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To Study Russian Literature in English: The Perception of Maurice Baring and Dmitry Merezhkovsky in Modern Japan

This paper examines the perception and influence of the English books and the English translations of the studies of Russian Literature in modern Japan, especially the works of an English man of letter and scholar of the Russian literature, Maurice Baring (1874–1945), and the works of a famous novelist, poet, religious thinker and literary critic, Dmitry Sergeyevich Merezhkovsky (1866–1941). Their books were widely read among the Japanese intellectuals in the early 20th century. As the previous studies have indicated, Russian literature became a worldwide craze in those days, and Japan was also one of the countries where it gained popularity. There are some studies of the Japanese translations of Russian literature in modern Japan, which revealed that the greater part of them were translated not from Russian originals, but from the translations in the Western languages. On the other hand, it is not well known that the characteristics of Russian literature were received in Japan at that period by books written in the Western languages other than Russian, such as English, and research to elucidate this reality has not progressed sufficiently. We analyze the English books and the English translations of the studies of Russian Literature by Baring and Merezhkovsky in the collection of Natsume Soseki (1867–1916), one of the most famous writers of modern Japan and an avid reader of these books. We discuss their texts, and line drawing and comment writing by Natsume in these books, reviewing the reception of them in Japanese newspapers and magazines in the early 20th century. This paper shows that it is essential to understand the reception of Russian literature in Japan not only from the bilateral perspective between Japan and Russia, but also from a broader international perspective, such as the trilateral relationship between Japan, Britain, and Russia.