

After the Apocalypse of Literature: A Critique of Karatani Kojin's Thesis of the End of Modern Literature

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Abstract

Based on his clear understanding of the extinction of the form, role, and formative conditions of modern literature, Karatani Kojin asserts that modern literature has ended and further has fallen into the realm of entertainment.

Karatani's discussion of the end of literature owes a lot to the Hegelian concept of "the end of art" and Kojève's notion of history. Karatani's end-of-literature thesis means that a historically determined possibility of knowledge and morality can no longer be realized in literary works. As we all know, however, a great number of works of art produced after Hegel's end-of-art declaration have significance in our culture. Another important cornerstone of Karatani's explanation is Kojève's view of what comes after the end of history, as well as the animalization of humanity. According to Kojève, the end of history means that human society no longer negates the given world. However, this paper argues that despite the overriding trend of human animalization, man still has the impulse to negate the given nature, culture, and the self that constitute them. Nevertheless, Karatani's thesis should be regarded as a challenge for us to think more seriously about the reasons why literature itself must exist.

Keywords: Karatani Kojin, modern literature, the end of modern literature, Hegel, Kojève

Literature after Modern Literature

As such masterpieces of literary criticism as Karatani Kojin's *Nihon kindai bungaku no kigen* (Origins of Modern Japanese Literature) illustrate, literature is historically bound. This is so in the sense that literature does not exist independently, possessed of innate characteristics and unchanging elements, but is formed by and is contingent on historical conditions that constantly change. Although a certain use of words regarded as "literary" is universal and perennial among human beings as sign-using animals and, therefore, is found in any human culture at any time, the category of literature holds meanings and values only when it is determined by a historically formed mode of human life. As we all know, literature, which is today recognized as a special category or kind of writing constituting a part of cultural production, has been produced alongside the distinct characteristics of modern culture. The development of print culture, growth of nationalism, and the modern notion of the self are often mentioned as indispensable conditions for the production of literature in the modern sense. Considering that literature is predicated on history, it is foolish to believe that modern literature will continue forever in the same form as it was initially created. Cultural change that has occurred on a global scale since the second half of the twentieth century shows that the historical conditions that made modern literature possible have almost disappeared. Printed books yielded their leading position in cultural production and adoption to new media such as radio, television, cinema, video, and the Internet. The independence, integrity, and unity of nation-states have weakened as a result of globalized economy, politics and technology. Among the greatest innovations achieved by twentieth-century literature and philosophy, the belief in a unified, constant, and sovereign self has been replaced by the notion of a fragmented and constituted self. Therefore, it does not seem totally unreasonable to say that modern literature has already come to an end or will end in the not so distant future.

Although it has never been declared explicitly, the conception that modern literature has ended in Korea lurks in many of the

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remarks about the crisis of Korean literature over the last ten years or so. One of the best sources for understanding the present status of Korean literature with respect to the misery of modern literature is Kim Uchang's "Munhak-gwa segye sijang" (Literature and the Global Market), which was presented at the first Seoul International Forum for Literature held by the Daesan Foundation in 2000. In the paper, Kim reviews how global capitalism affects literary production in various regions under its influence, particularly, in non-Western latecomer capitalist economies with a colonial legacy like Korea's. He also talks about the damage to autonomy, loss of interest in the totality of life, and a thwarted subjectivity in the capacity to construct an imaginary world. It goes without saying that autonomy, totality, and subjectivity are epistemological and aesthetic principles of modern literature, and in this sense, Kim thinks that the weakening of literature in Korea is, in nature, equal to the decline of modern literature itself. He asks whether Western realism, a modern form of literature that embodies autonomy, totality, and subjectivity, fits into the experiences of the non-Western world, including Korea; he also remarks that the demand for realism has dwindled in Korean literature with its incorporation into the global capitalist market. Korea's particular experience of the market economy as a semi-peripheral country in the capitalist world system seems to have widened the gap between the ideal of modern literature and the reality of Korean literature beyond the point of reconciliation. Thus, Kim cannot avoid the suspicion that the irony of post-modernism, despite his disagreement with it, might be the only possibility left for Korean literature.¹

When Kim made his presentation at the Seoul International Forum for Literature, Karatani was also among the panelists. Karatani's presentation was part of a manuscript that would be published as *Transcritique*, but the issue he raised in an interview by Korean newspaper reporters addressed the "end of literature." Saying that literature, as he understood it, was something conditioned by what Kim called subjectivity, i.e., modern literature, he declared that

1. Kim (2001, 308).

literature in that sense came to an end in Japan for the 1990s. He added that although literary works were still produced in large quantities in Japan, they meant nothing, and for that reason he stopped practicing literary criticism and launched the New Associationist Movement (NAM). Indeed, among Karatani's works that came out after the release of *Shūen o megutte* (On the End) in 1990, the amount of literary criticism was sharply decreased, as if proving his lack of interest in contemporary literature. However, in *Nihon seishin bunseki* (A Psychoanalysis of Japan) published in 2002, he gives the impression of his return to literary criticism by illustrating the theoretical core of the NAM with his analysis of short stories by Akutagawa Ryūnoske, Kikuchi Kan, and Tanizaki Jun'ichirō. He writes in the epilogue that "maybe I am a natural born critic", expressing his surprise at the fact that he produced another book of literary criticism without the intention of doing so.² Yet his admission of his natural inclination to criticism is one thing and his declaration of the end of modern literature is another. His belief that modern literature has ended and, with it, the age of literature, is expressed squarely in *Kindai bungaku no owari* (The End of Modern Literature), a speech he gave first at Kinki University in 2003 that has since become a sensation in Korea as well as in Japan.

Undoubtedly, Karatani's claim about the end of modern literature is a valid and useful hypothesis. It is based on a clear understanding of the characteristics acquired by modern literature under specific historical conditions and a precise judgment of their decline. He notes that the extinction of the form, role, and formative conditions of modern literature, particularly novels, is a universal phenomena in the contemporary world, as evidenced by completion of the political and ideological role of "nation-building," desertion of objective third-person narration in novels like the geometric perspective employed in painting, the decline of the status of the novel in national and global

2. Karatani (2002, 212). The epilogue is not included in the Korean translation of the book, whose title *Ilbon jeongsin-ui giwon* (Origins of the Japanese Psyche) is an absurd twist on the original.

mass culture due to the growth of new media technology and culture, and the spread of a social psyche not in search of the “modern self” or autonomous subjectivity. But, what is especially interesting to me is not his comments on the process and symptoms of the demise of literature, but his assertion that having completed its role, literature has fallen into the realm of entertainment. Even if modern literature has ended, I do not think it true that all the reasons for assigning meaning and value to literary writing have evaporated. Setting aside postmodern literature in the English-speaking world, it is theoretically possible to acknowledge the continuation of literary writing even after the end of its modern form. Actually, Karatani himself once sensed the possibility of a literature that was different from modern literature—in the narrative works of Nakagami Kenji, Tsushima Yūko, Murakami Ryū, Murakami Haruki, and Takahashi Ken'ichiro. However, it might not have been as important to him as the imminent death of modern literature and his plans for a resistant social movement based on the re-reading of Kant and Marx. In *The End of Modern Literature*, he casts a negative view of the significance of literature, regarding involvement in literature as a mere production of commodities for the entertainment market or a practice of socially insignificant esoteric practice. His argument that literature after the end of its modern form is trivial affords us a glimpse of the depth of his despair over contemporary Japanese literature on the one hand, but one might wonder if it may not be an overgeneralization of personal or local experience on the other.

Karatani's speech on the end of modern literature has generated wide repercussions in Korea since its Korean translation was published in a literary magazine³ and later, when a Korean translation of his book in which a revised version is included came out. His critical judgment of literature seemed to have drawn the attention of the Korean literary world, especially, of critics, because his observations on the rapidly diminishing influence of literature in Korea provided

3. Karatani (2004).

grounds for his argument about the end of modern literature.⁴ I, as a critic, may not be the only one who feels compelled to reflect while listening to him refuse to accord any significance to the commitment to literature, sometimes in a dismissive tone, in the face of direly needed political practice. In Korea, the response to his end-of-literature thesis has been typically that modern literature, in the sense of how he defined it, has not yet ended. This may be a correct diagnosis, in view of the ongoing politicization of literature in Korea. However, among new trends in Korean literature, there might be unrecognized symptoms or sign that the modern form of literature has ended or is ending in Korea. If people believe that “doing” literature is not yet a trivial act in Korea, they might as well question why literature has to exist at all, rather than insist on an ideal form of modern literature and condemn the incompetence and corruption of literary groups, or exert themselves to find the evidence of the modern still alive in contemporary Korean literature. In fact, faced with the current state of the end of modern literature, the numbers of critics carrying their conviction about the remaining, new, or unchanging significance of literature are no less than that of those engaged in the eschatological envisioning of the verbal art. Susan Sontag expressed a firm belief in the value of literature by saying that literature was and still is “a passport to enter a larger life, that is, the zone of freedom”⁵ in her acceptance speech for the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade awarded by the Association of German Publishers and Booksellers in 2003 (Other past recipients of the prize include Ernst Bloch, Max Frisch, Vaclav Havel, and Mario Vargas Llosa). Kim Uchang did not overlook the persistent demand for realism or magical realism in the above-mentioned paper. Yet Karatani's thesis, which calls for a cool-headed understanding of why the age of literature has ended, should be regarded as a challenge for us to think more seriously about the reasons why literature must exist.

4. Karatani (2006, 48). Hereafter, citations of the book are made in this paper by noting in parentheses the page numbers in the Korean version.

5. Sontag (2004).

The End of Art and Its Double Meaning

How should we regard the fact that a critic who profoundly confirmed the beginning of modern Japanese literature just as strongly declared its end without lingering or reminiscing over it? Karatani's book *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature* might have been a silent prediction of its end. In psychoanalysis, the cause is found *a posteriori* in the consequence, often as a symptom; similarly, in history, the beginning of a phenomenon is traced back from the end through recollections. Karatani might have implicitly found the limit of its possibilities, i.e., the end of modern Japanese literature in understanding the structure of the *a priori* consciousness that made it possible in the first place. This critical work, which was published in 1980 when discourse on postmodernism began to gain momentum in Japanese literary circles, was acclaimed as an outstanding piece in Japanese postmodernist criticism because of its clear departure from the hegemonic narrative of modern Japanese literature which has naturalized its conventions. Karatani's effort to historically contextualize modern Japanese literature shares many things in common with French post-structuralist philosophy, which is a major theoretical source of critique of modernity. For example, his "semiotic disposition" or "epistemological construct," which he uses to refer to the forgotten historicity of modern Japanese literature, is similar to Michel Foucault's "epistémé." Just as Foucault argues that truth is determined by a conceptual system or discursive framework that formulates its statement, Karatani asserts that truth claims of modern literature—e.g., subjectivity/objectivity, romanticism/realism, and so on—are established by a semiotic or epistemological structure that he calls "landscape." To understand the *a priori* structural conditions of modern literature is, from another standpoint, to comprehend its inherent nature of regularity, finiteness, and closure. Whether modern literature continues or has ended depends on how its temporal modalities are recognized.

Yet *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature* and *The End of Modern Literature*, which are twenty or so years apart, contain differences

in their mode of critique that are impossible to ignore. While the former is quite Foucaultian, the latter is rather Hegelian. In the latter, he reiterates his ideas already presented in the former on the originating function of the unity of speech and writing, the relations between modern literature and the nation-state, and the modern self derived from Christian asceticism. But his framework is not a Foucaultian, anti-historicist theory of knowledge, but a historical philosophy of man in the tradition of Hegel and Kojève. Karatani's discussion of the end of literature owes a lot to Kojève's notion of history based on a humanistic and existentialist reading of Hegel. This is why one is reminded of Hegel's famous end-of-art thesis when listening to Karatani's claim about the end of modern literature. The core of the Hegelian thesis is that art no longer fulfilled the role of manifesting truth. According to Hegel, art made truth appear in the sensual form of art only during an age of human history, which is that of ancient Greece. After that, the function of manifesting truth was ceded to religion (Christianity) and then, to philosophy. Hegel holds that although works of art continued to be produced through the Christian era and beyond, art ceased to be the highest organon of truth and, therefore, came to an end. Although Karatani does not use the key terms of Hegel's aesthetics, such as truth, idea, and spirit, he makes clear the values that correspond to them and guarantee the priority of literature in modern culture. They involve "a possibility of knowledge and morality, one different from, but better than those in philosophy and religion, which was discovered by modern aesthetics in the novel that had provided no more than the reading materials for sensual pleasure." In a more specific historical context, they constitute the function of informing the "nation" (Karatani 2005, 51). Therefore, his end-of-literature thesis means that the historically determined possibility of knowledge and morality can no longer be realized in literary works.

Karatani's lecture on the end of modern literature did not mark the first time he made Hegelian reflections on the fate of Japanese literature. Two of his essays on Ōe Kenzaburo, published in the late 1980s, offer textual interpretations with active use of Hegelian

notions, and attempt a phenomenological depiction of the experiences of Japanese consciousness as well. "A Circle of Identity," in which he deals with Oe's *Letters for the Memorable Year* (1987), focuses on the mode of literary expression that runs parallel to the Hegelian notion of absolute knowledge, that is, the state of perfect self-identity reached by a conscious subject after going through stages of depending on or relating with what it is not. According to Karatani's interpretation, the feelings of "the old man" "wrapped up in a strangely calm sorrow," which characterizes Ōe's first-person narrator, is identical to the state of absolute consciousness beyond the confines of intuitive and aesthetic consciousness. Furthermore, the narrator's self-reflections made in the form of dialogue with a man he calls Mr. Gi are similar to the movement of internalization in which the entire experience of consciousness converges with the general and the necessary. Karatani views the old man's wisdom in Ōe's novel as a form of self-consciousness parallel to the "end of history," in the sense that it eliminates all particularities and contingencies and brings all historical experiences into the whole.⁶ His view of history implicated in Ōe's work is captured more clearly in "Ōe Kenzaburo's Allegory." A key point of his argument focused on the novel *Manen gannen no futtoboru* (*The Football Game in the First Year of Manen*) is that it is an allegorical work containing all the possibilities of modern Japan. Regarding the valley in the village, which is haunted by the memories of a peasant uprising in the first year of Manen and causes two brothers conflict and anxiety, as a "discursive space of modern Japan," he locates and analyzes a complex drama of consciousness and action along the principal axes of confrontation between the West and Asia and between state power and civil rights. What he sees in the narrative of *The Football Game in the First Year of Manen* is a complete recovery of all the possible forms of political consciousness that are historically determined by modern Japan. Thus, he writes, "It can be said that Ōe tried to invoke modern Japanese history in its 'totality' and 'salvage' it. . . . Yet, by doing so,

6. Kojin (1990, 117-135).

quite unexpectedly, the end of 'modern literature' in Japan was declared."⁷

It is not easy to see how accurate it is to observe the contemporary scene of Japanese literature along the line of Karatani's Hegelian notion of the end of literature. Contestable is his claim that the "epistemic and moral possibility" of literature has expired with Oe and Nakagami Genji, whom he regards as symbolic of the demise of modern Japanese literature. Of course, advocates of Japanese postmodern literature would see this as an exaggeration. Since, for Karatani, the epistemic and moral possibility of literature is, from the outset, established with regard to the end or goal of modernity, however, his idea of the disappearance of that possibility is not illogical. The problem is not his indifference to or non-recognition of postmodern Japanese literature, but his teleological thinking about history and literature, which seems to be an underlying factor of this view. From the viewpoint of a *telos* that is assumed to make the history of a society rational and to give its culture a wholeness, and also, from that of the development of self-consciousness toward the realization of the *telos*, literature has only a temporally delimited significance regardless of its own history—this is the idea of literature made possible by Hegel's philosophy of art. One of the basic assumptions of Hegel's philosophy of art is that a movement from sensory and concrete perception to conceptual and abstract thinking is necessarily produced by the demand for a more complete grasp of truth. This is also how consciousness becomes pure and absolute by overcoming its dependence on the physical world and acting on its own principles. From the "from the sensory to the conceptual" sequence is derived Hegel's historical sequence, i.e., the sequence of "art-religion-philosophy" in the history of civilization, and of "symbolic-classical-romantic" in art history. In Hegel's philosophy, art has no autonomous and perennial

7. Karatani (1990, 74). Karatani's two essays on Oe are also found in the recent Iwanami edition of his writings (2004). Please note that they are different from their earlier versions in *Shūen o megutte* (*On the End*), and some parts were revised, including this quotation.

existence as a form of manifesting truth. Croce's comment that Hegel's theory of art is "a funeral oration" for art is quite to the point.⁸ Drawing attention to the representations of modern Japan in its self-realization through self-consciousness by subsuming the thematics of Oe's novels into a Hegelian conceptual system, Karatani seeks a philosophical, not an artistic, truth. His criticism seems to reiterate the Hegelian belief in the superiority of conceptual and abstract thought.

Today, to speak of the end of art in a Hegelian way is not only counter-intuitive, but also inconsistent. We all know very well that a great number of works of art produced after Hegel's end-of-art declaration are significant to our culture. It may not be far-fetched to say that in the post-Hegelian period, art takes the place of religion in secularized society instead of being replaced by it, and art complements philosophy in post-enlightenment culture without being superseded by it. It is right to see that art seeks truth in its own way rather than taking the unified epistemological path towards truth, along with religion and philosophy. In fact, Hegel was not totally unaware of the autonomous possibility of art and, in explaining the change that caused the end of romantic art, wrote:

Bondage to a particular subject matter and a mode of portrayal suitable for this material are, for artists today, something past. Therefore, art has become a free instrument that the artist can wield in proportion to his subjective skill in relation to any material of whatever kind. Thus, the artist stands above consecrated forms and moves freely of his own account, independent of the subject matter and mode of conception in which the holy and eternal was made visible to human comprehension.⁹

What this implies is that the end of art has absolutely no relationship

8. Croce (1958, 302).

9. Hegel (1996, 423). I modified the Korean translation of the passage, based on the English translation of *Hegel's Aesthetics* (trans. T. M. Knox, Oxford University Press, 1975, 605).

with the apocalyptic vision. This means that art freed itself from the shackles of socially approved subjects and forms and came to regulate itself. The end of art is, thus, its own self-liberation. Progress made in art from the nineteenth century, indeed, resulted from a variety of bold explorations and experiments, which would have been impossible had it failed to gain sovereignty. Art and literature need not be seen as having a bleak future—i.e., only for entertainment—even after fulfilling specific, historically defined goals.

Arthur Danto, a critic who holds a Hegelian view on the philosophical problems of art, thinks that art would end if it internalized its own history, i.e., when art's awareness of its own history becomes a part of its nature. Art comes to an end in the realm of absolute knowledge that it reaches in its own history, not in the history it participates in with religion and philosophy. In this realm, "Having absolute freedom, art seems only a name for an endless game it plays with its own concept." Freedom of art, which has reached an extreme today, is both the origin of innovations found in Western modernist art and the force that is driving it into anomic chaos. Drawing a caricature of the freedom of art, Danto parodies Marx, "you can be an abstractionist in the morning, a photorealist in the afternoon, and a minimal minimalist in the evening."¹⁰ Autonomous art produces standards to define itself, but it also destabilizes those definitions. Since modernism, the distinction between art and kitsch and between avant-garde art and commodity aesthetics has blurred. The idea that one can do anything in the name of art is identical to the idea that one cannot do anything. One irony of autonomous art is that it must be connected to something else in order to remain as such. This is why in Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, which reveals a deep understanding of the predicament of modern artists, the composer Adrian Leverkühn makes a deal with the devil for compositional inspiration. Postmodern literature should recognize its freedom and at the same time, find something worth sacrificing its freedom for. In this sense, Karatani's statement, which

10. Danto (1986, 16, 114, 205).

reminds us of the “special value” of literature in its modern form, namely, its political and ideological role, is not an ordinary one (Karatani 2005, 43).

Humanity among the Happy Animals

Karatani's end-of-modern-literature thesis is based not only on his judgement of the uselessness of the form (third-person realism in the novel) and the role (basis for nation formation) of modern literature but also on the observation that “ethos,” a critical element of its existence, is extinct. This ethos, which he seems to regard as identical to the psychological energy of modern literature, refers to an individual's desire to live a social and moral life in accordance with their rational judgement. This attitude, in which the most important norms are “interiority” and “subjectivity,” corresponds to what is often called “individualism.” He finds the prototype of individualistic morality, which emerged simultaneously with modern literature in Meiji Japan, in Kitamura Tōkoku's well-known idea of *ren'ai* (love). Tōkoku believed that there is a moment in *ren'ai* in which the couple finds a spiritual relationship (love), which is different from a physical one (lust), and transcends the secular to consummate it. In expounding on the ideal love, he articulated individuals' free will to formulate themselves against the moral customs of society. Karatani, on the one hand, juxtaposes the autonomous individual or “modern self” against “*risshin-shusse*” (literally, self-realization and social advancement) attitude of the younger generations of Japan, which began to influence them from the Meiji period, and, on the other, connects the characteristics of interiority or “secular abstinence” to the ethos of worldly success (Karatani 2005, 72, 82). It is quintessential of Karatani, a master of *Ideologiekritik*, to perceive the ambiguity of the autonomous individual in relation with the *risshin-shusse* conformism established in Japanese society under industrial capitalism. No matter how paradoxical individualism is, however, the more important thing is that the moral principles of modernity, which are indispensable to modern lit-

erature, disappeared after the breakdown of the bubble economy in postmodern Japanese society. Borrowing David Riesman's terminology for American society of the 1950s, Karatani calls contemporary Japanese society based on mass production and mass consumption a society of “other-directed” human types, or that of “free-floating people with no subjectivity (mass)” (Karatani 2005, 70).

Karatani tries to understand the characteristics of modern Japanese society with a special focus on conformist mass psychology and explain them in light of the philosophically interpreted historical reality of human beings. An important cornerstone of his explanation is Kojève's view of what comes after the end of history. Thinking that history is a struggle for the state in which each individual is recognized as equal, Kojève asserts that if history ends, humans will disappear with it, by which he means a return to a purely natural way of life. “In post-history, humans would construct edifices and works of art as birds build their nests and spiders spin their webs, would perform musical concerts after the fashion of frogs and cicadas, would play like young animals, and would indulge in love like adult beasts.” Kojève thinks that, in a sense, the animalization of humans already occurred in the “classless society” of the United States during the 1950s. However, to live as happy animals is not the only possibility left with humans of the post-historical period. Noting the traces of snobbery remaining in the culture of the rich and privileged of Japan since the Edo period (e.g., *noh* theater, the tea ceremony, and the art of flower arrangement), he says that snobbism “created disciplines negating the natural or animal given which in effectiveness far surpassed those that arose in Japan or elsewhere from ‘historical’ action.” Snobbery, which urges one to live according to totally formalized values and, in extreme cases, even commit gratuitous suicide, is the exact opposite of the return to “animality.” Thus, he predicts, “Every Japanized post-historical period would be specifically human.”¹¹ In discussing the revival of Edo snobbery under Japan's

11. Kojève (1947, 436-437). This famous epilogue added to the second edition of the *Introduction*, which contains Kojève's thoughts on post-historical humanity, is

economic prosperity, however, Karatani regards it as if it were an outcome of the animal state of the Americanized world, treating it the same as the non-subjective customs of Japanese mass society (Karatani 2005, 72-73). This interpretation is far from what Kojève intended. Nonetheless, it is obvious that Karatani shares with Kojève a bleak outlook on the death of man that will come with the end of history.

Kojève's end-of-history thesis is not just a product of intuition into seemingly end-of-the-world phenomena; it is based on his interpretation of the historical experiences of humanity in view of what is believed to be the nature of humanity as a whole. According to Kojève, the humanness of man comes from self-consciousness, i.e., the awareness that the "I" is different from or even in conflict with the non-"I." The essential force that forms and reveals the "I" is found in desire. Desire causes man to reject the given as it is and act to destroy, transform, or assimilate with it, i.e., engage in a negating action. For Kojève, truly human negativity originates from the desire for recognition by others. This is because "Desire directed toward another Desire, taken as Desire, will create, by the negating and assimilating action that satisfies it, an 'I' essentially different from the animal 'I.'"¹² The human action of conquering the natural given and transforming themselves in social relations is called historical by Kojève. Human actions to transform nature to meet their needs through labor and to abolish the determination of people by class have engendered countless wars, terrors, and violence, and from this, a universal recognition of all individuals, which is a fundamentally Christian ideal, has been realized. Therefore, that history has ended

omitted in the Korean translation of its German version (Kojève 1981), but it is included in the English version (Kojève 1969). The English version is an excerpt from the original French work edited by Raymond Queneau.

12. Kojève (1947, 5). Karatani ignores Kojève's conception that the desire for recognition is truly human, in other words, it engenders a non-natural "I" or a "free historical individual," and treats it as a trait of the non-subjective and conformist mass psyche. Equating the Hegelian-Kojévian concept with that of Riesman is not very persuasive, though it may be an expression of the implicit assumption that the two are not different things in post-history.

means that human society has reached the stage where all desires are completely satisfied and therefore no longer requires having to negate the given world. Confining it to the sphere of politics, which is what happened with the establishment of the universal and homogeneous nation—universal in the sense that the entire globe is under a zone of influence and homogeneous in the sense that the class system of master and slave has disappeared—which recognizes the absolute value of individuals.

The global change that has occurred since the second half of the twentieth century, which may be dubbed "Americanization"—from the collapse of communism in Russia and the Eastern Bloc and the victory of liberal democracy to the emergence of consumer masses that transcend national and class boundaries, to the prosperity of the mass culture industry as represented by Disneyland—seems to make Kojève a brilliant prophet. In a similar bent, Francis Fukuyama, who expounded on the human tragedy accompanied by the victory of liberal democracy by applying Kojève's thought together with Nietzsche's philosophy, was recently the source of enormous repercussions. However, it is impossible to agree with Kojève's notion of history unless we disregard the obvious fact that since the second half of the twentieth century, the world has witnessed the globalization of the American way of life but failed to see the end of the struggle for hegemony in international and social relations. The numerous anti-hegemonic political and cultural struggles that have taken place since then have led people to doubt his notion and even its philosophical foundations. Kojève presupposes that man possesses a universal desire (i.e., for recognition) that can be satisfied in principle, but this claim is difficult to support. Since Lacan, psychoanalysis has justly restored the libidinous origin of human desire, which is absent in Kojève's theory, and stresses the insatiability of desire by identifying its myriad substitute forms in human language and culture. Psychoanalysis shows that desire is not a homogeneous unity that provides a rational path for human behavior, but a complex of passions that cannot coexist or be reconciled with each other. That said, the notion of human animalization may be a strategy to "otherize" the

multi-facetedness of humanity and the multiplicity of desires in the epistemological structure of humanity's universal desire. Likewise, Japan, being a haven of snobbery, might be a self-reflective illusion that universal humanism (based on the Western experience) creates in the face of a non-Western reality.¹³

In Karatani's Kojévian view, the animalization of humanity is fatal to culture. Culture ceases to be an expression of the negativity that makes man human and becomes a mere instrument for them to accept life as given and enjoy it. This is what Karatani means when he says that in Japanese consumer society, novels will be something like *yomihon* (entertaining reads) and *ninjobon* (love stories) of the Edo period. However, if the assumption of the satiability of desire is not accepted, a simultaneous retrogression in human existence and culture will not take place. As a matter of fact, Kojève alludes to the insatiability of desire in constructing his theory, despite his intentions. For instance, he says that "Desire taken as Desire—i.e., before its satisfaction—is but a revealed nothingness, an unreal emptiness," and here desire is a sheer force of negativity that has no teleological structure from the outset. According to this concept of nothingness or emptiness, there is no reason to believe that desire has a predetermined course of progression.¹⁴ It is, thus, not strange that Kojève began to talk about the possibility of anti-animalistic humanity, i.e., snobbery, saying he came to fundamentally change his thinking after his visit to Japan in 1959. The notion of human being who lacks neg-

13. In his comment on Japanese allusions in films like Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, Fredric Jameson remarks, "as with Elizabethan visions of Spain, or the Soviet Union for us yesterday, the now obligatory Japanese reference also marks the obsession with the great Other, who is perhaps our own future rather than our past, the putative winner in the coming struggle." Recalling the example of Kojève he adds that "(it) is therefore Japan that is somehow 'the end of history' in store for us." Jameson (1994, 155-156).

14. Kojève (1947, 12). Judith Butler points out that Kojève's notion of desire has no teleological structure while showing that it is different from Hegel's. But she does not touch on the contradiction between the satiability of desire and its non-teleological nature and between human animalization and snobbery in Kojève's theoretical system. Refer to Butler (1987, 61-79).

ativity is likely to be an expression of pessimism that cannot be sustained without an extreme simplification of the reality of human culture. Bataille, one of the attendants in Kojève's seminar on Hegel, focused his attention on the human capacity for negativity, not the animalistic survival of wholly satisfied humans, with regard to the end-of-history thesis. In a letter to Kojève, he writes, "If action ('doing') is—as Hegel says—negativity, then emerges the question of knowing if that negativity of one who has nothing left to do disappears or continues in the form of unemployed negativity (*'négativité sans emploi'*)."¹⁵ Despite the overriding trend of human animalization, man still has the impulse to negate the given nature and culture and the self that are determined by them. Although the remaining negativity does not produce "historical action" by itself, the practice of negativity should be discovered and promoted as long as the idea of human dignity is not abandoned. This is why we cannot shake off our attachment to literature easily even if the cultural forms, including literature, show the symptoms of political decline and social isolation.

The Institution and Anti-Institution of Literature

It seems that not a few people in Korean literary world have the same degree of skepticism and despair about Korean literature as Karatani does of Japanese literature. Clearly is gone the power literature used to have in the past when print media had a relative advantage as a means of public communication and played a leading role in hegemonic and anti-hegemonic mass education and mobilization. There still exists an association of Korean writers which was established in the days when they had both fame and hardship, but it is only one among many civil organizations active today, even one of almost negligible political and social influence. Cultural production for mass consumption has recorded enormous quantitative growth during the

15. Bataille (1973, 369).

last several decades, and literary publication takes up a very small fraction of it. It is not unusual to hear writers talk of the “good old days.” The waning influence of literature is inevitable. With a little more thinking, one realizes that it was the underdevelopment of Korean society to make literature in the past fortunate enough to have such an influence, which was not a warranted reward for standing up to the power inherent in literature. The influence of Korean literature in the past cannot be explained without taking into account such factors as the overall low quality of college learning and education in general, cultural crudeness and technical backwardness of the mass media, the severe control over public communication by a succession of authoritarian regimes, the aged-old legacy of Confucian culture that affords men of letters elite privilege, and a social system characterized by a monopoly of worldly success by a well-educated class. Knowing that Korean literature took root in the soil of such social underdevelopment, it is questionable how great its works are. Kim Uchang remarks that “to what extent realism in the periphery was really pure remains a question,”¹⁶ having in mind the strong political orientation of Korean literature. It seems plausible that the worship of writers and their works in the past is an anachronism difficult to dispel for political and moral reasons. The achievements of writers who produced memorable works in hard times ought to be cherished, but the illusion of contemporary literature as an activity of decadence, facing an imminent grand catastrophe should be rejected. If one believes that there is something more pressingly important than literature, one should quit literature, as Karatani and Kim Jongcheol did. Otherwise, one should think of literature from beyond the fiction of the apocalypse, even if it may mean driving oneself into political powerlessness and social isolation, for literature is regarded with such low value.

Unfortunately, no idea is more unfashionable in the Korean academic and critical circles than the perennial existence of literature. As literature began to lose the authority it had possessed for the past

16. Kim (2001, 308).

several decades because of its close relationship with political movements, and accordingly, as its status as a commodity became more conspicuous, critiques of the usual practices and institution of literature became prevailing trend. Under the influence of critical theories, including feminism, many critics attempted subversive re-readings of canonical writers and texts, and engaged themselves in unraveling the connections between literature, discourse, and power. Karatani's *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature* is one of those books that has inspired and encouraged them to engage in what may be categorically called the demystification of literature. His powerful critique which is, indeed, comparable in brilliance and provocation to Roland Barthes's *Writing Degree Zero*, has served to recognize the historical contingency of concepts and categories of modern Korean literature, which had been taken for granted, and further, to grope for a full-fledged critique of the modernity of Korean culture. I believe *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature* and other works by Karatani, for the most part, have exerted salutary influence on Korean criticism. But it is difficult to deny that they gave rise to vulgar forms of ideological critique as they were widely referred to and applied as part of the trend of critical discourse on modernity. The way in which Karatani deals along with modern literature—which is a combination of “Kantianism devoid of transcendental subjectivity,” to use Paul Ricoeur's term for French structuralism, with critique of ideology—makes literature seen as totally determined by a discursive order in collaboration with the modern power structure. Karatani uses the concept of “institution” to refer to the circumstances under which particular literary conventions such as confession are established and preserved in relation to the social mode of ideological production. This makes the kind of criticism adhering to such terms as freedom, liberation, negation, and truth look like a bad thing—theoretically naïve and politically stupid—especially among young critics and academics.

In every historical period, literature has certain norms that condition its production and reception, and they are, in turn, subject to the influence of the dominant ideas and values of the society in which they belong. We can speak of the production and reception of litera-

ture from the standpoint that it is a lawful action—one regulated, voluntarily or involuntarily, by the goals of society at large. But it is important to note that literature does not follow the same rules as other sub-systems of society. The norms that make up the core of the institution of literature—in its modern form—are subject to skepticism, criticism, and revision, and, to this extent, is indeterminate in nature. That indeterminacy is an important feature built into literature as a result of modernization, which is characterized by the differentiation of the value domains of science, morality and art, the universal approval of the significance of fiction, and the spread of the idea and institution of democracy. In this regard, to speak of the institution of literature means to cover only half of it. When Derrida is asked in an interview, “What is literature?” he replies that it is an “historical institution with its conventions, rules, etc.,” and also is an “institution of fiction” that breaks free of its own rules by having the freedom to say anything. On the paradox of literature, he remarks that it is “a place at once institutional and wild, an institutional place in which it is in principle permissible to put in question, at any rate to suspend, the whole institution. A counter-institutional institution”¹⁷ Karatani regards the unity of speech and writing as the most important institution of literature. His formulation of *genbun itchi* (the unity of speech and writing), which includes a reference to Derrida’s critique of logocentrism and phonocentrism, is the most brilliant part of his archaeological critique of modern Japanese literature. It is hard to believe, however, that modern literature has only played the role of legitimizing, approving, and reinforcing national ideology since it was established under the condition of unity of speech and writing. Some modern literary works may prove to disbelieve, criticize, and deconstruct the style of unity of speech and writing, depending on how they are read. Interestingly, in contrast to Karatani, Derrida once remarked that “the subversion of logocentrism is announced better than elsewhere, today, in a certain sector and certain determined form of ‘literary’ practice,” though this

17. Derrida (1992, 37, 58).

was in France after the 1968 revolution.¹⁸

Karatani is as well aware of the paradox of the institution of literature as anyone else. He clearly discloses the epistemological and ideological determinedness of modern literature and at the same time, reminds us of the existence of a literary consciousness that resists this very nature. Natsume Sōseki is a case in point. In the great writer of Meiji Japan, who placed himself on the cultural borders of Japan and the West, Karatani identifies the consciousness that makes it possible to defamiliarize modern Japanese literature and discovers a literary mode that differs from the realism in a unified style of speech and writing. In Chapter 7, “Extinction of Genre,” of the revised edition of *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*, he discerns the difference in kind between Sōseki’s narrative works and the novel, which is considered the dominant form of modern fiction, and argues that “finding himself at the center of modern literature, Sōseki uttered an objection to it and saw different possibilities.” Karatani’s understanding of Sōseki with recourse to Bakhtin’s genre theory reveals that Sōseki’s fictional works, which constitute a continuation and a reworking of the genres of Edo fiction, created “a moment in transcending the form of modern literature.” Karatani also offers an interpretation that there remains a “sense of the world”—going against modern literature—in Sōseki’s aesthetic way of thinking, according to which modern *shaseibun* (sketching) derived from *haiku* poetry.¹⁹ However, although he perceives the elements of literature that resist its institutionalization, he does not discuss how such elements persist in modern literature and what will become of modern literature as foreshadowed by them. This is probably because he is “really disappointed” with literature and believes that there are other “more pressing things” to do than literary criticism (Karatani 2005, 10). Karatani’s farewell to literature is unfortunate not only for Japanese literature, but also for Korean literature, which has obtained a new model of self-awareness and self-criticism from his work.

18. Derrida (1981, 11).

19. Kojin (2004, 248, 250, 255).

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