For some reason, I seem to always teach in academic departments whose names are difficult to understand. At York University in Toronto, where I have taught since the 1980s, it is the Humanities Department. What exactly is “Humanities”? Even we who work there aren’t entirely sure. The only thing we know for certain is that we are all dealing with “texts”—literary, religious, cinematic or artistic—of one kind or another in an interdisciplinary way. Over the past year at the University of Tokyo, I helped inaugurate the 現代文芸論 (GBR), otherwise known as The Department of Contemporary Literary Studies. To some degree, the GBR resembles my department at York, although here we focus exclusively on literary texts. Still, what exactly does “Contemporary Literary Studies” mean?

I wasn’t sure when I first arrived in April, but I still tried my best to explain to the people who asked. At first, their eyes started glazing over when my explanation was barely underway. Still, since I don’t teach in the national security field, I couldn’t just say, “I’m sorry, Ma’am, but that information is classified.” So I stumbled on. Contemporary Literary Studies, I continued, doesn’t mean just the study of contemporary literature—for example, our students can deal with the Taiheiki or War and Peace if they want to. “Aha!” they responded, their eyes brightening for a moment. “You mean Comparative Literature!” “No,” I answered, “it’s not necessarily comparative. But we are very interested in the translation process, and how works from different literary traditions influence each other.” I was tempted to use the word “intertextuality” here, but that term can be a real conversation-ender, and I could see their eyes beginning to glaze over again.

The task of putting into words what we do in the GBR is much easier today, thanks to a series of remarkable public forums organized by our
chair, Numano Mitsuyoshi, and our devoted staff, and run with the help of our students. The first lecture in this series, by the writer Oe Kenzaburo, was a huge success, thanks to the energy and passion that Oe put into his performance. With over a thousand people in attendance, the atmosphere in historic Yasuda Hall was electric. Unfortunately, I had agreed to appear on stage and question Oe in my rusty Japanese, so I was too nervous to fully appreciate the moment. (By the end of my year, such occasions were actually fun.) Yet, the fact that Oe is a contemporary writer may have inadvertently reinforced the impression that the 『現代』 of the GBR determined the material that we studied; in other words, that we were a department focusing solely on contemporary literature.

That misapprehension was erased by our second public forum, starring Royall Tyler, the author of a masterful translation of *The Tale of Genji*. Running Oe Kenzaburo and Tyler back-to-back made it clear that our department was pioneering a different approach to literary studies that incorporated, not only the new and the old, but the art of translation itself. This forum also drew a large and attentive crowd, most from outside the university, testimony again to the organizing skills of our staff. After the event, we went drinking, and I had a chance to talk with a group of graduate students from the Department of Japanese Literature, who had helped us host the event. This time, when asked what Contemporary Literary Studies meant, I had a ready answer. “We are,” I said brimming with confidence, “a department that can welcome Oe Kenzaburo one month and *The Tale of Genji* the next.” A long silence followed. Then the talkative one in the group spoke up. “Oh,” she smiled, “Then we’re not so different – you guys study Japanese literature too.”

She had a point, or at least half a point. Although my colleagues — Numano Mitsuyoshi (Russian and Eastern European), Shibata Motoyuki (American), and Noya Fumiaki (Latin American) — specialize in foreign literatures, they are all deeply involved in Japanese literature as well, and quick to connect literary works from various places, and times. There is no sense of distance, or even friction, between these various literary traditions: a typical
conversation may start with a discussion of Oe, cut back to Mark Twain, move on to French symbolism, jump sideways to Russian Formalism, then circle through Jorge Luis Borges to arrive at Shimada Masahiko. This is not only enjoyable, it is probably the most natural way to think about literature these days, free of national and linguistic boundaries. One could even call it the wave of the future. This doesn’t mean that the GBR can replace, for example, the Departments of French or German. To the contrary, since our students must read (and eventually present papers and engage in scholarly debate) in two languages other than Japanese, the GBR has to cooperate with such departments to ensure its students are properly trained. Forging such alliances isn’t an easy task at an institution with as proud a history as the University of Tokyo; yet, from this outsider’s perspective, Todai’s role in educating future scholars and intellectuals makes such interdepartmental relationships crucial.

Luckily for me, Visiting Professors don’t have to deal with the politics of all this. As a result, I was able to do my teaching and hang around with the students in the kenkyushitsu, sharing sweets from all over the world and drinking free coffee. Gradually, I came to realize that the answer to the question, “What is the GBR?” could not be separated from the people in that sun-filled room, and the atmosphere being created there. Looking out, one had a raven’s eye view of the tops of the great trees of Todai, and beyond them the rooftops of the city. At the center of this room were the two people, Mouri Kumi and Shimabukuro Satomi, who run the office. At first, they seem to be opposites, one (Mouri) the analytical scholar, and the other (Shimabukuro) the intuitive artist, but both were genuinely interested in the students. It was no mystery, therefore, why students spent so much time there, eating, hanging out, and most of all studying. It was impressive to see them working away at their German or Russian texts while chatting in Japanese and greeting me in English. These students, I came to feel, were the grassroots of the GBR, the foundation of a new tradition at one of Japan’s oldest universities.
One cannot talk about this human side of the GBR without mentioning the parties. Parties to welcome visitors, or send off colleagues; parties to celebrate the Old or New Year; parties just for the sheer fun of it. And they were fun. One of the best took place on the night of our third forum, after we had hosted novelist Ikezawa Natsuki, the editor of a new anthology of world literature. It had been a difficult day – our staff was exhausted, our fearless leader, Numano, had injured his back, and Ikezawa himself was severely jet-lagged, having just arrived from Paris. Nevertheless, everyone had pulled together, and the event had turned out to be a great success. In a way, after all, world literature was our most natural topic, our home turf as it were. Now we were gathered together like a team of athletes after a hard-fought victory, sweaty and sore but happy, and very thirsty. Several people from a publishing house had joined the party, and one now asked me that very question that had once so perplexed me, “What exactly does Gendaibungeiron mean?” For a moment, I looked around the room. Pitchers of beer were emptying rapidly, students were talking in excited voices. Seated in their midst was Shibata Motoyuki, looking much like a student himself, and Noya Fumiaki. Numano and Mouri Kumi had shed their discomfort and fatigue and were gesturing like Russians as they talked. “Well,” I answered, a bit too drunk for long explanations. “It’s everything here, all this. This is who we are.”