Introduction

The Japanese quest for a new written language began in the early Meiji years. Increased exposure to the literary traditions of the West prompted scholars and intellectuals of the period to revisit their own literary heritage and to question the functionality of the currently predominant written expression, a static language that carried the legacy of centuries of literary practice but that was by then considerably different from the vernacular actually spoken by the people. Soon, these individuals began to envision the possibility of creating a simplified form of written expression based on spoken language and therefore more accessible to the masses. This idea, revolutionary in nature and seemingly impracticable to many, contained, already in its embryonic stage, the seeds for fierce academic debates and deep ideological conflicts. Not that the tension between traditional and more colloquial modes of expression had not already surfaced in premodern years; in fact, the presence of a more or less explicit discourse or metadiscourse that addressed the role of the vernacular in writing is detectable even before the Meiji era. However, the intensification of the debate on the question of language is a particularly significant phenomenon of the post-Restoration (1868) period. The critical reexamination of classical and pseudoclassical literary styles and the literary experimentation with the vernacular that followed became crucial traits of Meiji (1868–1912) and Taishō (1912–1926) academic discourse. The arrival of Western rhetoric in the early Meiji years added considerably to this process of renewal, contributing substantially to the creation of a new literary language in ways hitherto unclarified.

Previous scholarship has addressed several aspects of the rise of this new language. Prior analysis has treated not only the stylistic changes that occurred as a result of the exposure to Western languages and literatures, but also the parallel growing concern of the time for the creation of a literary medium capable of sustaining trends in literature that put growing emphasis on truth and the faithful reproduction of reality. The literary world of early Meiji faced a challenging task: to create a relatively simple written language that would ensure effective
communication and at the same time be sufficiently refined for artistic achievement in writing. The dialectical relationship between this quest for a new form on the one hand and writers’ aspiration to deliver a new content, along the tenets of current literary theories, on the other became one of the most crucial aspects of the literary developments of those years.

It is in the reexamination of the dynamics of this relationship that one detects the existence of a recurring theme in the critical discourse of the time that imbued every aspect of the debate on language: the question of rhetorical refinement. What is rhetoric and how should elegance in writing be defined? These very questions strongly characterized the Meiji and Taishô quest for a new written medium.

The understanding of the importance of rhetorical refinement in the debate on language leads in turn to another significant realization: the early inability of the Meiji bunraku (literary world) to formulate a definition of rhetoric and rhetorical sophistication that could help bridge the ideological gap between the quest for a simple but relatively refined form and the drive toward the straightforward and unadorned content advocated by the current literary trends of realism and naturalism. Western rhetoric mediated between these two equally compelling pursuits, paving the way toward an acceptable compromise between classical and colloquial written styles.

But how and why is rhetoric relevant to the debate over the creation of a new written language and to the cultural and literary events of the Meiji era in general? It should be noted that a very significant portion of Meiji discourse centered on the issue of successful communication and the means to achieve it. Such discussion was often a metalinguistic operation, that is, a discourse concerning what type of language to use and how to use it, both in speaking and writing, in order to effectively communicate one’s ideas and emotions. As a discipline that addressed the question of effective communication, rhetoric certainly held the key to many of the issues debated at the time. The oral dimension of rhetoric, in particular, was closely linked to the popularity of public speaking in Meiji Japan. The spread of oratory was one of the most significant phenomena of post-Restoration years, and although this proliferation has been addressed by previous scholarship, the framework of rhetorical inquiry has seldom been employed in the analysis. This book maintains that the history of oratory, and in particular public speaking, cannot be entirely separated from the history of Western rhetoric as a whole, but should be addressed as a constitutive part of its development. The popularity of public speaking was not only a social phenomenon that was supported by favorable political circumstances, but it also provided for the introduction of knowledge and the growth of a new awareness of the power and scope of the spoken
language. This awareness grew parallel to and in conflict with the supremacy of the written language, which resulted in a relationship of friction and antagonism between the two. The conflict between the oral and the written medium became a recurrent theme in Meiji literary debates and is a point of chief concern in this book.

In addition, rhetoric’s written dimension is inevitably linked to the literary developments of the period. It could not be otherwise, since literature is in part the very subject matter of rhetoric’s discourse. If, as stated in many of the Western rhetorical treatises imported at the time, rhetoric taught how to discern beauty in writing, then it is logical to postulate that it must have played an important part in the debates that sought to discuss the aesthetic aspects of literary production. When Meiji literary discourse became earnestly engaged in the search for a new written language, rhetoric inevitably became a part of that process. On a broader scope, the search for a modern form of written expression was not a question that was necessarily confined to the specialized realm of literature. With the coming of the modern age and the increased need for an exchange of knowledge and information, the choice of words and style and the understanding of their relationship to the reader came to assume an unprecedented relevance, not only in the domain of literary production, but also in the realm of communication in general.

In a sense, however, this language-centered debate was especially pertinent to the field of literature. Centuries of literary tradition had reinforced the primacy of classical language to the extent that the vernacular was widely regarded as unsuitable for literary production. Classical language was perceived as elegant and changeless, whereas the vernacular was thought by many to be verbose and mutating, devoid of refinement and regularity. Although some scholars and intellectuals asserted the importance of the spoken language in literature, they faced strong resistance from those who argued in favor of the elegance and tradition of classical prose styles. This resulted in a dispute that became the core of a discussion addressing the feasibility of a modern form of literary language based on the vernacular: a debate, that is, on the nature of rhetorical refinement in writing.

Despite the likely crucial involvement of rhetoric in the academic debates of the time, very few existing works mention the existence of a tradition of rhetorical inquiry in modern Japan, and even fewer have considered its contribution to the literary debates of the period. As a result, Meiji and Taishō research on rhetoric has remained an obscure and unknown entity whose rightful place in the history of modern Japanese literature still needs to be elucidated. Such disregard for this aspect of recent Japanese literary history is in no way justified. If one considers that both the popularity of public speaking and the search for a
new literary language have been major traits of the Meiji cultural and literary scene, it seems only logical to assume that there are important links between the social and literary developments of the period and the introduction of Western rhetoric. The large number of works of rhetoric published during the Meiji and Taishō years constitutes further evidence of the likelihood that the discipline played a key role in the academic and intellectual debates of the time.

Several factors have contributed to this paucity of interest. One may be found in the modalities by which rhetoric was introduced after the Meiji Restoration. The introduction of the discipline in some cases occurred as a result of the impulse to acquire Western culture, rather than from a thoughtfully motivated search for a source of knowledge to apply to native literary and cultural tradition. Ground-breaking works were often followed by redundant publications that amounted to mere translation exercises. Rhetoric became a corpus of scholarly production lacking in unity and coherence, being viewed by many as a marginal aspect of the process of importation of Western knowledge taking place during those years.

Another reason for the disregard of rhetoric among scholars thus far may lie in the discipline’s recent rebirth in the West. Since the 1950s, rhetoric has found new relevance within a variety of fields such as linguistics, semiotics, philosophy, and communication theory. This engagement in multiple interdisciplinary issues has led to an increased interest among Japanese scholars in some specific aspects of the discipline, such as the internal mechanisms of rhetorical figures and their cognitive relevance to speech and literary production, which has paradoxically overshadowed efforts to reconsider the role of rhetoric at the time of its first importation to Japan.

A third and perhaps most important factor can be found in the widely accepted viewpoint that rhetoric was in a conflictual relationship with the literary trends that ruled the bunraku between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. According to this position, such a relationship prevented rhetoric from playing any kind of active role in the debate over the definition of literature and the creation of a modern literary language. This argument is crucial to the history of rhetoric in Japan and is discussed at length in this book.

This book seeks to reconsider the introduction of rhetoric into Japan and to clarify its interactions with the forces and synergies that shaped modern Japanese literature and culture. More specifically, it seeks to provide a historical account aimed at bringing to light the presence of distinctive features throughout the discipline’s development. Ultimately, it aims to give modern Japanese rhetoric an identity of its own, denoted by both the achievements and the inevitable contradictions and failures that have characterized it.
Given the variety of meanings presently attributed to rhetoric both as a term and as a field of study, the first task of this book is to clarify the scope and boundaries of the domain that is specifically the object of this investigation. George Payn Quackenbos’ *Advanced Course of Composition and Rhetoric*, a text widely read in Japan in the Meiji years, serves as a suitable starting point in that it conveniently illustrates the state of the discipline and its acceptance at the time of its introduction to Japan. According to Quackenbos, the word “rhetoric” originally had reference solely to the art of oratory; in this sense, moreover, we find it generally used by ancient writers. As, however, most of the rules relating to the composition of matter intended for delivery are equally applicable to other kinds of writing, in the course of time the meaning of the term was naturally extended; so that even as early as in the age of Aristotle it was used with reference to productions not designed for public recitation.

At the present day, Rhetoric, in its widest acceptation, comprehends all prose composition; and it is with this signification we here use the term: in its narrowest sense, it is limited to persuasive speaking.¹

Differently from Quackenbos’ work, this investigation is concerned with both understandings of rhetoric: in its narrowest sense, that is, as the art of speech, and in its broadest sense, that is, as the art of composition. It is generally concerned with all those rules originally devised for public speaking that later came to be applied to the domain of writing. Consequently, it treats the various parts into which classical rhetoric was traditionally divided, namely “invention,” “arrangement,” “elocution (or “style”),” “memory,” and “delivery,” and the general principles regarding the effective use of language, including the classification of rhetorical figures. Further connotations of rhetoric, most of which originated well into the twentieth century, are not considered here.

This book is thus divided into three parts: “The Tradition of Rhetoric,” “History of Rhetoric,” and “Quest for a New Written Language.” “The Tradition of Rhetoric” sets the stage for the discussion by first providing an important overview of the chief theoretical points that have marked the historical development of rhetoric in the West. The section also addresses the existence of a tradition of rhetorical inquiry in Japan prior to the Meiji period, highlighting the presence of a broad range of misguided notions among modern scholars on the practice of rhetorical communication in premodern Japan.

“History of Rhetoric” chronicles the development of the study of rhetoric in Japan, from its introduction in the early Meiji period to its decline well into the Taishō years. Departing from the assumption, widespread among Japanese Meiji
scholars, that Japan did not have a rhetorical heritage along the lines of Western tradition, the section focuses on the developments that took place after the Meiji Restoration. It comprises four chapters (chaps. 3–6), corresponding to the four main phases that, according to my investigation, have characterized the growth of rhetoric as a field of study in Meiji and Taishō Japan. Chapter 3 deals with the arrival of rhetoric, which was introduced mainly as the art of speech. Covering a period that spans from the Meiji Restoration to the end of the 1880s, the chapter discusses the rise of public speaking and the works of intellectuals and political leaders such as Fukuzawa Yukichi, Ozaki Yukio, and Baba Tatsui. Chapter 4 is concerned with the period extending from the end of the 1880s to the end of the century. Initiated by the publication of Takada Sanae’s *Bijigaku* (Rhetoric) in 1889, this phase saw rhetoric come to be perceived as a system of rules and precepts for composition and literary criticism. The shift to a rhetorical investigation now concerned mostly with written discourse is analyzed in this section. Chapter 5 describes the changes that took place with the rise of rhetoricians such as Shimagura Hōgetsu and Igarashi Chikara and delineates the surfacing of crucial links between the discipline and the literary developments of the period. These vital links are detailed in the third section of the book. Chapter 6, covering the entire Taishō era, assesses the final stage of rhetoric in Japan, which then came to be mostly absorbed within the field of composition and studies of national language. Each of the four phases is duly contextualized so as to illustrate the existence of crucial intersections between the development of rhetoric and the social and literary events of the time. The question of language, in particular, is constantly held under consideration and constitutes a matter of high priority in the discussion of the content of each work.

“Quest for a New Written Language,” the third section, discusses the debate over the creation of a modern literary language. It explores the collusions and conflicts characterizing rhetoric and its relationship with the *genbun itchi* movement (the movement for the unification of the spoken with the written language) and its call for a simplified written medium. The analysis considers one of the many aspects of the debate, namely the controversy over the role of rhetorical refinement in writing. The question of rhetorical refinement, it is argued, figured as one of the key issues in the literary discourse of the time, to the extent that it could be employed as an interpretative paradigm for the developments that took place throughout much of the Meiji and Taishō years. Attention is also paid in this section to the predominant literary trend of the period, naturalism. As Donald Keene has noted, “[i]f any movement in Japanese literature of the twentieth century can be described as central, it is doubtlessly Naturalism (*shizenshugi*).” The movement’s call for an unadorned writing style seemed
to result in an impracticable coexistence with rhetoric and its teachings. This book illustrates how, on the contrary, the two were not necessarily in an antagonistic relationship. Furthermore, addressing the complex and conflicting relationship between the written and spoken mediums, “Quest for a New Written Language” also contextualizes the importance of oratory in modern Japan, clarifying its role as a tool for modernization and as an effective platform for the reappraisal of the spoken language. It discloses the process by which developments in oratory itself contributed to an ultimate resolution in favor of the final acceptance of a written vernacular.

The book concludes with an epilogue. Capitalizing upon the investigation’s findings, this final section reaffirms Western rhetoric’s significant role in Japan’s modernization process. Whether in the field of politics, literature, or education, rhetoric is revealed as inextricably connected to the crucial developments that have brought Japan to the threshold of modern times. The epilogue highlights the existence of an important common denominator among recent studies on the development of modern Japanese literature: the recognition of the centrality of the question of language. In recognizing the genbun itchi issue as central to their investigation, recent critical approaches have challenged, even if only in a superficial fashion, the historicist view that held that language played a subordinate role in the literary discourse of those years. Concurring with these studies, this investigation seeks to reverse the notion of form as a merely passive component of the process that led to the development of a new literary language. Reiterating the crucial importance of the issue of rhetorical refinement in the literary debates of the time, the final section of this book shows the existence of significant convergences between rhetoric and the formation of modern Japanese narrative. As a result, rhetoric is propelled toward a theoretically ambitious dimension that does not confine the discipline to a question of a mere stylistic nature, but situates it squarely within mainstream contemporary discourse in the field.