In the fall of 1996, respected literary critic and academic superstar Frank Lentricchia committed a shocking apostasy: he renounced his belief in literature as a discursive arena for the exploration and exercise of political and ideological influence, and embraced in its place the conviction that “literature is pleasurable and important, as literature, and not as an illustration of something else.”

This statement represented a radical departure from the intellectual stance that had made him famous. In 1983, while a professor at Rice University, Lentricchia had secured his reputation in the academy with the publication of *Criticism and Social Change*. In this book he had posed a question that haunts scholars of literature: “Can a literary intellectual . . . do radical work as a literary intellectual?” His answer was in the affirmative, of course, and he would later recall that at the time of the book’s publication he had been “convinced that a literary critic, as a literary critic, could be an agent of social transformation, an activist who would show his students that, in its form and style, literature had a strategic role to play in the world’s various arrangements of power; that literature wasn’t to be relegated to the Arts and Leisure section of the Sunday paper, as if it were a thing for weekend amusement only.” Lentricchia’s revolutionary agenda, put forth in powerful prose, earned him a reputation as the “Dirty Harry of contemporary literary criticism.” His fierce defense of literary studies as a mode of social activism—as something more than a means for refining aesthetic sensibilities or exploring cultural heritage or revealing the multiplicities of the human experience—
was appealing to many working in the academy. It continues to inspire students and teachers of literature today.

However, in the fall of 1996, Lentricchia, who was by this time a tenured professor at Duke University, made the pronouncement mentioned above: he had, in short, changed his mind about literature’s relationship to power and social justice. Whereas he had built his career as a critical theorist and analyst of literary texts, Lentricchia announced that he would thereafter be true to a second, secret side of his literary life:

The secret me was me-the-reader, in the act of reading: an experience in which the words of someone else filled me up and made it irrelevant to talk about my reading; an experience that I’d had for as long as I can remember being a reader. This secret life implicitly denied that any talk about what I had undergone could ever be authentic. My silent encounters with literature are ravishingly pleasurable, like erotic transport.5

His secret self revealed, Lentricchia retreated into the undergraduate classroom to indulge and share these pleasures of reading. Of his life in this safe haven, he writes,

I become something of a rhapsode. As Plato says in the Ion, rhapsodes are enthusiasts. We’re out of our minds. Like all rhapsodes, I like to recite from the text. I tell my students that in true recitation, we’re possessed, we are the medium for the writer’s voice. . . . My listener-students . . . too become possessed. Rhapsode and audience assume a single strange consciousness, not their own: “living,” not “knowing,” the text. We are simply, and collectively, mad.6

In this proclamation, we see his transformation complete. Whereas he had once grappled with literary representations as a means first to understand and later to intervene in the various flows of power in the world, from this point forward in his career Lentricchia would surrender himself to the personal, hedonistic joys available to the connoisseur of literary expression.

Considering his standing in academia and the widespread appeal of his earlier, politically oriented agenda, it is not surprising that this socially conscious critic’s apostasy triggered a variety of responses. A consideration of two of them is warranted here for they illuminate a tension in literary circles operant also in the figures examined in this study. One response to Lentricchia’s article appeared in the very same journal, Lingua Franca, in the form of a reader’s letter to the editor, and it offered a cautious embrace of his new vision. The embrace, however, was tenuous, qualified: when “Brother Lentricchia ceases
to use the word ‘text’ when he means ‘novel,’ we’ll know his soul has truly come home.” This statement reveals something of the radical nature of Lentricchia’s conversion. So different are the positions he has held that they require distinct “languages.” If Lentricchia is truly to abandon himself to the act of reading, he must acknowledge that he is reading “novels,” not “texts.” Furthermore, in the metaphors it employs, this reader’s statement also illustrates a widely shared assumption about Lentricchia’s new approach. By looking forward to the day “his soul [will] truly come home” (italics added), this reader is suggesting that Lentricchia’s rhapsodic encounters with literature represent some privileged point of origin antecedent to the intellectual analysis that constituted one stage of his career. The implication is that his foray into theory was somehow a betrayal of basic human nature, a contrived attempt, fueled by hubris, to harness the literary imagination to the lesser goals of some secular world.

There is also something undeniably appealing about this apolitical, purely literary (aesthetic) vision. We do experience, at times, a book whose words fill us up, a text that engulfs us. When we give ourselves over to that experience, we do indeed feel as if our “soul” has found its way “home.” When we sit down to write or talk about that experience, however, we find that somehow our words are not up to the task. We worry that by the act of interpretation we are somehow doing that original encounter a grave injustice, somehow reducing the private and sacred to the communal and profane. We sometimes succeed in repressing these nagging doubts as we deploy literary texts in an effort to alter the hierarchies of power in the world. They return, however, the next time a bright young student of literature interrupts a lecture to ask, “I loved this novel. It made me laugh, it made me cry. Why do we have to ruin it by analyzing it to death?” Like the converted Lentricchia in 1996 and the cautious reader who applauded his conversion, many would privilege this intoxication of rhapsodic abandonment.

It is easy to imagine other reactions to Lentricchia’s apostasy. Whether their claim is rooted in a suspicion of hedonistic pleasures, a Protestant work ethic, or the need to assert political relevance in an age defined by the “war against terror,” those who make literary texts a central part of their profession feel compelled to insist, like the younger Lentricchia, that “literature [has] a strategic role to play in the world’s various arrangements of power.” Not surprisingly, this position was also promoted in the pages of Lingua Franca in the
form of another reader’s reaction to the Lentricchia article. This letter defends the politicization of literary studies, and accuses the Duke professor of a cowardly retreat from the very critical discourse that he himself had helped to propagate. Most germane to the argument here is an unexplored observation in the letter, an observation that indicates that the two literary stances adopted by Lentricchia might not be mutually exclusive after all: the letter-writer observes that, in his denunciation of politicized literary criticism, Lentricchia “certainly hasn’t abandoned the terrain of metacritical debate, in which his article intervenes quite conspicuously. . . .”8 This remark cuts to the quick of Lentricchia’s conversion. Issued by a literary theorist in a forum for intellectual debate, even this renunciation of ideological motives has ideological and theoretical ramifications. In fact, Lentricchia’s subsequent work suggests that he intended the “conversion” he announced in the Lingua Franca article to be precisely that type of metacritical intervention.9

At its core, this study explores a similar commitment to literature as a realm complete unto itself. It also examines the paradoxical manner in which that stance, pursued over the course of two decades, itself constituted a “metacritical intervention” of monumental importance in the cultural history of modern Japan.

These tensions as explored in this study can also be productively introduced through reference to Susan Sontag’s classic essay of 1964, “Against Interpretation.” I discuss it here not only because it substantiates the pervasive nature of these tensions, but also because Sontag’s articulation of the issues provides imagery and a vocabulary that proves useful. While Lentricchia’s article takes the form of a personal manifesto, Sontag’s essay includes a short but carefully formulated history of interpretation’s infiltration of literary discourse, as well as a program for liberating the literary from the analytical. Interpretation today, Sontag asserts, is “reactionary, impertinent, cowardly, stifling”; it is

the revenge of the intellect upon art. Even more. It is the revenge of the intellect upon the world. To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world—in order to set up a shadow world of “meanings.” It is to turn the world into this world. . . .

The world, our world, is depleted, impoverished enough. Away with all duplicates of it, until we again experience more immediately what we have.10
As Lentricchia would do over thirty years later, Sontag dreams of reversing humankind’s relentless parsing of literature and art into its hidden meanings and ideological significations. Where Lentricchia would have us “live” the text rather than “know” it, Sontag would have us “experience more immediately” the works we impoverish through interpretation.

Sontag’s program is based on her understanding of the historical and philosophical contexts that have led us to the current state. The penchant for interpretation is rooted in our inheritance of the ancient Greek conception of art as mimesis—as a representation of something else. This paradigm fuels a perpetual need for interpretation, the act whereby that “something” existing antecedent to the work of art, its “true content,” can be revealed. Over time the pace of interpretation quickened, and its range grew; the scientific enlightenment pulled even the heretofore immune realms of myth and religion into the fray. Finally, with Marx and Freud the interpreting mind became ubiquitous, and latent content (visible only through interpretation) was now privileged above all else. Understanding had become synonymous with interpreting.11

As a cure for this obsession with teasing out latent content through interpretation, Sontag proposes, not surprisingly, a renewed attention to form. It is possible to repel the interpreters, she suggests, by “making works of art whose surface is so unified and clean, whose momentum is so rapid, whose address is so direct that the work can be . . . just what it is.”12 Criticism, too, she argues, must strive for a “transparency” that allows us to experience “the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are,” for this direction alone will prompt the recovery of the senses we need to once again fully experience the world as it is.13

Like Lentricchia’s manifesto, Sontag’s essay is an unequivocal advocacy of an acritical, emotional engagement with art (or literature). It is also—and here again it anticipates Lentricchia’s stance—an ironic gesture in that it originates wholly within the realm of intellectual, critical discourse. An artistic/literary appreciation whereby a “work can be . . . just what it is” may be presented as some primal mode of experiencing the world, but for Sontag this is possible only as a “recovered” mode of cognition. It is meaningful and, in fact, recognizable only after the interpretive mode has taken hold. Sontag, like Lentricchia, recognizes the irony inherent in her stance. In an interview held three years after the publication of “Against Interpretation...
tion,” Sontag claimed “Obviously, if nobody were paying attention to content or meaning or message, then probably I would be talking about that.” Sontag’s case is another demonstration of how a rejection of critical analysis functions, ultimately, as precisely the sort of “metacritical intervention” it claims on its surface to denounce.

To repeat, this study is an examination of the contours and consequences of a very similar sort of metacritical intervention, one worked in the intellectual world of Japan between approximately 1929 and 1946. It was an intellectual intervention that exercised tremendous influence on a generation of writers and critics, and the literary world of Japan today continues to grapple with its legacy.