FROM MORALS TO MELANCHOLY:
HOW A JAPANESE CRITIC REJECTED BAKIN AND
LEARNED TO LOVE SHAKESPEARE

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In 1920 the renowned author, playwright, translator and critic Tsubouchi Shōyō (1859–1935) composed a stunning confession, revealing to his readers a life-long sense of failure and insecurity.1 This humorous account of a revered scholar’s quest to mature as a writer provides a detailed view of the destabilizing process of linguistic and ideological conversion associated with intellectual life in Meiji (1868–1912) and Taishō (1912–26) Japan. Writing during the peak of his career, Shōyō describes a struggle of more than three decades to purge his written language of the rhythms, metaphors, and imagery associated with the traditional literature he loved as a child. He recounts the painful transformation to which he committed himself to evolve as a scholar and pioneer of modern literature. This conversion to a thoroughly modern and Western-oriented literary sensibility ultimately involves the wholesale rejection of the self. In rediscovering himself Shōyō reveals the comic nature of his agonized pursuit of literary perfection.

Shōyō’s disdain for his cultural inheritance is so strong that he begins the essay by dismissing a childhood fascination with popular fiction, in particular the works of Takizawa Bakin (1767–1848), as a “pernicious infection” and a debilitating intoxication from which he has never been able to recover. The rest of the essay is largely devoted to recounting the experiences that led to Bakin’s transformation from beloved writer to a source of mental and physical affliction. Shōyō begins by explaining that as a college student he attended lectures in philosophy taught by American instructors at Tokyo University and studied Shakespeare. These courses inspired him to compose a fictional work that he hoped would become a Japanese version of Hamlet. To develop his novel

1 The original essay which I have translated here appears in the Selected Works of Tsubouchi Shōyō (Shōyō senshū, v. 12, pp. 295–303). The title of the essay is given as “Kyokutei Bakin” followed by the parenthetical text “[Around Taishō 9 [1920]].” An earlier translation of this essay appears in my Appraising Genji: Literary Criticism and Cultural Anxiety in the Age of the Last Samurai (SUNY Press, 2006).
depicting the inner struggle of the individual he instinctively turned to more familiar material by borrowing plot devices and characters from a popular work of historical fiction by his favorite writer, Bakin. His best efforts to integrate what he loved from traditional fiction with what he believed to be important in modern literature produced a text that was “inexplicably strange.”

Repeatedly frustrated in his efforts to forge a pleasing literary style, he decides to shun the traditional and familiar in all forms. An initial impulse to criticize Bakin’s moral didacticism eventually results in the sweeping rejection of the dominant conventions of prose composition in Japanese at the time. Imagining that he has managed to liberate himself from traditional style, Shōyō goes so far as to condemn the language in which he composed his own most famous translations and critical essays for its “intolerable phrasing in the style of Bakin.” This radical renunciation of the familiar, extending to his own prose, leads to an unbearable sense of alienation. His forced conversion to superior literary tastes complete, Shōyō discovers that he is no longer able to write in his native language. He confesses that the decision at the height of his career to abandon all hope of becoming a modern novelist is rooted in this lifelong infatuation with Edo period melodramas and lyric prose rich in Confucian and Buddhist morality. He attributes this failure to his inability to exorcise “Bakin’s ghost” from his literary imagination.

At the end of the essay he explains how the “struggle” (lit. sutoraguru) he has just described led to his role in contributing to the development of a modern vernacular style of prose (gembun itchi) in Japan. His remarks suddenly shift in tone from humble confession to the dicta of a respected scholar of literature. He argues that other influential authors and critics of the time, including Ozaki Kōyō (1868–1903) and Futabatei Shimei (1864–1909), experienced a similarly painful process of linguistic and spiritual conversion.

Shōyō is best known for his translation of the complete works of Shakespeare into Japanese between 1884 and 1928. His “The Essence of the Novel” (Shōsetsu shinzui, 1885–86) is widely considered to be the first substantial treatise on contemporary literary criticism in Meiji Japan. The engaging description of his struggle to reject traditional

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2 Surveys of modern Japanese literature consistently refer to the appearance of Shōyō’s treatise “The Essence of the Novel” as the beginning of Meiji fiction. Recent