came and Never Left: Writing Literary History in the Face of the Other

Starting in the third century BC, Janus, the double-headed god of beginnings and ends, peace and war, pristine life and civilization, circulated widely on Roman coins. Typically, the two heads are joined at the back and look in opposite directions. It would be an anatomical challenge to draw two heads with one brain, which nevertheless face each other. Yet, my reflections on the writing of literary history in the 'double-faced' cultures of Ancient Rome and Early Japan will assume the anatomy of a joined brain, a merged center of consciousness, while seeking out the suspicious glances exchanged between the Greek and Roman faces of the one head that was Roman culture, or the Chinese and Japanese faces of Early Japan. Even if anatomically impractical and iconographically unaccounted for on Roman coins, the confrontation of the 'foreign' – yet indispensable – with an 'indigenous' that was in constant danger of having been, being or going to be contaminated by the 'foreign' face was formative for virtually all cultural manifestations of Ancient Rome and Early Japan.

Why undertake this far-flung comparison? From the cultural historian's bird's eye view there is enough to justify the juxtaposition of Rome with Japan. Both cultures are offsprings of an 'axial' civilization, that is Greece and China, which served as a 'reference culture' in the genres, forms, lexicon, and rhetorical sophistication of their written record; elite cultural literacy was defined as the mastery of a multilingual canon, which in Rome consisted of Greek and Latin and in Japan of Chinese, Sino-Japanese (*kanbun*), and Japanese writings (*wabun*). Still, although scrutiny of the dynamics along the Greco-Roman and Sino-Japanese intercultural axes is historically *de rigueur*, what do we gain from the juxtaposition of the Roman with the Japanese case? Good reasons to justify impossible comparative projects are not scarce. First, introducing a transcultural timeline on both the occidental and the oriental side increases complexity and discourages often all too dichotomist accounts of West versus East; second, similarities in the appropriation of the older

'reference culture' may point towards common patterns about the writing of literary history in double-faced cultures in general. And third, watching specialists deal with their literary traditions is highly instructive for one's own discipline. Comparative work is always the most efficient heuristic machine to harvest academic desiderata *en masse*. All of this is certainly acceptable and valuable, but there is a better, stranger reason, which I will put off to the end of this paper.

Certainly, the differences between Cicero (106–43 BC), the famous politician, orator, and writer, and Ki no Yoshimochi (?–919), one of the compilers of the first imperial collection of Japanese poetry, the *Kokinwakashū* (hereafter *Kokinshū*) are striking. Cicero lived in Late Republican Rome that more than a century before had conquered its motherland Greece, was caught in a double bind between admiration for and triumph over Greece, and at the same time painfully conscious of a 'good old' Latin past prior to the conquest of Greece. Yoshimochi lived at the Heian imperial court in a state which up to the twentieth century never conquered its 'reference culture' China, but throughout led a parallel existence heavily influenced by Chinese culture. The vectors that brought Chinese writing, statecraft, Buddhism, and literature to the archipelago varied between diplomatic envoys from or to the Korean peninsula and the Middle Kingdom, traveling monks in search of the Buddhist Law in China, and merchants of books, devotional objects, and other goods. Again, from the bird's eye view of European cultural history, the destruction of the Greek states and the fall of the Roman Empire enabled various *Renaissances* and *Classicisms* that attempted to retrieve one or both of these lost cultures. In contrast, we might say that the persistence of both the Chinese and Japanese states into the modern period led to periods of Japanese *Reconnaissances* of China, during which the Japanese felt an urge to catch up with recent developments in the Middle Kingdom.

The difference between a history of conquest and, ultimately, fall in the Roman case, and separate histories lingering aside each other up until the modern period in the Japanese case, is reflected in the different linguistic configurations: Cicero lived in a biliterate empire, in which the Roman elite was expected to read, speak, and sometimes write in both Greek and Latin. The education provided by Greek slaves in Rome was routinely supplemented by periods of study in Athens. Although biliteracy did not work symmetrically – Greeks in Greece seldom learned Latin – the cultural flux went both ways. Rome impinged on Greek affairs not only politically but also culturally: *nota bene*, Rome was instrumental in canonizing Attic models of Greek oratory in the first century BC at the expense of the 'Asianist' style.

Premodern Japan could only have dreamt of having an impact on Chinese affairs. After the Korean immigrants that had brought writing to Japan were assimilated, only the few Japanese who had visited China could speak vernacular Chinese. Due to the lack of direct exposure to China, Japanese literature developed a unique trilingual constellation, in which literacy consisted of the mastery of Chinese, Sino-Japanese, and Japanese literary idioms. Sino-Japanese is a highly hybrid language, because, although written in Chinese syntactical order, it encompasses a rich spectrum of registers that are genre-dependent and range from Sino-Japanese poems that could well have been written by a Chinese author to prose diaries that could come close to Literary Japanese. It is impossible to describe this Sino-Japanese 'third space' on pure linguistic grounds. Sociologically, Sino-Japanese functioned as clerical language in both senses of the word: it was the language of the Buddhist clergy and of imperial administration, thereby associated with public, male court-culture and ceremonial protocol. Artistically, Sino-Japanese poetry stood inevitably in competition with Chinese poetry, the royal literary genre on the continent, which probably had a normative, that is Sinicizing, effect; in contrast, the characteristically Japanese genre of court diaries (*kokiroku*) had more leeway to sway towards Literary Japanese.¹

Let us retrace our steps to Cicero and Yoshimochi (see Appendix). Because the cultural flow between China and Japan was virtually a one-way-street and Chinese writers could not talk back to Japanese writings, Yoshimochi had much artistic freedom. His preface is scripted in Sino-Japanese and is much less famous than the other, the Japanese preface to the *Kokinshū*, which became the catechism of Japanese poetics. It is intriguing that the passage that traces the beginning, corruption, fall, and hopeful endurance of Japanese poetry (Appendix, Text 2b), does not occur in the famous Japanese preface, but only in Yoshimochi's Sino-Japanese version. That means that Yoshimochi uses Sino-Japanese, the idiom of the 'third space' specific to Japan, to denounce Sino-Japanese

1 Sino-Japanese is a linguistic chameleon, and this quality is still reflected in contemporary Japanese parlance that does not distinguish between 'Sino-Japanese' and 'Literary Chinese,' but calls both 'kanbun' (Han-writing). This traditional conflation has for centuries located Sino-Japanese literature as coequal, even oddly identical, with Chinese literature in a borderless space that engulfs both mother- and daughter-culture. But it has also helped to produce a greater split between a 'quasi-foreign' Sino-Japanese and the 'vernacular' Japanese legacy that has been exploited by Japanese nativists and nationalists since the eighteenth century to build a purified Japanese literary canon. In 2000 the Library of Congress Classification finally recognized 'Sino-Japanese Literature' as a heading separate from Chinese literature and thus destroyed the age-old conflation of 'Chinese' with 'Sino-Japanese' that has enabled many fantasies and ideological moves. Librarians would be delighted to hear that, for once, their reshuffling of the stacks is part of and even a contribution to a major rethinking of Japanese literature as a whole.

literature and to accuse it of having caused the decline of the Japanese poetic tradition, a mishap that the *Kokinshū* anthology sets out to forcefully correct by example. To put it more strongly, this would amount to Cicero writing a poetic treatise in heavily Latinized (to Greeks: devious) Greek denouncing Hellenistic poetry by Latin authors and calling for a revival of pre-Hellenistic *romanitas* – thereby criticizing both the Latin authors that gave in to Hellenistic influence, but indirectly also Greece itself as the culprit of the decline. It is unclear whether Cicero's crime would have consisted of linguistic hubris – self-confidently insisting on a hybrid language that to Greeks could only appear denatured – or vernacular vulgarity. But in any event, such an act would have been more entertaining than imaginable.

Still, Cicero and Yoshimochi seem to propose a curiously similar solution to basic questions they have to face regarding the literary development of their home countries: how does one shape one's own timeline of literary history in relation to the narrative template of the reference culture? How does one compensate for the 'historical flatness' of one's own tradition? To use the narrative template from Greek and Chinese literary history was both tempting and potentially devastating. Yes, one could adopt their poets and successive styles wholesale and treat them as one's own revered and noble prehistory. But that did not solve the question of how to integrate accounts of one's own writers who were neither a mere continuation, nor a completely independent phenomenon. Also, the literary developments in both latecomer cultures were heavily distorted, affected by a time-warp. Roman poetry started out on Hellenistic – that is in Greek terms postclassical – premises. Early Japanese poets picked up on Chinese poetry from the Six Dynasties Period, poetry that itself looked back to a good dozen centuries of thriving poetic production. Both Cicero and Yoshimochi propose similar solutions to resolve both the challenge of belatedness and the perception of the time-warp.

The *Brutus* (see Appendix, Texts 1a and 1b) is a pedagogical dialogue – not by coincidence staged under a statue of Plato at Cicero's residence in Rome – between Cicero, in the instructor role, his friend Atticus and the young Brutus (the later murderer of Caesar), on whom Cicero's hopes for the future of Latin rhetoric rest. Although the dialogue traces the development of Greek and Latin rhetoric by dwelling in more or less detail on the quality of some two hundred and seventy-five orators, most of whom we know nothing about, Cicero emphatically uses the term 'rhetoric' (*eloquentia*) both in the technical sense of 'public oratory,' the cardinal virtue of Roman Republican spirit, as well as in a broader sense, meaning the proper and refined use of language in speech and writing.

Cicero's remarks on Cato constitute a 'climax before the climax'² as Schwindt has called it. In the figure of Cato, Cicero sees the climax of a 'natural history' of Roman oratory that excelled through an *intuitive* use of rhetorical devices. Although the real climax of oratory lies in Cicero's time or – as he insinuates in subtle maneuvers – in himself, this climax is part of the history of 'artificial' rhetoric that slowly matured and developed its sophistication under Greek influence. Cato predates the conquest of Greece, a time that was still unconquered – even forever 'unconquerable' – by the Romans. Within that time narrative, Cato constitutes a miracle without precedent on the Greek side, because he is an exception to the principle emphasized by Cicero that every art needs time to mature and reach perfection. It is ironic that Cato, untouched by rhetorical artifice, intuitively applies rhetorical 'tropes' and 'schemata,' words that Cicero's text spells out in the Greek alphabet and treats with deliberate naïveté (Appendix, Text 1b). Cicero operates on two timelines,³ a naturalized 'old Latin' one symbolized by the Roman miracle Cato, and a refined 'Roman-Hellenistic' one of which he politely considers himself the pinnacle.

Yoshimochi undertakes a similar move. Japanese poetry, so goes the story, existed since the times of the gods and is rooted in the human heart (see Appendix, Text 2a). This is the kind of poetry produced by Kakinomoto no Hitomaro (fl. late seventh century), who himself was gradually deified around Yoshimochi's time. The compilation of a Sino-Japanese poetic anthology during the time of Prince Ōtsu (663-686) constituted a historical fall from primeval grace that can only be recovered by fashioning Hitomaro into a timeless figure beyond historicity, 'striding unrivalled between the past and present' (Appendix, Text 2b). The narrative is adamantly partial in that the songs of the gods and of Hitomaro – which of course came down to us in Chinese characters – are established in a timeless and unmediated realm independent of the depraving influence of Chinese writing that is postponed to the time of Prince Ōtsu. There is no inverted climax here as in the *Brutus*, but the problem of the time-warp of belatedness is solved by introducing a new

2 Jürgen Paul Schwindt, *Prolegomena zu einer „Phänomenologie“ der römischen Literaturgeschichtsschreibung* (Göttingen, 2000), p. 112. While our observations coincide, Schwindt thinks that the figure of Cato serves Cicero to polemicize against the young 'Atticists' who model themselves on classical Attic oratory. This is certainly consistent with the fact that Cicero provocatively places Cato on a par with Lysias, a favorite Attic model, and with Cicero's fierce attack on the Atticists later in the dialogue. But I do think that Cicero's remarks on Cato have more than just rhetorical substance, but claim a climax of Roman oratory that preceded Greek influence.

3 One of the most fascinating aspects of the *Brutus* is the ingenious manipulation of multiple time-frames and time-relations, which I unfortunately cannot discuss here, but which are highly relevant to the topic under discussion.

time-warp, by creating a timeless 'natural' Japanese realm of divine poetry (see Appendix, Text 1a) that precedes and relativizes the foreign influence, which is controlled and limited by its emplotment within history.⁴

It is at double refraction that we face the same problems as Cicero and Yoshimochi. How should we write the literary history of 'double-faced' cultures? Such *explicit* accounts as Cicero's or Yoshimochi's are complex enough in their partisanship, and the image becomes far more complicated once we deal with *implicit* manifestations of Greek and Chinese influences on the poetic and literary practices of Rome and Japan.

Latin Philologists since Quintilian have always studied the implicit manifestations of Greek influence by minutely tracing the dynamics of the 'imitatio auctorum,' the 'imitation of famous authors.'⁵ (Some Latinists might grace theorists of intertextuality who to them seem to pour trendy wine into the old bottles of 'imitatio' criticism with a wise smile). But only in the past two decades have a few brilliant philologists urged scholars to fruitfully integrate the study of allusive practices into representations of Latin literary history. Gian Biagio Conte's *Rhetoric of Imitation* (1986) and his *Latin Literature: A History* (1994) have set the tone in this debate. 'Latin Literary History' was considered a *quantité négligeable* until the beginning of the twentieth century – either because it was considered basically Greek and non-extant or it was disregarded as a merely ancillary discipline.⁶ Stephen Hinds's masterful study *Allusion and Intertext* analyzes 'narratives of literary history' through close readings that revolve around claims of novelty, narratives of decline, or fashioning of 'old' and 'new' poets in

4 Stephen Hinds observes how this pattern could be used for opposite purposes in Latin literature: 'Claims of poetic primacy and innovation in Roman literary history down to the Augustan period are characteristically claims of an epiphany of Hellenic influence. Yet Roman literature is already thoroughly Hellenized from the earliest period of writing to which we have access.' *Allusion and Intertext* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 52. The basic pattern of creating an uncontaminated backdrop (to lament decline or assert novelty) stays the same. Yoshimochi's partisan account has become a truism in Japanese poetics that may indeed be true or at least has legitimized itself within the confines of history. In the excellent *Ōchōgo jiten* edited by Akiyama Ken (Tokyo, 2000), pp. 63 and 200, Kubota Jun and Ōsone Shōsuke, both authorities on Classical Japanese, respectively Sino-Japanese literature, describe the difference between Japanese and Sino-Japanese poetry in much the same terms: while Japanese poetry derives from spontaneous song, almost as an anthropological symptom, Sino-Japanese poetry is an artifice that was 'invented' after the first Chinese books were brought to Japan.

5 Quintilian, of course, commends 'imitatio' as exercise for skillful composition (Book X of his *Institutio oratoria*) not, as relevant here, for interpretation. But his suggestions to produce new texts in this way have been so influential ever since that the key that authors received from Quintilian for composing their works functions also in the opposite direction in the interpretation of the produced works.

6 See Schwindt, *Prolegomena zu einer „Phänomenologie“ der römischen Literaturgeschichtsschreibung*, pp. 22-35.

Latin literature. Although Hinds does not use the term (but labels his project with the somewhat unfortunate term a 'subjectivist literary history'),⁷ he practices what others have called 'immanent literary history' or 'phenomenology' of literary history.⁸

'Immanent literary history' abolishes the distinction between explicit statements about literary history – traditionally called 'criticism' – and implicit practices of it that are minutely traced through subtle self-positionings of Latin authors vis-à-vis Greek (or Latin) precedents. In short, it reads Latin literature not just *qua* literature, but as an enormous writing board on which every inscription constitutes a conscious or unconscious self-positioning towards previous tradition.⁹ Extrapolating from Hinds's chapter on 'narratives of literary history,' authors, schools, and works as organizing headings in a future literary history would be replaced by the various *teleologies*, such as the four issues Hinds discusses in his chapter on literary history. With Cicero and Yoshimochi we barely touched upon one such teleology, the construction of time-lines and ways of dealing with time-warps in double-faced cultures.

'Literary history' would then be the parallel presentation of various teleologies. Literary history would be, put awkwardly, a *teleologography*. The teleologography would include entries such as: narratives of decline in relation to reference cultures; 'querelles' between ancients and moderns; claims to superiority over reference culture and self-ironical moves to compensate for such transgressions; self-fashioning in the guise of the reference culture and acts of sudden disclosure; plotting of indigenous tradition along a trajectory of the oral/spontaneous/natural/eternal versus plotting of the reference culture along a line of the written/crafted/artificial/historical; binary juxtaposition of mother and daughter cultures,¹⁰ functions of code-switching in literary texts, and much

7 Stephen Hinds, *Allusion and Intertext*, p. 123.

8 See Ernst A. Schmidt (ed.), *L'histoire littéraire immanente dans la poésie latine* (Geneva, 2001) and Schwindt, *Prolegomena zu einer „Phänomenologie“ der römischen Literaturgeschichtsschreibung*. In contrast to his phenomenological approach Schwindt chooses to discuss only the texts that have traditionally been considered as a scattered subgenre of 'literary history,' thus maintaining the distinction between literature and criticism that an immanent historiography would abolish.

9 In this sense, 'immanent history' is a model for writing the literary history of any tradition, not just the biliterate ones at stake in this paper.

10 Most prominent on the Roman side are paired biographies of famous Greek and Roman political and cultural figures as preserved in Nepos, Suetonius, and Plutarch. Most interesting on the Japanese side are Heian anthologies that variously juxtapose Japanese, Sino-Japanese, and Chinese poems such as the *Shinsen Man'yōshū*, the *Chisatoshū* and the *Wakan rōeishū* with its sequel.

more.¹¹

Certainly, a hermeneutics that historicizes cases of 'imitatio' into narratives of literary history is dauntingly indeterminate. We cannot always distinguish an accidental 'confluence' from an intentional 'reference' to use Richard Thomas's useful terminology.¹² An 'immanent' literary history is demanding, because it asks us to be productively paranoid about the return of tradition within tradition and the building of tradition out of tradition. Should we not, as a thought experiment, read Virgil's *Aeneid* for once while trying to unthink the existence of Homeric epic? Would it make sense? What other sense would it make? (This is a foolish, yet helpful exercise when working with ancient traditions where many sources have been lost.)

Also, we face the challenging task of tracing 'imitatio' across language barriers, a situation in which the tracing of similar lexical or syntactical structures may fail, but a fall-back on 'tropes,' 'themes,' or 'images' may be too vague to identify an allusive gesture.¹³ Attitudes towards crossing language borders are largely determined by the politics of the field. 'Imitatio' that straddles Greek and Latin is treated as astonishingly unproblematic, while it is little explored between Sino-Japanese and Japanese poetry. In contrast, interferences tend to be exaggerated between Sino-Japanese and Chinese, so that Sino-Japanese literature is held to the Chinese side of the language barrier, as a foreign body ejected from Japanese territory. These observations correlate well with the use of the term 'comparative' for research that includes Chinese, Sino-Japanese and Japanese literature ('wakan hikaku bungaku'). For Latinists it is a matter of course to work with Greek materials and they would hardly ever think of their endeavor as 'comparative.' Scholars of Japanese literature (or of living national traditions of Europe) might prefer to keep their neighbors at a 'comparative' distance. A comparison between the literatures of Ancient Rome and Early Japan is asymmetrical not least due to the radical differences in the respective academic field. Classics, more than any other philology, is a de-nationalized global discipline – at least in the Western

11 I am of course aware that enormous amounts of work has been done on most of these topics, but I suspect that a reorientation of this research along the lines of a *teleologography* would shift its profile and results.

12 Richard Thomas, 'Virgil's *Georgics* and the Art of Reference,' *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 90, pp. 171-98. On the indeterminacy see also Alessandro Barchiesi's reflections in 'Some Points on a Map of Shipwrecks,' in his *Speaking Volumes* (2001), pp. 141-55.

13 In tracing 'imitatio' through language barriers, translation should count as the first type of 'imitatio': e.g., Japanese 'topic poems' take fractions from famous Chinese poems and 'translate' them into a perfectly executed, complete *waka* poem that both *is* and *is not any more* a translation (imagine a 'translation' of only the final couplets of Shakespeare's sonnets into *haiku* form!).

context – to which any scholar can legitimately contribute. In contrast, the historiography of Japanese literature is partly an affair of an extant nation state. It is hard to imagine how the marginalized role of Chinese impact and of the history of Sino-Japanese literature could be brought into focus, because it is conflicted territory for Japanese consciousness and an implicit reproach to current national literary history. Neither is it of great interest to the Chinese, who certainly take pride in their formative historical influence on all of East Asia to a degree that the precise dynamic of this cultural impact that for centuries radiated from the Middle Kingdom becomes not worth pursuing. Last, Western scholars of Japanese literature face problems of legitimacy in their contributions to a 'national' literary history, as does any scholar working in a tradition that is not his or her own.

What would be the alternative to the defensive 'comparative' towards Sino-Japanese literature? Or, more generally, what is the antonym of 'comparative'? As 'comparative' rings of selectiveness and free choice, one antonym would be the 'imperative.' It leaves us no choice to consider two traditions together or not, but is 'imperatively' expected as seems to be the case in classics. This brings us back to Janus's anatomy. Whether looking at each other or avoiding eye contact, the two faces of Janus belong to the same creature. Most disconcertingly, Janus's anatomy changes over time. David Damrosch has proposed relocating our notion of 'world literature' from a set canon of influential texts to an ever expandable store of reading experiences:

World literature is fully in play once several foreign works begin to resonate together in our mind. This provides a further solution to the comparatist's lurking panic: world literature is not an immense body of material that must somehow, impossibly, be mastered; it is a mode of reading that can be experienced intensively with a few works just as effectively as it can be explored extensively with a large number.¹⁴

Even if the body of material that makes world literature is historically and geographically disparate, these texts meet in the mind of the reader of world literature. By plunging into the canons of historically unrelated traditions and providing accounts of East Asian literatures for Western readers that are nourished by our readings in both Western and Eastern canons, these traditions become historically related to our specific present, the 'Jetztzeit,' to use Walter Benjamin's term. With the moment of our parallel exposure to those traditions and our efforts to provide

¹⁴ David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 298-99.

translations, footnotes and reading notes to those who cannot take time to get the linguistic training that allows entering those treasure houses on their own, even unrelated traditions might be dealt with less 'comparatively.' Since the moment that East Asian and Western cultures have historically influenced each other, even the earlier periods that preceded this cultural contact acquire a secondary historical relatedness in the 'Benjaminian' eye of us beholders, the present traders of ancient history and literature. This – and I promised above to spell it out – is the strangest, most fascinating, and most imperative dynamic and motivation of comparative work. Our efforts will undoubtedly have impact on the future of these texts and the texts of the future.

Appendix

Quotations from Cicero, *Brutus* (47 BC)

Text 1a

As for Cato, who of our orators who are around today reads him? Who even knows him? And yet, good heavens, what a man! [...] One should select from [his orations] the passages worth of notice and praise; one will find there all oratorical virtues [...]

Text 1b

The Greeks consider it an embellishment of speech, if they use substitutions of single words, which they call 'tropes' [τροποι] and figures of sentences and speech, to which they give the name of 'schemata' [σχηματα]; it is hardly believable how versatile and distinguished Cato is in the use of both devices. Of course, I am not unaware that he is not yet sufficiently polished as an orator and that one has to seek something more perfected; and that is not strange, since according to the reason of our times he is so antiquated that no older text before him exists that would be worth reading.

Quotations from Ki no Yoshimoshi, Sino-Japanese Preface
to the poetry collection *Kokinwakashū* (AD 905)

Text 2a

Japanese poetry spreads its roots in the soil of one's heart and blossoms forth in the forest of words [...] In the seven Generations of the Age of the Gods the times were pristine and people were pure. Emotions and desires were undivided and Japanese poetry had yet to arise. Only later, when God Susano-o arrived at Izumo, do we have thirty-one syllable poems.

Text 2b

Since the time of Prince Ōtsu lyric and rhyme-prose [Chinese genre] came to be composed; poetic talents admired this practice and succeeded each other. They imported those Chinese characters and transformed our Japanese customs. The ways of the people were completely changed, and Japanese poetry gradually declined. Yet we still had the Illustrious Master Kakinomoto who upheld memories of the divine marvels and who alone strode unrivalled between past and present.