Prologue

To be sensuous, that is, to be an object of sense, to be a sensuous object, and thus to have sensuous objects outside oneself—objects of one's sensuousness. To be sensuous is to suffer.

—Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*

There is a way of knowing the world that reaches beyond the limits of the human body. I will call this mode of perception realism. By this, I do not refer to a particular literary convention or artistic style, but to a belief system: a faith in the real existence of an insensible world and in the possibility of depicting a human connection to it. It is this faith—or the hope of such a faith—that has united some of the most ambitiously experimental writers of the industrialized world under the banner of aesthetic modernism.

To say that human beings perceive the world not only with their bodies but also with their minds, with their imaginations, is merely to repeat an age-old insight. To outline a specific moment in the history of this relationship, however—between mind and body, sensation and knowledge, perception and reality—requires an encounter with one of the central problems of modernity, a problem suffused with political and ethical significance.

Realism envisions a world external to human experience, but it also implies the human capacity to know and depict that world, to engage with it. As developments in early twentieth-century industry and science
transformed the meaning of “observation” and “objectivity,” modern writers and poets struggled to capture what they too came to see as an evolving network of relations joining human beings to each other, to non-human beings, and to the things of this world. This book portrays an extraordinary moment in the history of this realist mode of perception and the life it lived in Japanese literature from the late 1910s to the mid-1930s—or from late Taishō (1912–26) to early Shōwa (1926–89). Widely acknowledged as Japan’s most prolific and creative period of literary modernism, these years are also characterized by an aesthetic shift outward, when authors turned from the claustrophobic and egocentric concerns of the “I-novel” (watakushi shōsetsu) to face the political and ethical demands of the world outside. At their creative peak, despite profound ideological differences, Japanese modernists seem to have shared an aspiration to depict accurately and objectively an external universe which was seen as indistinguishably natural and historical: a strangely “ecological” world of objective material forces and events that both defined and exceeded the sensory parameters of the human body, the limits of human language, the laws of social conflict.

For very good reasons, scholars who have studied modernist literature from this period in Japan have taken the elements of “uncertainty,” “disintegration,” and “fragmentation” identifiable with these texts as signals of alienation and a general concern with the “unreal.” The characterization of aesthetic modernism as a version of anti-realism, directed toward linguistic and sensory surfaces and away from objective reality, accounts for the emphasis scholars have put on subjective fracture and the phantasmal in these works. Indeed, no one could reasonably deny these responses their rightful place in the spectrum of the modern experience. For the most stylistically and thematically daring authors of the period, however, the dissociative trauma of sensory and cultural breakdown—embodied in the twin notions of subjective and representational crisis—is only half the story. From the photographic and cinematic obsessions of Tanizaki Jun’ichirō (1886–1965) to the shocking and disjunctive portraits of the imperial economy as conceived by Yokomitsu Riichi (1898–1947), to the tender depictions of astrophysical phenomena and human-wildlife relations in the children’s stories of Miyazawa Kenji (1896–1933), these authors’ works manage to balance a chaos of sense experience against the imagined contours of an objective total-
ity—a reality that exists beyond the senses yet is no less real for that—in a way that readers still find compelling today.

It may be useful here to suspend the colloquial value of the word “breakdown,” with its implications of psychic and cultural collapse, and consider the term the way a chemist might: as a method of analysis, a means of comprehension. For the physical scientist, the purpose of breaking down an object or process is not to deny its real connection to the world, but to understand it. In important ways, the everyday instruments and technical systems informing the lives and works of the authors in this study offered new insights into social and natural relationships precisely by fragmenting the world and reassembling it as a meaningful abstraction. It is no accident that the modern revolution in theoretical physics, which these same technologies both enabled and embodied, relied increasingly on abstraction and non-mimetic models to make “visible” bizarre and contradictory laws at work in the cosmic and subatomic realms. In a certain sense, the competing descriptions of the atom that filled the pages of physics journals in the early years of the twentieth century had their everyday equivalents in the selective and diagrammatic “world pictures” presented on the front pages of any number of national newspapers—a phenomenon made possible, not incidentally, by the telegraph’s practical mastery of the electron. For the modern reader, no less than for the theoretical physicist, abstraction had become an essential tool for grasping, depicting, and “seeing” the world.

Against this backdrop of technical transformation and scientific discovery, I will approach aesthetic modernism in Japan not as a moment of representational or subjective collapse—not, in other words, as the death knell of the referential impulse—but rather as a singular and anomalous moment of perceptual and referential expansion. Each work treated in this study explores in its own register the consequences of what amounts to an enlarged definition of observation, a notion of perception uncontained by the limits of immediate corporal experience, though imbued with its textures and codes. It is precisely this fusion of the visual with the visionary that allows these works to assemble in their pages an image of objectivity that focuses not upon distinct objects and individuals, but upon the relations between them. The most innovative experimental and popular narratives produced during this period in Japan may be said to have aspired commonly to this “higher” form of objectivity,
making use of abstraction not as a means of establishing distance but as a way of depicting involvement and mutual transformation. In this fundamental sense, and across the political spectrum, the masterworks of Japanese high modernism are united by a species of realism that could be called dialectical: a literary version of what Friedrich Engels described as the “science of interconnection.”

What does it mean to say that Japanese literary modernists engaged with the world “dialectically”? In his classic *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, when Marshall Berman speaks of modern environments and experiences as forming a “unity of disunity,” he makes clear that what he is describing is not really a unity at all, but a “maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish,” a world in which “all that is solid melts into air,” to invoke the phrase from Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* made famous by Berman. Indeed, by underscoring the poetry of Marx’s observation—and by adopting this descriptive phrase about the social processes of modernization as the title and refrain of his project—Berman focuses the reader’s attention upon the sense of accelerated instability these words express, transforming their frantic tone into the signature of aesthetic modernism itself. It is not surprising, then, that in Berman’s analysis, Marx’s contribution to modernism ends up amounting to the contours of a rhetorical style: a literary “voice” that displays not only a “breathless pace,” but also a “readiness to turn on itself” in order to “express and to grasp a world where everything is pregnant with its contrary . . .”

In spite of an obvious debt to Berman’s work, this book will proceed along a different point of sail. Berman’s emphasis on voice, while useful, invites the conclusion that, because nothing in the descriptive content of the modernist text is stable, nothing it refers to is “real” except for its own discursive surface and the chaotic sensory response it portrays. It is this focus on voice, for instance, that allows for the unsettling, and ultimately misleading, connection Berman draws between Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche. The two great minds, he tells us, share a “similar voice and feeling for modern life” expressed through an “ironic and dialectical” engagement with modern history. Still, we must ask ourselves how significant this stylistically “dialectic” connection can be when it is precisely Nietzsche’s spellbound absorption in his own modernist voice that leads him finally to deny—as a
metaphysical figment of the “popular mind”—the very idea of the historical or ethical “subject.” Reflecting the sensory literalism of his age (and anticipating the postmodern skepticism of our own), Nietzsche’s anti-metaphysical stance resists the “subject” as part of a general denial of anything at all purported to exist beneath the surface of things. There is “no such substratum,” he would tentatively conclude in his *On the Genealogy of Morals*, “there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed. . . .” In the same passage, Nietzsche clarifies the anti-realist implications his position holds for modern science, taking it upon himself to deny the existence of the atom itself as science’s version of “that little changeling, the ‘subject,’” an assertion that echoes unexpectedly the positivism of his famous contemporary in physics, Ernst Mach (1828–1916).

For Marx himself, however, and for the most important authors of Japan’s age of high modernism, that which I am calling dialectical thinking never implies a world of pure surfaces with no underlying reality—with no “doer” behind the deed—but envisions instead a universe in which no “doer” can exist independently of social and material relations. This book will proceed from the proposition that Marx’s great contribution to a later aesthetic modernism is not to be found in the breathless inflection of a literary voice, but in the far-reaching horizon of an epistemological and ontological conviction. What is modernist about Marx—and what is “Marxist” about Japan’s most important literary modernists—is a revolutionary form of relational realism that implies an underlying belief not only in humanity’s objective and interdependent existence in an eternally evolving network of material relations, but also in the human capacity to know this reality, to appreciate its history, and to determine “objectively” a position within it. Realism in this sense overcomes the limits of the human body not by effacing those limits, but precisely by recognizing in their peculiar shape evidence of communication with a larger, interconnecting cosmos.

It is in this context that human sensuousness takes on a crucial, if contradictory, significance. The senses proved to Marx—in contrast to the skepticism they provoked for positivists like Mach and moral relativists like Nietzsche—not only the real existence of an objective world external to human experience, but the material and objective inclusion of the human body itself in that world. “To be sensuous,” Marx
wrote, in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, “that is, to be an object of sense, to be a *sensuous* object, and thus to have sensuous objects outside oneself—objects of one’s sensuousness.” Being an “object” in a world shared by other objects becomes, for Marx, an essential part of the human experience. “A being which is not itself an object for some third being has no being for its object; i.e., it is not objectively related.” Objectivity emerges in these early writings as an epistemological stance, as a sensory experience, but also as the hallmark of existence: “An unobjective being is a nullity—an un-being.” So when Marx finally and enigmatically concludes that “to be sensuous is to suffer,” the term “suffer” must be understood with its full range of meanings, including as Robert C. Tucker advises, “in the sense of ‘to undergo’—to be the object of another’s action.”

To be sensuous is to suffer. In essential ways, the works that form the core of this study explore the meaning that this statement acquires at a time when the senses themselves undergo enormous and sudden enlargement through transformations in science and industry. New social and geopolitical relations forged and made visible by modern technology cannot be separated wholly from newly recognizable natural relations revealed by the concept of the “energy field,” associated with mid-nineteenth-century experiments in electromagnetism. The discovery of x-rays in 1895, of natural radioactivity in 1896, and of the electron in 1897 would only intensify the perceptual and metaphysical challenges already inherent, for instance, in the earlier invention of photography, forcing a generation of scientists in the 1920s and 30s—in a remarkable parallel with their literary contemporaries—to develop what physicist Sakata Shōichi called a “new cognition of nature” based on its “dialectical structure,” according to which no object is final or indivisible, and there is always something beyond. Thus, the “forming of the five senses,” in Marx’s memorable phrase, understood as a “labour of the entire history of the world down to the present,” must include the historical expansion of those senses beyond their organic limits.

The link between the new reality revealed by modern physics and the reality a generation of novelists and poets began to describe is too fundamental to be treated using the language of influence. Scientists and poets seem rather to have been jointly discovering, as it were, a new observational grammar inseparable from modernity itself. By high-
lighting this parallel, however, I am not attempting to “heal” the social divide that exists (and existed) between science and letters in modern Japan, or to correct what Joseph Murphy calls a “comic dissymmetry” between the two disciplines in contemporary debate. The significance of this homology lies rather in its capacity to reveal a historical aspiration common to science and literature during these years: the impulse to accommodate but also to push beyond the sensory immediacy of reality. To be sensuous is to suffer, which means to undergo the effects of a world of perpetual disintegration, where “all that is solid melts into air.” In another sense, however, it means to recognize material disintegration for what it is: to see natural and human history as a relationship of solid to air, to acknowledge as real the process of melting itself and to reclaim this process as an object of representation and belief.

Few places in the industrialized world saw the scope of this literary ambition pursued with the expansiveness it was afforded in Japan during the late Taishō and early Shōwa years. For the self-described members of Japan’s aesthetic avant-garde—but also, in essential ways, for the leftist authors they opposed—it was this realist impulse that led prose fiction away from the self-involved minutiae of Taishō fiction and toward the outward-reaching, cartographic logic of high modernism: what I call the language of non-mimetic referentiality. The modernist text in Japan struggled to depict fragmentation and cataclysm, but also to penetrate the surface of these experiences, to reach toward the invisible boundary of some elusive totality, the varied contours of which will be the subject of this book. Competing forms of narrative emerged that focused on navigating the space of sociality itself—defined by class relations, by national or ethnic conflict, but also by the interconnections between human and nonhuman species, between living beings and inorganic processes. This turn outward—at least in its non-ecological sense—has been noted in Seiji Lippit’s *Topographies of Japanese Modernism*, an exhaustive study that stands as a necessary precursor to my own. Much of what follows began as an effort to carry forward certain problems raised by Lippit’s work and contained especially in the explicit rationale of its periodization. Although *Topographies of Japanese Modernism* treats works from roughly the same decades examined in this study, it is a sign of our fundamental difference in approach that Lippit chooses Kobayashi Hideo’s (1902-83) elegiac essay, “Kokyō
oshinatta bungaku” (“Literature of the Lost Home”; 1933) as representative of the spirit of the modernism we both set out to study. For me, Kobayashi’s essay, with its emphasis on the anxiety of cultural homelessness and on the gap that stands between the concreteness of reality and the abstraction of art, marks the end of the period in Japan I am calling the era of high modernism. The world-weary skepticism of Kobayashi’s essays from the early 1930s—especially regarding modern literature’s capacity to represent nature as a “concrete and actual” thing—might be more usefully characterized as a recapitulation of the anti-realism expressed so vividly two decades earlier by that great figure of Meiji (1868–1912) literature, Natsume Sōseki (1867–1916). The introductory chapter will begin, therefore, with a 1911 lecture by Sōseki and end with a 1933 essay by Kobayashi in order precisely to highlight the fragile uniqueness of certain texts that came in between.

At stake in arguing for this distinction among modernisms is the logic of inevitability that often colors discussions of Japanese literature’s eventual and well-documented turn to the reactionary ideology of cultural self-defense in the 1930s. There are many reasons to characterize the artistic and intellectual history of this period as a story of profound moral failure. Indeed, it is impossible to speak of Japanese modernism without addressing the problems of nationalism, imperialism, ethnic and racial oppression, and the other related incarnations of tyranny associated with the rise of Japanese militarism. Aesthetic modernism fed these trends, to be sure. And yet there is something to be gained by remembering that this is not all it did. There may be another legacy to appreciate, another ethical vision hidden beneath the very struggle itself—however short-lived—to make an accurate accounting of the world, to formulate the material laws of art and empire, to trace the contours of the non-human universe.

If there is a consistency to modernism’s agonizing political ambivalence—its tentative flirtations with both socialist revolution and an emergent fascism—the content of this consistency can be reduced to an earnest, if confused, aspiration toward an integrative ideal. And yet the consistency of this aspiration is deceiving. I began this book convinced that Japanese modernism led inevitably and logically to Japanese fascism because of its very concern with totality itself. I now believe that Japanese fascism represents the replacement of one modernist vision...
of totality with another: a moment at which identity and difference cease to be understood in terms of interconnection and mutual transformation, becoming instead a problem of assimilation and exclusion. This book will present the former, dialectical version of “totality” as the most valuable ethical and political legacy of aesthetic modernism, a legacy that survives today in the fundamental concepts of contemporary ecological discourse. It is unaccountably rare for scholars to observe that the central ideas of contemporary environmental ethics and of “deep ecology” found poetic and narrative expression in Japan of the 1920s. So while Chapters 1 and 2 take up the fiction of Tanizaki Jun’ichirō and Yokomitsu Riichi—widely studied figures of a thoroughly urbanized image of Japanese modernism—the last half of this book focuses on the ecological vision of Miyazawa Kenji, a pioneer in experimental narrative and verse whose themes of human-wildlife relations have been largely ignored in English language scholarship.

Despite the common association of Japanese modernism with the gritty textures and exhilarating pace of city life, the most creative works from this period portray far more than merely the experience per se of industrialized, urban life. More precisely, these works absorbed the structure of industrialized environments as the logic of nature itself. Modern industrial conditions are directly visible in Yokomitsu Riichi’s exploratory move “out onto the streets” and “onto the fluidity of city space” that Seiji Lippit describes, but these same conditions also, more furtively, inform Miyazawa Kenji’s poetic migration toward the open fields and forests of Tōhoku, into the stars, and beyond the edge of the cultivated world. To study Japanese modernism is to appreciate an era when the “social reality of nature,” to turn once again to Marx, and the “natural science about man” had become “identical terms.” It is a sign of the latently ecological grammar of this equation that the very idea of materialism in Marx’s work, as John Bellamy Foster has observed, suggests “both an ontological and an epistemological category.”

In the pages that follow, the term “high modernism” will designate the poetic encounter with precisely this enigmatic image of nature: the struggle of literature to make visible a historical and material reality that both envelops and stands outside our senses, to picture with accuracy a world our eyes could never see.