Criticism is often considered as an evaluative response to literature. What if, however, criticism arrived before literature in a particular time and space in history? Japan’s Meiji period (1868–1912) bore witness to such a perverse ordering of criticism and literature, as criticism actually prepared the notion of “literature” as a modern, independent form of knowledge. By investigating intellectual discursive spaces in late 19th-century Japan, this lecture demonstrates how and why criticism preceded literature.