Introduction

This book is concerned with the complicated issue of interpretation of Japanese literary texts. By interpretation I mean a consistent effort to make sense of texts—in other words, continuous experimentations toward the construction and reconstruction of meaning. “To make sense” is an odd expression. “Sense” derives from the Latin sensus, which means perception, either aesthetic or emotional. If we want to attribute to this expression the meaning usually given to it (i.e., to explain rationally something that is ambiguously perceived by the senses), we should rather talk about “making sense of sense” and give sense a rational explanation. To make sense is perceptual understanding, an understanding based on perceptions, maybe a fluid understanding, but still a form of understanding. Meaning is more rational than sense. The word “meaning” comes from Middle English menen, which means “to have a purpose, to intend.” And yet, even the German Meinung is nothing but an opinion. The need to interpret came about as a result of making perceptions and opinions acceptable to people other than the bearers of the original perceptions and opinions. When interpreting, one had to mediate—literally—among prices and values (inter-pretium), but, in order to do so, one had to establish a currency against which to judge the value of the merchandise as well as to calibrate the value of other currencies. Like most scholars of my generation and of those before, I was trained in the currency of hermeneutics—a sustained effort to make sense of texts in light of their historicity. It goes without saying that the hermeneutical project that flourished in the nineteenth century became the object of fierce attacks in the twentieth, to the point of risking becoming a fading memory in the twenty-first. By hermeneutics I simply mean attention to interpretation and to the major role that interpretations play in the creation of texts.

The Latin word hermeneutica did not emerge until the seventeenth century, when it was first introduced by a theologian from Strasbourg, Johann Dannhauer (1603–1666), as a necessary requirement of all the sciences that rely on the interpretation of texts. Dannhauer distinguished two kinds of truth: hermeneutical truth, which strives to discover what is meant, and logical truth, which seeks to find out if what was meant is true or not. Al-
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ready in Aristole’s *Peri Hermeneias* (*De Interpretatione*), interpretation dealt

with propositions that could be either true or false. The history of interpre-

tation exhibits a noteworthy obsession with uncovering allegedly hidden

truths—a fact that explains the race among interpreters of later ages to es-

establish complete monopoly over specific interpretations, the truthful ones.

While philological hermeneutics concentrated on the *sensus literalis* or *sen-

sus grammaticus*, in which a mediator (translator) uses linguistic knowledge

to make intelligible what is not understood, what is no longer understood,

theological hermeneutics opened the door to a *sensus spiritualis* based on

allegorical exegesis. This basic scheme opened the doors to searches for all

possible meanings hidden first in the Greek mythological accounts and then

in the West’s sacred text, the Bible. It became possible to say one thing and

mean something else, as the grammarian Pseudo-Heraclitus (fl. first century
A.D.) theorized in describing the rhetorical trope that he called *allegoria*,

allegory. The Greek father of the church Origen (ca. 185–254), found three

levels of biblical meaning: a literal (historical-grammatical), a moral, and a

spiritual (allegorical or mystical) meaning. John Cassian (360–430/435) made

a fourfold distinction between levels of meaning: a literal, an allegorical (or

typical), a moral (or tropological), and an anagogic (or mystical) meaning.

In other words, a reader was invited to find in the literal meaning what hap-

pened, in the allegorical meaning what to believe, in the moral meaning

what he ought to do, and in the anagogic meaning what he was striving

toward.1

In the Middle Ages the cosmos became a puzzle in need of interpreta-

tion. Language itself came to be seen as an act of interpretation pointing at

a deeper truth. In the words of St. Augustine (354–430), the *actus signatus* or

verbal sign was an incomplete translation or faulty interpretation of the inner

word, the *verbum intimum* or *verbum cordis*. In a sense, St. Augustine was

going back to the original hermeneutical problem of finding out the funda-

mental meaning prior to its translation into sense, either literal or spiritual.

The political implications of interpretative acts marked the pages of the his-

tory of the Reformation in which a rejection of allegoresis meant a rejection

of the Pope’s authority as unchallenged interpreter. When Martin Luther

(1483–1546) proclaimed the primacy of scripture (*sola scriptura*) he aimed at

bringing back to the Bible the authority that Roman popes were claiming for

themselves. The problem was that, even if the scripture was the interpreter

of itself, based on its alleged literal meaning (*sensus litteralis*), someone still
needed to explicate this meaning to others. In other words, the notion of an absolutely clear and univocal scripture was absurd, as the Catholics pointed out by noticing marked variations among Protestant interpretations.

The remaining history of hermeneutics coincided with the development of the field of philology — whether one concentrates on Johann Chladenius’ (1710–1759) study of obscurities, Georg Friedrich Meier’s (1718–1777) theory of signs, Friedrich Ast’s (1778–1841) notion of the author, Friedrich Schleiermacher’s (1768–1834) idea of misunderstanding, or August Boeckh’s (1785–1867) minute classifications of the philological sciences in his Enzyklopädie und Methodologie der philologischen Wissenschaften (Encyclopedia and Methodology of the Philological Sciences, posthumous 1877). Boeckh provided the most complete account of methodologies associated with historicism — methodologies that are still very much alive in our daily scholarly practices, including my performance as translator in this book. His vocabulary is immediately recognizable, since I believe most of us are indebted to it, as one can see from Boeckh’s differentiation between (1) a formal theory of the science of philology, which included (1a) the theory of hermeneutics (grammatical interpretation, historical interpretation, individual interpretation, and generic interpretation) and (1b) the theory of criticism (grammatical criticism, historical criticism, individual criticism, generic criticism), and (2) material disciplines of the study of antiquity, which included (2a) generic antiquity (national life, private life, religious art, sciences) and (2b) specific antiquity (public life of the Greek and Romans, their private life, their religious art, and the sciences of ancient times).

Why is this history of Western hermeneutics relevant to the study of Japan? Because so much of modern Japan — including the university system and modern organizations of knowledge — was built on German models. Western hermeneutics had a profound impact on how philology, history, and the humanities came to be articulated in Japan. In other words, whatever goes under the umbrella of Japanese literature, art, religion, history, philosophy, and so on would not exist in its modern form without the paradigms that hermeneutics provided in forcing Japanese authors to talk about Japan with a language that was originally devised for interpreting the Bible. Haga Yaichi (1867–1927), one of the founders of kokubungaku (Japanese national literature), spent most of 1900 studying Boeckh’s Encyclopedia in Berlin. According to Haga, in order to be a good critic and a good interpreter, a philologist must master disciplines that are still well known to us today: bibliographical
studies, studies of manuscripts, paleography, epigraphy, prosody, grammar, archeological material, ancient geography, chronology of ancient history, weights and measures, antiquities, mythology, archeology of the fine arts, ancient philosophy, literary history, and numismatics.  

Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), who is considered one of the major voices in the history of hermeneutics in the twentieth century, challenged traditional views of this discipline, eventually questioning the overall validity of the enterprise. In a “Dialogue on Language between a Japanese and an Inquirer” (“Aus einem Gespräch von der Sprache,” 1959) Heidegger pointed out that already in *Sein und Zeit* (Being and Time, 1927) he had gone beyond Schleiermacher’s general distinction between hermeneutics (“the art of understanding rightly another man’s language”) and criticism (“the art of judging rightly the genuineness of written works and passages”) as well as Wilhelm Dilthey’s (1833–1911) idea of hermeneutics as the theory of the art of interpretation of written artifacts. Heidegger argues that “In *Being and Time*, hermeneutics means neither the theory of the art of interpretation nor interpretation itself, but rather an attempt first of all to define the nature of interpretation on hermeneutic grounds.” Heidegger confesses that eventually he had done away with the concept altogether, since there cannot be a fixed standpoint in what can only be a stop along the way. And yet, even in Heidegger, the project of *Destruktion* is still very much linked to a recovery of authenticity that the interpretative process of Western metaphysics had allegedly hidden from sight and forgotten. The quest for a recovery of the ontological difference — the difference that Being makes to everybody’s life — is still based on interpretative acts that Heidegger increasingly directed toward poetry after the compilation of *Sein und Zeit*. Despite Heidegger’s repeated statements on his attempts to overcome metaphysics and all the disciplines based on metaphysical interpretations of reality, it would be hard to deny the profound impact that theology had on Heidegger’s thought, as he himself admitted.

While in the 1960s Heidegger’s disciple Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) launched a stern defense of hermeneutics in *Wahrheit und Methode* (Truth and Method, 1960), Susan Sontag (1933–2004) waged a fierce war against this most German of all German sciences by stating that “in place of a hermeneutics we need an Erotics of art.” Since then it has become increasingly difficult to talk about hermeneutics, mainly because of its associations with discourses on historicism. These reservations have stemmed
from a naïve reading of hermeneutics in terms of a theory that attempts to make one relive the experiences of the past, as this came to be experienced by authors within past contexts and background. Such a view flattens the richness of the hermeneutic lesson by leveling against its practitioners the charge of an alleged belief in the possibility of putting oneself in the shoes of the dead. This skepticism tends to ignore the validity of one of the major tenets of hermeneutics, which is the impossibility of dealing with either the past or the other without beginning from the self in the present. It is not a question of trying to figure out what went on in the past in abstraction from the present; it is a question of how the present is constantly shaped by the past and how the present shapes our understanding of the past. This applies to newer countries as well, such as, for example, Susan Sontag’s native land, the United States, which makes massive efforts to delete the past in order to live in the utopic promise of an economically prosperous future.

I personally experienced the uneasiness that the topic of hermeneutics raises when in 2003 I organized at UCLA the twelfth annual meeting of the Association for Japanese Studies on the topic “Hermeneutical Strategies: Method of Interpretation in the Study of Japanese Literature.” The conference provided a forum for a variety of methodological approaches to texts, such as postcolonial theories, feminism, cultural criticism, intertextuality, narratology, psychoanalysis, poetics, and aesthetics. However, when it came to hermeneutics the reservations, although politely formulated, were nevertheless quite palpable, as one can observe from the exemplary remarks on the part of a speaker that “her-meneutics” should rather be called “his-meneutics.” Evidently, there is a wide perception of hermeneutics as the most conservative, male-biased, homogeneously nonhybrid, homophobic, colonial, capitalistic enterprise. In other words, hermeneutics is currently associated with the mummified “ancient” in the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns.

If one follows the reminder by the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo (b. 1936) that, aside from being used as a specific kind of interpretation, hermeneutics stands today for a koiné of interpretative languages, then there would be no reason not to include within hermeneutics vocal examples of political resistance, such as feminism, postcolonialism, transnationalism, postcapitalism, and queer studies. In other words, by definition hermeneutics requires the presence of the modern in the querelle between ancients and moderns, since reading always begins from the interpretative act, that is, the reader in the present. Vattimo continues to be one of the most convincing
advocates of hermeneutics — a task that is particularly welcomed by someone like me who was trained in classical studies. A desire to know more about the construction of meaning in Japan prompted me to work on a series of categories — rhetorical (sugata, yūgen-tai, ushin-tai, and the triad omote-ura-sakai), aesthetic (yūgen, yojō, mono no aware), religious (mushin, shin-tai, santai, kotodama), and ethical (makoto, mawaza) — in order to explain how interpretative strategies work in the reading of Japanese literary texts, mainly poetic texts.\(^\text{11}\)

Research on these categories has increased my interest in the particular nature of Japanese modernity — especially the encounter between the pliant, supple groups of ideas arising from a Buddhist philosophy of nonpermanence, nonsubject subjectivity, and nonsubstantial substance and the patterns of strong permanence, strong subject, and strong substance sustaining modernity in all its variations, Western and not. On the one hand, we find in Japanese tradition elements that could easily be included in Gianni Vattimo’s philosophy of weak thought, as I have indicated in a series of articles: the notion of a soft subject (no-mind or mushin) — a self that “is seen by others, that sees itself, and that sees itself as other,” which is Zeami’s definition of the Nō actor; or, the concept of soft time (mujō) — all elements that are part of a philosophy of Nothingness developed by Buddhist thinkers in premodern times, and regrounded in logic in modern times by the philosopher Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945).\(^\text{12}\) On the other hand, once these supple elements are made into categories, such as aesthetic categories that impose an uncomfortable universality over an untamable particularity, they lose their pliant nature and are reconfigured into patterns of violence, power, homogeneity: the nation, the emperor, the national language, the nation’s laws, the national subject, inside (Japan) and outside (the West) with no place for East Asia, frontside (omote/tatemae) and underside (ura/honne) with all the implications of participation and exclusion.

In the present book I focus on a few categories that I believe are relevant to the development of a history of Japanese hermeneutics, which to this day remains to be written. I wanted to call the readers’ attention to a few Japanese terms whose discussion might shed light on how Japanese thinkers have proceeded in making sense of their own culture. The application of Western hermeneutical constructs to Japanese texts was the focus of my earlier research on the development of the field of aesthetics in modern Japan.\(^\text{13}\) In this book I chose to discuss a few expressions that are constantly present in
discussions of Japanese culture and have organized them under three headings. The first deals with the word *koto*, which in Japanese means “things” and “words” at the same time. *Koto* is at the center of a series of interesting compounds, such as *kotodama* (the spirit of words) and *makoto* (truth), that have shaped Japanese discourses of philosophy, ethics, aesthetics, and religion. On the issue of things and words I present in English translation the voices of three thinkers — two twentieth-century philosophers, Watsuji Tetsurō (1889–1960) and Ōmori Shōzō (1921–1997), and a scholar from the Edo period, Fujitani Mitsue (1768–1823). The second heading is dedicated to two well-known aesthetic categories, *yūgen* and *sabi*, which point to notions of depth in physical space as well as in the space of interiority. The aesthetician Ueda Juzō (1886–1973) from the University of Kyoto will guide the reader through the history of these concepts. In the third part of the book, two colleagues of Ueda at the University of Kyoto, Nishitani Keiji (1900–1990) and Kuki Shūzō (1888–1941), will assist readers in understanding notions of time in its forms of *kū* (emptiness) and *gūzen* (contingency). *Koto* (and its compounds *kotodama* and *makoto*), *yūgen*, *sabi*, *kū*, and *gūzen* are the subjects of this book — a few selected representatives of a long series of important hermeneutical concepts, each of which is so compelling that it would deserve a separate monographic treatment.