

THE BEST OF SCHOLARS AND SCHOLARSHIP IN THE HUMANITIES

6



Roy Starrs

UNDERSTANDING
MODERN JAPAN
Through Its Literature

ibidem

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Through Its Literature

The Best of Scholars and Scholarship in the Humanities

Edited by:

Elliot Y. Neaman, Matthew Feldman, and Karim Mamdani

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Introduction

A Defence of the Humanities

In this age of so many impressive and useful advances in science and technology, the humanities seem in danger of being viewed as the poor relation in the family of academic disciplines—rather like a once-distinguished uncle now reduced to living as an unwelcome houseguest, perhaps even regarded as something of a freeloader. It is true, of course, that the humanities do not attract the kind of substantial research grants that keep universities in clover and help pay the outsized salaries of an increasingly bloated managerial bureaucracy. Consequently, the goal of many university administrators of late seems to be to cut down the humanities to a bare-bones, purely symbolic, absolutely minimal level, just enough to allow them to retain the high-cultural status of the name ‘university’ as opposed to the less culturally prestigious ‘institute of science and technology’. Unfortunately, not only university bureaucrats but also government ministers seem to share this current scepticism about the value of the humanities. Recently, for instance, the New Zealand government announced that it will henceforth provide grants only for ‘practical’ research in science and technology—no more taxpayers’ money will be ‘wasted’ on humanities research, which presumably is now officially dismissed by our government as ‘impractical’. Remarkably, this applies even to the social sciences.

If one looks around the Western world today, the dire consequence of these short-sighted attitudes is obvious: humanities programs are steadily shrinking at many institutions, sometimes to the point where they disappear altogether. Needless to say, this new species of late-capitalist, techno-bureaucratic philistinism did not spring up overnight. It has been growing over the past few decades slowly

but surely, like a metastasizing intellectual cancer. Nor is it restricted to the domain of the famously philistine ‘Anglo-Saxon’ countries. In my own experience, one particular memory stands out: from 2011, when I was invited to give a talk at one of Germany’s most venerable academic institutions, the University of Tübingen. Tübingen, of course, has a remarkably distinguished history in the humanities (as well as in the sciences), counting among its alumni major philosophers, poets, theologians, and novelists—world-renowned figures such as Hegel, Hölderlin, Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and, more recently, Martin Walser. Few other universities in the world could boast such a stellar cast of humanities alumni. One would expect that Tübingen, at least, would remain a proud bastion of humanities scholarship, impervious to the worldwide attacks from short-sighted university bureaucrats and government policy-makers. Sadly, I found that such was not the case: here too humanities scholars were voicing the familiar complaints about ever-diminishing support—both moral and financial—from the powers that be, in stark contrast to the ever-increasing support for science and technology.

In collegial response, though the hour was late, I tried to ‘restructure’ my talk somewhat as a ‘defence of the humanities’. My preannounced topic was ‘religiopolitical terrorism in late 20th century Japan’. By an almost eerie coincidence, a few days before, Europe had experienced its worst terrorist incident in many years: Anders Breivik, the anti-immigrant, anti-Islamic, far-right terrorist, had massacred over seventy people, many of them children, associated with a left-wing political party he blamed for allowing Moslem migrants into Norway. I remember thinking at the time that this tragic incident was also a brutal reminder that critical thinking and humanistic debate remain of crucial importance even—perhaps especially—in an age of science and technology, which

not only bring many benefits but also enable lone-wolf terrorists to cause such unprecedented mayhem. More specifically, at a time when the problems we face, as fellow residents on this small planet, are inescapably global, Breivik's twisted ideology proved the importance of arguing the case for open-hearted 'global thinking' as opposed to mean-spirited and narrow-minded nationalism or nativism. In other words, his act of mass murder, inspired by a familiar far-right *Weltanschauung*—and *Weltschmerz*—demonstrated, albeit in a disastrously negative way, that thought matters, because perverse, hateful, or inadequate thinking can lead to the kind of massive human catastrophe that this one man caused. As the old saying goes: ideas have consequences. And thought of this kind, of course, is very much the domain of the humanities. As often after such incidents of mass murder, a haunting question remained: would all those innocents still be alive if only this one man's thinking had been corrected, either by himself or by some other influential person in his life? Was that at all possible, given his cold-heartedness, peculiar psychology, and politically extremist tendencies? Would it have made any difference, for instance, if he had been exposed more to humanistic values that teach the common humanity of all peoples?

My talk focussed on a rather more civilized far-right figure, the leading postwar Japanese writer Yukio Mishima—who, in fact, specifically condemned the killing of women and children by a Japanese far-right terrorist in 1960. Nonetheless, despite all his great achievements as the author of brilliant novels, short stories, plays, and essays, Mishima ended his life, on November 25, 1970, by launching a terrorist attack against the Japanese army headquarters in Tokyo. Dressed up in a faux-military uniform and accompanied by members of his own private army, he tried to inspire the actual Japanese military to rise up against their civilian government and overturn what Mishima considered to be its

emasculating, American-imposed 'peace constitution' of 1947.

Despite the obvious moral and intellectual gulf between Mishima and Breivik, I argued that they had enough in common to make a comparison instructive—in particular, a general affinity between the ideas that motivated them to resort to terrorist violence. Towards the end of my talk, I showed a picture of Breivik, also dressed in a faux-military uniform, looking for all the world like a wannabe Mishima—that parody of Mishima, of course, who by now has become an icon of sorts in international far-right circles. Although no comparison can be made between the intellectual power or mental clarity of the two men, nonetheless both, in the end, were inspired to commit perverse acts of violence—Mishima as much on himself as on others—because they became entrapped in the emotional and intellectual snares of an extremist far-right ideology. From a larger historical perspective, that ideology is the product of an international Blut-und-Boden 'nativist' reaction against late twentieth and early twenty-first century globalization, which is seen as a threat to 'traditional' albeit newly imagined national cultures and identities. For Mishima, this threat came in the form of the Westernization, and especially 'Coca-Colanization', of Japan after its defeat in the Second World War, turning his country into a pacifist liberal democracy and thereby, in his view, robbing it of its 'samurai spirit' and its emperor-centred *kokutai* (national polity). For Breivik, of course, the perceived threat was the influx of non-European, non-Christian migrants, perniciously undermining, in his view, the supposed ethnic and cultural homogeneity of his homeland.

This begs the question: what defence can the humanities mount against this rising tide of far-right nativism, which has become so dominant at this historical moment that it even controls the executive power of the United States, and is also on the rise across Europe? The answer, I would say,

may be usefully broken into two parts: firstly, understanding the phenomenon; and, secondly, counteracting it.

In terms of understanding the phenomenon, humanities scholarship, of course, has a great deal to offer. It can enable us to trace the genealogy of far-right thought in intellectual history, elucidate the socio-economic conditions in which it thrives, or analyse the psychology of individual far-right extremists. Another important thing it can teach us, in my view, is that the intellectual appeal of far-right ideology is intimately related with its emotional appeal—since human behaviour is often driven more by an emotional response to ideas rather than by a critical analysis of them. For instance, nativist ideology may be said to appeal to a kind of primal, atavistic tribalism that, from the perspective of evolutionary psychology, was no doubt ingrained in the human psyche over millennia of incessant intratribal warfare. Which brings us to the second issue: how to counteract it. If prejudice against the ‘alien other’, and the violent urges that often result from that, is so deeply embedded in the human psyche, what can humanities scholars do to help lessen if not entirely eliminate that prejudice? The urgency of this question was driven home to me, in an acutely painful way, by another horrific terrorist attack that occurred in Christchurch, right next door to where I live, in 2019, resulting in fifty-one deaths and eighty-nine injuries. This was unwelcome proof that Breivik’s appalling action, and the hateful ideology that inspired it, had continued to reverberate throughout the far-right manosphere in the years following 2011. The terrorist who committed that mass murder at a Christchurch mosque eight years later—I will follow our former Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s admirable example and not mention his name—claimed to have been inspired by Breivik.

Of course, one cannot claim with any certainty that a sound, well-rounded humanistic education would have prevented either Breivik or the nameless Christchurch assassin

from perpetrating their crimes—other factors, such as their psychological instability or illness, no doubt played a role. But, generally speaking, for most people, a humanistic education helps cultivate a sense of common humanity and encourages a less fearful and more tolerant view of other peoples and cultures. A rough piece of evidence for that claim might be the educational profile of the nativist MAGA supporters in the USA today, as opposed to the Democratic Party supporters, far many of whom have a liberal-arts education. Of course there are always exceptions—Mishima, for instance. It might be objected that, on the last day of his life, this man of high humanistic education and culture proved himself as capable as anyone of committing acts of terrorist violence. But, on the one hand, as the essay herein on his sadomasochism illustrates, psychologically speaking he was not exactly an ordinary, garden-variety human being, and, on the other, as already noted, he was in fact ‘humane’ enough to condemn far-right violence against women and children.

This raises an interesting and complex question: what exactly is the relation between morality and the humanities in the widest sense—that is, including not just academic scholarship but all kinds of literature and the arts? If we look at the matter historically—that is, at human beings as they have actually behaved over time—what might we conclude? Obviously there is no simple equation between morality and the humanities: we cannot say that the more educated or cultured or artistically creative a person is, the more decently they will behave towards their fellow human beings. To take an extreme example, writers on the Holocaust from Hannah Arendt onwards have noted that some of the Nazi leaders were educated, cultured men, men who enjoyed listening to classical music at night while they perpetrated horrendous crimes during the day. One might argue that these men were

not educated or cultured enough, that they did not really understand the true or deeper meaning of literature and the other arts, and that, in their half-educated or ill-educated way, they exemplified what Arendt called the ‘banality of evil’—efficiently but mindlessly carrying out what they considered to be their bureaucratic duties. We might recall here Alexander Pope’s admonitory lines:

A little learning is a dangerous thing;
 Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring;
 There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
 And drinking largely sobers us again.

The dangers of superficial learning combined with ideological intoxication were perhaps never more aptly expressed. For a perfect example of what Pope meant, one need only read Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*—or, for that matter, Breivik’s 1500-page mishmash of quotations from diverse far-right sources, *2083: A European Declaration of Independence*. Nonetheless, outside of poetry, it is not easy to draw a clear line between a knowledge that is adequate to its subject and one that is dangerously insufficient. Nor is it easy to ascertain exactly how ‘largely’ one must drink of the Pierian spring in order to become an enlightened humanist—that would require a deep dive into philosophy, psychology, aesthetics, and no doubt a number of other humanistic disciplines. However, while we cannot make any simple equivalence between humanistic learning and moral behaviour, we can more simply and safely say that the good fight—the fight against all kinds of narrow-minded prejudice—can be fought only on a humanistic battleground, in the realm of heartfelt words and powerful images. Of course, scientific evidence can support the argument in favour of our common humanity, but the argument itself is best made in the kind of humanistic terms Martin Luther King used in his ‘I have a dream’ speech, including the moving line: ‘I have a dream that my four little children will one

day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character.' Dangerous and inhumane ideologies such as those of the Nazis or terrorists of any religious or political stripe are most effectively challenged by such soaring words and images.

But what exactly is that 'Pierian spring' that Pope said we must drink deeply of, if we are to drink at all? In ancient Greek mythology, it was a spring near Mount Olympus that was sacred to the Muses and thus appeared in Greco-Roman literature as a symbolic fountain of knowledge and of artistic creation. No doubt there are many ways to interpret what Pope means by the dangers of 'a little learning', but, generally speaking, I think he refers to the human tendency to jump to conclusions on the basis of inadequate knowledge. For instance, seeing whole categories of people as absolutely or essentially alien from oneself, perhaps because of a few cultural differences, is certainly one kind of dangerous 'little learning'. If one drinks more deeply of the Pierian spring, one inevitably finds that those 'alien others' have much more in common as fellow human beings than one had imagined. In historical terms, we can see this in the change in Western perceptions of Asians over the past century and a half, since Rudyard Kipling's 'East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet'. By now the twain certainly has met, and generally Westerners today have grown out of the exaggerated sense of an absolute cultural difference between 'East and West' that was common in the 19th century. Much of this change or 'progress', at least on an intellectual level, has been the result of humanities scholarship in 'Asian studies'.

In geopolitical terms, what this means is that, in the 21st century, many of us are beginning to assume more of a 'post-national' viewpoint—that is, to identify more as fellow human beings sharing a small and threatened planet rather than as members of any particular national, religious, or ethnic group. Whatever we may think about globalization as an

economic and sociocultural phenomenon, it is undeniable that the problems that face humanity today require a cooperative ‘global thinking’ for their resolution. And it could be argued that this is a necessary further stage in the evolution of human consciousness—just as the larger ‘imagined identity’ of the nation state replaced many varieties of local identity in the 19th and 20th centuries. ‘We must love one another or die’—W.H. Auden’s words, written on the eve of the Second World War, have now taken on a renewed meaning and urgency.

But, to get to the real heart of this matter, perhaps we need to consider the psychology of the aesthetic experience itself—what happens when we become absorbed in a work of literature, music, or visual art. There is an interesting expression in Japanese: *dokusho zanmai* (読書三昧), which could be translated as ‘totally absorbed in reading’, but the two words literally mean ‘reading *samadhī*’. In other words, the mental state of being totally absorbed in reading is regarded as analogous to Zen or yogic meditation: a monistic experience of ego-transcending subject-object union. Deeply absorbed in a novel, a painting, a movie, in dancing, or in a piece of music, we forget ourselves and our everyday anxieties and become ‘another’. As W.B. Yeats wrote, we reach a state in which we cannot ‘tell the dancer from the dance’. Rather mysteriously, we find this to be a deeply pleasurable and meaningful experience. This essentially ‘unitive’ or monistic power of the aesthetic experience is perhaps most evident with music, by which we can become deeply absorbed in ‘*samadhī*’ almost immediately, without any resistance from our egos. This may be why the Victorian aesthetic theorist Walter Pater famously claimed that all art constantly aspires to a condition of music.

From a sociopolitical viewpoint, however, the problem is that the unitive power of music also can be used for nefarious purposes—such as to unite far-right extremists. In recent

years, for instance, it has been reported that: 'Neo-Nazi music is flourishing worldwide, with sales being a primary source of income for racist groups and a recruiting ground for new members'.¹ Music, of all the arts, is supposed to be the 'universal language', untethered to culturally specific words or images, and yet even music can be made to serve the cause of intolerant nativism.

In his compelling and controversial study of the 'aesthetics of Japanese fascism', Alan Tansman tackles this problem head on. His argument focuses on what he calls 'fascist moments,' which are moments of 'binding' (*musubi*) between self and other, moments that provided the glue for the 'new myth of wholeness' of the imperial Japanese state of the 1930s, based on the 'mystique of national and racial destiny'.² In their more active, war-like phase, fascist moments 'offered images of self-obliteration evoked through the beauty of violence, often in the name of an idealized Japan'.³ The apotheosis of all such moments was the achievement of 'union' with the emperor by death in battle. The far-right poet and essayist Yasuda Yojūrō in particular 'wrote prose that bestowed beauty on the act of self-immolation in war', offering a cure to the 'wounds of modernity'.⁴ The aesthetic-spiritual experience of becoming one with nature or works of art could thus slip imperceptibly into the national-Shinto religio-political experience of becoming one with the emperor or the state: 'Rife with state religious implications, *musubi* suggests the harmonizing powers of the gods and, by extension, the binding power of the state'.⁵ Interestingly, Tansman also offers the counter-example of Virginia Woolf as a writer who, unlike some of her Japanese contemporaries, understood the dangers as well as the attractions of 'unitive moments' to her readers in the 1930s: 'For Woolf there is beauty where there is 'no past, no future; merely the moment in its ring of light, and our bodies; and the inevitable climax, the ecstasy.' But as an acute observer of encroaching fascism in her time,

Woolf understood that merging can be dangerous'.⁶ On the other hand: 'Woolf also saw the social danger that lay in extreme individuation and separateness, and she recognized that merging can provide antifascist forms of solidarity; she punctuates moments when consciousnesses merge by suggestions of friendship and fraternity, allowing us to glimpse the possibility that a merging of identities can yield a modernist antifascist politics'.⁷ In other words, the problem is not the aesthetic-spiritual experience of merging per se but the uses to which it is put. The unitive power of literature and the other arts can also be used to cultivate the humane virtues of tolerance, compassion, and understanding—and surely that is the true and highest goal of the humanities.

With all this in mind, I am delighted to contribute to this series celebrating humanities scholarship. It is particularly welcome at what is certainly a perilous moment in Western intellectual and political history, and I am very grateful to the series editors, Mathew Feldman and Elliot Neaman, for bringing it to life. May it grow and flourish!

The Literary Gateway to Understanding Modern Japan

The title of this book may seem quite straightforward, but its major terms—'modern Japan', 'understanding', even 'literature'—require some clarification. 'Modern', for instance, is a rather elastic term that can be stretched from the present historical moment to encompass centuries—historians of Japan often speak of an 'early modern' period that begins with the advent of the Tokugawa shogunate in 1603. From the literary-historical perspective adopted here, however, 'modern' refers to a specific period—from about 1868, the year of the Meiji Restoration, to the postwar era, ending somewhere in the 1970s or, at the latest, the 1980s, when Japan's century-long nation-building project culminated in the capitalist boom years of the 1970s and 80s. This was the period of the

country's rapid modernization, when it transformed from an isolated feudal society into a modern nation state and a significant cultural and economic presence on the international scene. In literary terms, the period begins with pioneer modern writers such as Futabatei Shimei (1864-1909), Mori Ōgai (1862-1922), and Natsume Sōseki (1867-1916), and ends with a trinity of great modern writers: Tanizaki Jun'ichirō (1886-1965), Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972), and Mishima Yukio (1925-1970)—in my view, the greatest Japanese novelists of the 20th century, along of course with Sōseki. In other words, 'modern' here does not refer to present-day literature or culture. After the death of Kawabata, Japan's first Nobel Prize winner in literature, in 1972, Japanese literature became progressively 'postmodern', with the new generation of writers such as Murakami Haruki and Yoshimoto Banana. One obvious distinction between the 'moderns' and the 'post-moderns'—apart from, again in my view, the clear superiority of the former in terms of literary quality—is that the moderns are more deeply rooted in the national literary tradition, whereas the postmoderns are the cosmopolitan 'post-national' offspring of late 20th century globalization—in other words, more thoroughly Americanized by Japan's postwar Coca-Colanization.

Thus the 'literature' in my title refers to a specific kind of Japanese literature: modern fiction mainly of the early to mid-20th century, rather than to the postmodern fiction of today. Of course, a country's or a culture's fundamental moral and spiritual values change—if at all—far more slowly than its literary fashions, and I would contend that the modern Japanese fiction I deal with here, being so deeply grounded in the national tradition, has, in fact, more to teach us about the 'real Japan—that is, the deepest level of the country's literary, intellectual, and spiritual culture—than much of the fiction being written today, which often seems to

have about as much national character as a global fast-food restaurant or an international airport.

Finally, regarding the word ‘understanding’: there are, of course, many different ways to try to ‘understand’ such a vast, complex, and ever-evolving reality as ‘Japan’—by studying its history, its cultural, sociopolitical and religious traditions, its geopolitical situation, its natural environment, and so on. But my claim here is that Japanese literature gives us a privileged ‘insider’ view that can be obtained in no other way—in particular, an insider’s understanding of what might be regarded as the *kokoro* (心), the very heart and soul, of Japanese culture: its moral and spiritual values. This is not merely an abstract matter of theoretical or philosophical interest, since those values are also what guide human thought and behaviour even in the most practical affairs or struggles of everyday life.

A central concern of my own study of Japanese literature, evidenced particularly in the extended studies contained herein of three major Japanese writers—Shiga, Kawabata, and Mishima—has been the ways in which these 20th century writers called upon the moral and spiritual resources of their own cultural tradition to help them respond to the challenges of the modern world: most famously, perhaps, the sense of ‘alienation’ produced by Japan’s extremely rapid pace of modernization. Each in their own way, these three writers drew upon—or had their suffering alter ego/protagonists draw upon—the spiritual traditions of their country in their search for meaning, for psychological healing, or even for some form of ultimate ‘salvation’ from a profound existential anxiety. Generally speaking, Shiga and Kawabata turned to folk-Shinto and Buddhist natural mysticism, while Mishima turned to the more ‘supernatural’ mysticism of the kind of national-Shinto emperor-worship analysed by Alan Tansman. (More eccentrically, the other major literary figure of the Shōwa era [1926-1989], Tanizaki Jun’ichirō, sought

his 'salvation' in a kind of erotic Tantric-style mysticism combined with an Orthodox-Christian-style 'holy mother' worship that he reportedly absorbed from his grandfather, a Russian-Orthodox convert.) With Shiga, Kawabata, and Mishima, at any rate, the ultimate 'salvation' towards which their narratives gravitate is characteristic in one important respect of traditional East Asian mysticism: it involves dissolution of the personal ego in some great transcendent reality, be it the Dao (literally, 'Way') of Nature, a cosmic Buddhaimind, or the divine Emperor. However, the problem is that, as 'modern' Japanese, these writers were already somewhat alienated from their own religious or spiritual traditions, so that their resort to them often involved struggle, frustration, and even failure.

The seminal early treatment of this key literary theme or problematic—its modern locus classicus, one might say—is in a 1910 novel entitled *The Gate (Mon)* by the most highly esteemed Japanese writer of the 20th century, Natsume Sōseki (1867-1916). Given the central significance of this problematic in the later Japanese literature I deal with in this volume, it is worth taking a closer look here at how it is handled by this most influential of modern Japanese novelists.

The central protagonist of *The Gate*, Sōsuke—who, as usual in Sōseki's fiction, is more or less an alter ego of the author himself—is a modern intellectual who suffers from various stresses, anxieties, and vaguely defined (at first) guilt feelings. When he is given the opportunity to spend some time in a Zen monastery, he embraces it in the hope that a little Zen training might be exactly what he needs. As the narrator tells us:

If it were true, as people from olden times had believed, that it was possible to reach the stage of calm resignation through the power of *zazen* [seated meditation], then he thought that he himself would like to try it. He could easily take ten or twenty days off from work. But the way of Zen was completely foreign to him. He had no good idea how to go about entering it.⁸

Despite his freely avowed ignorance and inexperience of Zen, he has high hopes for what might be accomplished:

Enraptured by the magic sound of the word *satori* [awakening or enlightenment], he set out upon an adventure that was different from anything he had ever experienced in his ordinary life. If by chance he should succeed he even had the fleeting hope that his present troubled, weak, irresolute self might be rescued.⁹

At the monastery he is duly instructed on how to do *zazen*, and the *roshi* or Zen master gives him a *kōan* or ‘meditation question’ to work on, one of the more famous ones: ‘what was my face before my parents were born?’ Poor Sōsuke is unable to provide any answer to this purposely mind-boggling question that satisfies the *roshi*: he ‘did not understand what he meant, but he judged that the *roshi* wanted him to find out who he really was, to grasp his essential self’.¹⁰ That is true enough on an intellectual level, but Zen masters—as I know from my own bitter experience—demand answers that come from the gut (*hara*), not from the intellect, and so in this case, needless to say, the master summarily rejects Sōsuke’s answers as superficial and merely bookish. Also, the aspiring Zen novice suffers from the aching legs and back and restless ‘monkey mind’ common to beginning meditators: ‘Only his body was motionless; his mind was painfully active, almost unbearably so’.¹¹ Soon enough he gives up. This is described in a way that reminds us that Sōseki began his novelistic career as a humourist:

Finally he decided that if meditation were the aim, then it was just as easy to meditate lying down as sitting. He stretched out the grubby quilts that were folded in a corner of the room and crawled into them. He had no sooner done so than, fatigued by the events of the day, he fell into a deep sleep, without having had even a moment to meditate.¹²

In short, far from being the restful therapeutic retreat he had hoped for, his brief stay at the monastery leaves him even

more psychologically disturbed than he was previously: 'because of his meditation his nerves seemed to be getting more on edge than they were before.... He was a poor fool who had come here with the sole intention of cutting himself loose from the entangling complications of his daily life, and had wound up instead lost and confused in a detour on this mountain'.¹³ Finally, shortly before he leaves the monastery, he expresses his exasperation to Gido, the young monk who has been caring for him: 'There doesn't seem to be much chance of anyone like me ever reaching *satori*'.¹⁴

Gido, of course, protests, and, in typical Zen terms, exhorts him to persevere: 'Not at all. Anyone determined to reach *satori* can do so.... You've got to pit yourself full force against the taut strength of the *Lotus Sutra*, just as if you were beating a drum. When you have become saturated from head to foot with the *kōan*, a new heaven and a new earth will suddenly open up before your eyes'.¹⁵ But Sōsuke is exhausted and lacks the will to go on. Dejectedly, he returns home: 'The Sōsuke that crossed the threshold of his own house again cut a sad figure indeed, even to his own eyes'.¹⁶

Nonetheless, it is important to note that other characters in the novel, unlike Sōsuke, Sōseki's alter ego, are represented as having achieved *satori*—in particular Gido, the young monk who tries to initiate Sōsuke into Zen practice. As the narrator tells us:

The day he achieved enlightenment he ran up the mountain behind the temple in an excess of joy and shouted out in a loud voice, 'Grass, trees, animals, men—everything is Buddha!' And he shaved his head.¹⁷

So this begs the question: why, in Sōseki's view, is Gido able to 'awaken', but not Sōsuke? Why is Sōsuke—or Sōseki himself—condemned to remain forever 'outside the gate' of the serene, spiritually liberated world of Zen? The answer to this question is made clear by the narrator: as a modern, West-

ernized intellectual, he suffers from an overly complex, conflicted mentality—torn between modern ways of thinking and his attraction to the serene simplicity of the East Asian spiritual tradition of Zen:

In his present mood he envied the unsubtle simplicity of the fool, who follows a course of action without having to weigh the possibilities or puzzle over the means; and he looked with near reverence upon the dedication of the simple good men and women who were firmly anchored in their beliefs and undisturbed by intellectual doubts'.¹⁸

In other words, as a modern, Westernized intellectual, Sōsuke is troubled by 'intellectual doubts' and thus cannot attain the state of *mushin* (no-mind) or *munen* (no-thought) necessary for deep absorption (*samadhi*) in Zen meditation.

From Sōseki's biographers and also from a memoir by the Zen monk who had hosted him at his temple in 1895, we know that this fictional episode is a fairly accurate account of his own experience when he tried to follow the 'way of Zen' as a young man. In fact, he never lost his interest or belief in Zen as a way of spiritual liberation—albeit not, apparently, in his view, one that was accessible to a 'neurotic' modern intellectual such as himself. Given his desperate longing for a way out of his psychological unrest and anxiety, there is a certain pathos in this. Despite his faith in Zen and thirst for the enlightenment and liberation it promised, he felt himself excluded forever from the 'consolations of religion'. Shortly before he died, he wrote a letter to two young Zen monks of his acquaintance, confessing that he very much regretted not having followed the 'Way of Zen' more faithfully:

It's a painful thing to say, but I am a foolish man who has realized for the first time at the age of fifty [forty-nine by Western reckoning] that I must seek the Way. Wondering when I will achieve this, I am dismayed to think how very distant it still seems. You two are specialists in Zen, still a mystery to me, but as you have labored to practice the Way while I have squandered my fifty years, I can hardly say how much more fortunate you are than I, how much more distinguished your purpose is than mine. I commend and venerate your understanding.¹⁹

Sōseki was not alone among his contemporaries in his attraction to Zen. In fact, there was something of a ‘Zen boom’ around the turn of the 20th century among intellectuals who felt disaffected by Japan’s rapid modernization and turned to this spiritual tradition as a form of psychological therapy. This gives, of course, a larger significance to *The Gate* as an expression of the zeitgeist. Sōsuke is very much representative of his generation of intellectuals in their struggles with the ‘heavy psychological costs of modernity’.

Of course, this raises another significant question: was Sōsuke/Sōseki right about the inaccessibility of Zen to modern intellectuals such as themselves who lacked the necessary ‘simplicity’ of mind? This was a question that continued to haunt modern Japanese literature at its deepest level. As I have already suggested, a number of the major modern writers who came after Sōseki were not as pessimistic as he was in their answers to this question. As will be seen, these later writers—or, at least, their protagonists—were more successful in their resort to traditional East Asian spiritual traditions such as Zen.

Although there is a tradition in Zen of the illiterate but enlightened ‘Zen idiot’—most famously Huineng (638-713), the sixth patriarch of Chinese Zen—its ‘anti-intellectual’ reputation is at best a symbolic myth and at worst a mere superficial stereotype held by people who have never set foot in a Zen monastery. In reality, compared to other more popular Buddhist traditions such as the ‘Pure Land’ Amidist devotional sect, Zen is a highly philosophical and highly literary tradition that has always attracted many writers, artists, and intellectuals. In fact, Zen practice in monasteries involves intensive study of both religious and literary classics, as dealt with in depth by one of the most authoritative contemporary Zen monk-scholars, Victor Sōgen Hori.²⁰ As for the supposed incompatibility of modernity with Zen, as already mentioned, by the early 20th century the psychological stresses of

Japan's modernization actually created a 'Zen boom' among intellectuals such as Sōseki himself, as his novel testifies.

What gives all this a larger meaning, of course, is that, in talking of Zen, we are not just talking about one of many Japanese religious traditions—we are talking about the spiritual tradition at the very heart of Japanese culture. As many leading writers on Japanese cultural history have attested, Zen has been a major shaping force of the culture since the Middle Ages, influencing everything from aesthetics to architecture, haiku to gardening to tea ceremony, interior design to philosophical worldview, and even the Japanese work ethic. Authoritative studies that address this issue—to name just three of the most famous—include D.T. Suzuki's *Zen and Japanese Culture*, Kawabata Yasunari's Nobel Prize acceptance speech, *Japan the Beautiful and Myself*, and Donald Keene's *Yoshimasa and the Silver Pavilion: The Creation of the Soul of Japan*. In philosophical terms, Zen's worldview is ultimately monistic—which is why, for instance, it challenges the use of language to represent reality, since language is inherently dualistic, given that words are designed to distinguish one thing from another. Thus the *kōan* system that so perplexes Sōsuke is paradoxical not merely for the sake of being so but because it tries to use language, which is inherently dualistic, to transcend dualism. To 'pass' a *kōan*, the Zen student must demonstrate to the master an understanding that transcends the inherent dualism of the very language used in the *kōan*—not an easy task!

Although this Buddhist philosophy may seem extremely obscure, theoretical, or arcane, it has permeated Japanese popular culture to a remarkable extent, so that even the ordinary man or woman in the street who has never thought about Zen philosophy will use words in their everyday language that reflect the influence of that philosophy. As the eminent scholar of Japanese culture, Sir George Sansom, pointed out, one consequence of this is a general feeling that

words alone are inadequate for communication. In modestly excusing his own ‘failure’ to ‘chart the main intellectual currents in Japanese history’, Sansom observed:

... I fear I did not succeed in showing the characteristic attitude of the Japanese towards moral and philosophical problems—their intuitive, emotional approach and their mistrust of logic and analysis. Yet perhaps I may be excused for this failure, seeing that the quintessence of Japanese thought is to be found in Zen Buddhism or in other philosophical systems whose doctrines are by definition incommunicable by the written word and can be made clear only by some inner illumination.²¹

What this also means, of course, is that literature takes on a particular importance in the Japanese cultural context, because creative literary works are thought to be better at trying to ‘communicate the incommunicable’, the truths that can be expressed only through emotion and intuition. That is why, for instance, much use is made of poetry in Zen monastic training, and why some of Japan’s—and China’s—greatest poets (and painters) were Zen monks. It is also why there is no better way to understand modern Japan than through its literature, as I hope to show herein.

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- 1 *Al Jazeera*, August 23, 2012. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2012/8/24/us-neo-nazi-music-scene-flourishing>. See also Kirsten Dyck, *Reichsrock: The International Web of White-Power and Neo-Nazi Hate Music* (Rutgers University Press, 2017).
 - 2 Alan Tansman, *The Aesthetics of Japanese Fascism*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), p. 18.
 - 3 *ibid.*
 - 4 *ibid.*, p. 53.
 - 5 *ibid.*, p.19.
 - 6 *ibid.*, p.277.
 - 7 *ibid.*
 - 8 Natsume Sōseki, *Mon (The Gate)*, translated by Francis Mathy. (New York: Putnam, 1982), p. 177.
 - 9 *ibid.*, p.187.
 - 10 *ibid.*, p.186.
 - 11 *ibid.*, p.188.
 - 12 *ibid.*
 - 13 *ibid.*, p. 202.

- 14 *ibid.*
- 15 *ibid.*
- 16 *ibid.*, p.205.
- 17 *ibid.*, p.198.
- 18 *ibid.*, p.204.
- 19 Quoted in John Nathan, *Sōseki: Modern Japan's Greatest Novelist*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), pp. 258-9.
- 20 Victor Sōgen Hori, 'Kōan and Kenshō in the Rinzai Zen Curriculum', in Steven Heine and Dale Wright, *The Kōan: Texts and Contexts in Zen Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- 21 G. B. Sansom, *Japan: A Short Cultural History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1952), p. vi.

Part One:

Essays

1. Lafcadio Hearn as Japanese Nationalist

Introduction

The centenary of Lafcadio Hearn's death fell in 2004, and a number of conferences and other events to celebrate the man and his work were held worldwide, but especially in Japan and Ireland (although in Ireland the national newspaper referred to him as 'the most famous Irishman you've never heard of.¹⁾). Even the Japanese Post Office entered the spirit of the occasion by issuing a commemorative stamp—a very attractive one, as can be seen in Figure 1. It shows Hearn in a demure, dreamy pose, appropriate for a writer of ghost stories, fairy tales, and romantic travelogues about exotic, faraway lands. But, as always with Hearn, things are not quite what they seem; the picture is a little deceptive. He always assumed this type of pose when photographed—either turning his face to the left or turning his eyes down—not because he was dreaming of faraway things but to hide a facial disfigurement: he had lost his left eye, possibly in a schoolyard fight, at the age of sixteen, and he was so sensitive about this that, even when he talked to people face-to-face, he would often cover his 'dead eye' with his left hand.



[Figure 1]

The flower, I presume, despite its pinkish hue, is a shamrock, to represent his Irish background. At the bottom left of the stamp appears his Japanese name, Koizumi Yakumo (小泉八雲), above his English one. Koizumi was his wife's family name, and he chose the name Yakumo to represent Izumo, the area of Japan where he first lived and that he remained most fond of.

During his lifetime Hearn was relatively unknown in Japan but already a widely celebrated author in the West, not only for his books on Japan but for his colorful 'regionalist' writings on the French West Indies and on the American cities of Cincinnati and New Orleans, as well as for his excellent translations of nineteenth-century French literature. Now the situation is more or less reversed—as the quote from the Irish newspaper indicates. In Japan his work has been accepted as an important part of the popular national literary canon, as the commemorative postage stamp shows, and there is a burgeoning industry of Hearn scholarship, led by the doyen of Japanese Hearn scholars, Hirakawa Sukehiro (平

川祐弘), Emeritus Professor of Tokyo University, who has done more than anyone to ensure that Hearn's work receives serious scholarly attention.

The reasons for the precipitous decline of Hearn's reputation in the West are no doubt many and various, but if we look at the matter from a historical perspective I think we can summarize them as follows: in the period when especially the English-speaking world's attitude toward Japan took a negative turn—that is, in the 1930s and 40s—his view of Japan was regarded as naïve at best and as deceitfully propagandistic at worst. A further blow to his reputation was dealt by the post-colonial literary-critical movement that began in the late 1970s with Edward Said's book, *Orientalism*.² Now Hearn, when his existence was acknowledged at all, was often dismissed as an arch-Orientalist, another exoticist like Pierre Loti (a particularly unfair comparison, given that Loti's attitude toward Japan and his treatment of the Japanese was often openly contemptuous, especially in regard to women, whereas Hearn always treated Japan in general and Japanese women in particular with a gentlemanly respect and consideration).

But all this may have begun to change in the past few years: there have been several substantial and quite fascinating biographies written in English, a few scholarly essay collections, and selected anthologies of his writings.³ And, of course, travellers to Japan continue to discover the pleasure and insight to be had from his writings. In the present essay I have no intention of serving as an apologist for Hearn but, on the other hand, since much of what I say might sound fairly critical, I also don't want to give the impression that I'm dismissive of his work. Quite the contrary: I continue to take great pleasure in his writings on Japan, and I am still convinced that there is much to be learnt from them.

i. Hearn as Nationalist and Internationalist

It could be said of Lafcadio Hearn that he was an internationalist by birth and experience but a nationalist by conviction. Or, to put this another way, from the viewpoint of his personal history, he could be described as one of the first multinational or transnational 'global citizens,' a significant early example of a kind of person who is becoming increasingly more common in the twentieth century: in his particular case, a Greek-Anglo-Irish American deeply acquainted with French and Creole culture who ended up as an honoured citizen of Japan. Also, of course, through the many popular books he wrote on Japan, he served as a kind of facilitator of international, cross-cultural understanding. And yet, paradoxically one would think, the worldview he espouses in these books seems to contradict the very internationalism that he himself embodied.

To give just one striking example: he includes as an appendix of *Japan: An Attempt at Interpretation* (his major theoretical work on Japan) a letter of advice to Japan from his intellectual hero, Herbert Spencer, in which Spencer warns the Japanese to keep 'Americans and Europeans as much as possible at arm's length.'⁴ Spencer even goes so far as to recommend that the Japanese government 'peremptorily interdict marriages of Japanese with foreigners.'⁵ Any child produced by such a union, he adds, will be 'a bad hybrid.'⁶ No doubt Spencer's advice was well-intentioned, but it was based on an unspoken and typically Victorian assumption of Western superiority: in his particular social-Darwinist terms, Japanese civilization was less evolved than its Western counterpart, and therefore, like a hothouse flower suddenly exposed to the outside world, it would inevitably wilt and wither if overexposed to the greater force and survival skill of the West. Its only chance of survival was to withdraw as far as possible back into the *sakoku* or national isolation it had imposed on itself in the Edo period. Needless to say, in the more

than century since Spencer proffered his advice, Japan has proven time and again that she has nothing to fear from open competition with the West, and that, indeed, she is among the very fittest at surviving—if one wishes to view the world in those Darwinian and nationalist terms.

Of course, Spencer's racial views are not particularly surprising—in fact, they are quite typical of the age. But it does seem odd that Hearn, himself a 'hybrid' or 'mixed-race' Westerner (in those days, we must remember, Greeks were considered to be 'Orientals' by West Europeans), for many years employed by the Japanese government, married to a Japanese, and the proud father of children from that union,⁷ should so heartily endorse Spencer's advice as the best way forward for Japan, and even express regret that his advice has not been followed more closely (although he does note with approbation that 'the law has wisely provided that the Japanese woman marrying a foreigner thereby becomes a foreigner, and that the children by such a marriage remain foreigners.'⁸). It certainly makes one wonder how a man could be so openly self-contradictory but, at the same time, whether self-contradiction is not in some sense deeply characteristic of Hearn's thought and writing as a whole.

To take another major example: if the Japanese language and Japanese culture in general is so profoundly *sui generis* that it can be understood only by the Japanese themselves, as he often seemed to imply, then what business had he, as a foreigner, in claiming to write interpretations of even the 'inner life,' the very *kokoro*, of the Japanese? In his position as a foreigner interpreting Japan, would he not have been better advised to emphasize those aspects of Japanese culture that are universally human and therefore recognizable even to a Greek-Anglo-Irish American such as himself? Before attempting to answer such questions, I think we must investigate more deeply the source of Hearn's self-contradictions.

I would like to address three main questions here: firstly, what was Hearn's position regarding nationalism and related issues before he came to Japan? Secondly, what was the political and cultural background of nationalism and related issues in late Meiji Japan during the fourteen years that Hearn lived there? Thirdly, in what way, if any, did Hearn's position regarding nationalism and related issues change during his years in Japan? Of course, a whole book could probably be written in answer to each of these questions, and here I have time only to sketch out some tentative answers.

ii. Hearn's Position on Nationalism before Japan

Needless to say, one's form of nationalism depends very much on one's concept of what constitutes a 'nation.' My own country, Canada, has recently taken to calling its Indian and Inuit or Eskimo tribes 'first nations,' thus implying that they merit a degree of political and cultural sovereignty. When Hearn wrote about American or Caribbean Creoles he was writing about 'nations' in this old-fashioned sense, as distinctive ethno-cultures. This was the sense favored by Johann Gottfried von Herder, the eighteenth-century German philosopher who is credited with coining the term 'nationalism.' In fact, the pre-Japan Hearn might be justly described as an Herderian nationalist, as opposed to a modern state nationalist. That is, he was a kind of gentle, nostalgic, Romantic nationalist, or what we might call today a regionalist or folklorist. Certainly, he was far from being a Greek, Anglo-Irish, or American nationalist in the modern sense of the word. Rather he was a celebrant of alternate, peripheral, minority cultures, cultures that, in the late nineteenth century, were already disappearing before the homogenizing, hegemonic power of the modern nation states. As Isaiah Berlin, a very eloquent writer on Herder and his influence, has pointed

out, Herder's philosophy of national cultures was formed in opposition to the French Enlightenment ideal of a universally valid human culture based on the supposed laws of reason. For Herder cultural diversity rather than universality was the ideal; every culture was the unique product of a particular time and place and had its own unique values that could not be judged by any universal laws or standards. As Berlin wittily puts it:

For Herder everything is delightful. He is delighted by Babylon and he is delighted by Assyria, he is delighted by India and he is delighted by Egypt. He thinks well of the Greeks, he thinks well of the Middle Ages, he thinks well of the 18th century, he thinks well of almost everything except the immediate environment of his own time and place. If there is anything which Herder dislikes it is the elimination of one culture by another. He does not like Julius Caesar because Julius Caesar trampled on a lot of Asiatic cultures, and we shall now not know what the Cappadocians were really after. He does not like the Crusades, because the Crusades damaged the Byzantines, or the Arabs, and these cultures have every right to the richest and fullest self-expression, without the trampling feet of a lot of imperialist knights.⁹

Berlin is equally witty in sketching a portrait of someone who, knowingly or not, is one of Herder's descendants—and certainly we can easily recognize Hearn's features here:

[Herder] is the originator all those antiquarians who want natives to remain as native as possible, who like arts and crafts, who detest standardisation—everyone who likes the quaint, people who wish to preserve the most exquisite forms of old provincialism without the impingement on it of some hideous metropolitan uniformity. Herder is the father, the ancestor, of all those travellers, all those amateurs, who go round the world ferreting out all kinds of forgotten forms of life, delighting in everything that is peculiar, everything that is odd, everything that is native, everything that is untouched. In that sense he did feed the streams of human sentimentality to a very high degree.¹⁰

One is reminded by Berlin's last witticism that Hearn too, true to form as a stereotypical Herderian as defined by Berlin, also had a pronounced tendency to sentimentalize Japanese

culture. One can see this clearly, to give just one example, in his *Kokoro* story, 'At a Railway Station,' which purports to depict an actual event Hearn himself witnessed: the remorse, even emotional breakdown, of a criminal when confronted by the young son of a man he had murdered—an episode that Hearn presents as proof of 'that potential love of children which is so large a part of the soul of every Japanese.'¹¹ Yuzo Ota (太田雄三) has demonstrated convincingly that this moving display of remorseful sentiment is a pure fabrication, and that, in the real incident (which Hearn did not personally witness but read about in a newspaper), the murderer expressed only a perfunctory and indirect apology, and not to the boy but to the victim's wife and mother. Judging by the original newspaper account, in fact, the murderer was not a sentimentalist with a soft spot for children—he was plainly the kind of calculating, cold-blooded killer that can be found among criminals everywhere.¹² The fact that Hearn felt the need to sentimentalize the incident says much about his general approach to the representation of Japanese society and culture for a Western readership.

iii. The Meiji Context of Hearn's Writings on Japan

Hearn arrived in Japan in 1890 and stayed there until his death in 1904. What was the socio-political context of this particular period in Japan? The last decade of the nineteenth century is generally characterized as a reactionary or traditionalist period which saw the creation of the modern version of Japanese political and cultural nationalism. The Meiji Constitution of 1889 and the Sino-Japanese war of 1895 were the two defining events of this decade, and, needless to say, both of these bolstered conservatism and nationalism. The Meiji Constitution and civil code aimed to create a state system that recognized family rather than individual rights,

and that defined the family as a traditional patriarchal system in which the husband/father was all-powerful, a micro-cosmic version of the emperor—and, indeed, his power was seen to derive entirely from the state and to be sanctioned by the state. In this sense the Meiji Constitution aimed to create an anti-modern state that was rooted in Japanese tradition and that would thus foster a society that was more disciplined, unified, and loyal to the state than were its Western rivals.

Thus, when Hearn arrived in Japan in 1890, the movement towards nationalism and a return to tradition was already in full swing. After the popular liberal democratic movements of the Meiji tens (1877–1887), which had led to peasant riots and other forms of social disorder, the Meiji twenties (1887–1897) saw a conservative counter-reaction. The consolidation of power of the naturally conservative oligarchy in government and industry was accompanied by a promotion of nationalism and traditionalism in the socio-cultural realm. The rapid pace of modernization since 1868 had produced social and psychological tensions that seemed to threaten the stability not only of society as whole (as in the case of the peasant riots) but of individual human minds. Some turned to Christianity or other foreign religions or ideologies for answers, but many educated Japanese began to call upon the moral and spiritual resources of their own cultural and religious traditions in order to try to resolve their existential anxieties. There was a revived interest in Zen and in Shinto, in the Japanese literary classics, as well as in many other aspects of traditional culture. It might also be said that, for many, Japan itself, the new reconstructed nation with the emperor on high as sacred father figure, became a kind of substitute religion—and, of course, the new national Shinto encouraged this trend. A Japanist Association (*Nippon-shugi kyōkai* 日本主義協会) was established in 1897—

very much as if *Nippon-shugi* or Japanism were itself a new religio-political ideology.

In the background of Meiji nationalist thought, of course, there was always an intense sense of rivalry with the West: a famous nationalist writer of the day, Tokutomi Sohō (徳富蘇峰), for instance, argued that the Japanese had to become more nationalistic in order to defend themselves against the West. Ishikawa Takuboku (石川啄木) wrote of the ‘awakening of the nation as a result of the Sino-Japanese war.’¹³ Another influential figure, Takayama Chogyū (高山樗牛), one of the major nationalist ideologues of the day, argued that the Sino-Japanese war, despite the Japanese victory in that war, had, paradoxically, heightened Japan’s awareness of its precarious peripheral position on the edge of a continent that was a great battleground for imperial rivalries. As Carol Gluck has pointed out, in 1897 Takayama also claimed, along with Inoue Tetsujirō (井上哲次郎), another ‘leading proponent of Japanism,’ that ‘the war had transformed the people’s understanding of the Rescript on Education and changed the spirit of loyalty and patriotism from empty theory and half belief into concrete “national consciousness.” It had also enhanced national confidence and pride of empire at the expense of an age-old cultural respect for China.’¹⁴

Indeed, the Japanese of this time created their own powerful ideology of imperialism—powerful enough to convince not only themselves but also some other Asian and Western sympathizers and Japanophiles. (We must remember that this was long before the Imperial Army began its 1930’s rampage across Asia—it was an age when even liberal opinion could be in favor of imperialism as a ‘liberating’ or ‘civilizing’ force.) Many so-called pan-Asianists argued that it was Japan’s mission to expand its rule to the continent to establish a Pax Japonica that would bring peace, freedom, and modernization to the other, more backward peoples of Asia (a classic imperialist argument, of course, and, needless to say,

one that is still very much with us today).¹⁵ It is a sign of the times that even the Christian leader Uchimura Kanzō (内村鑑三) justified Japan's invasion of Korea in 1895 on these 'civilizing' grounds—though he would later change his mind after he saw more of the reality of what was happening on the ground.¹⁶

In short, the period when Hearn lived in Japan was a period when aggressive modern state nationalism was at its height.

iv. The Change in Hearn's Nationalism

It is perhaps not entirely surprising, then, that Hearn too, as someone who was very sympathetic to Japan, became infected with what was, for him, a new type of nationalism. In letters to his friends he joked about his position as a hireling of the Japanese state, and some writers have suggested that, because he was an employee of the Meiji government, he felt obliged to tow the official line in his public pronouncements about Japan—as if he became no more than a mouthpiece of government propaganda.¹⁷ But I think there is far more to it than that because, as I have said, he was a nationalist of sorts—that is, a defender of threatened peoples and cultures—before even coming to Japan. Somewhat paradoxically, it was only because he was that kind of Herderian nationalist that he was susceptible to the appeal of the Japanese version—and only the Japanese version—of modern state nationalism.

And what kind of Japanese nationalist did Hearn become? As it turns out, a very mainstream kind of nationalist in the context of turn-of-the-century Japan. For instance, in 1891 Hozumi Yatsuka (穂積八束), who along with Inoue Tetsujirō was a leading theorist of so-called 'familial-state nationalist thought,' wrote: 'Our country is an ancestor-religion country, a family institution country. Authority, power, and

law originate in the family.’¹⁸ This could stand as a neat summary of a good part of Hearn’s message in *Japan: An Attempt at Interpretation*, written more than a decade later. In other words, despite his rather elementary level of literacy in the Japanese language, Hearn somehow managed to absorb the mainstream nationalist thought, ideology and discourse of late Meiji Japan—no doubt partly at least because he taught in government schools. There is very little in *Japan: An Attempt at Interpretation*, in fact, that would seem out of place in the works of the leading Japanese nationalist writers of the day—or even in a Meiji-government-approved textbook. Certainly all the basic ingredients are there: a ‘national morality’ based on filial piety; a patriarchal family system in which the husband/father is all-powerful, a microcosmic version of the emperor; ancestor worship leading, through the emperor, to a kind of state worship; Japan as a country whose unique virtue derives from its divine provenance; this myth presented to the nation by the state as a new state religion, belief in which is mandatory—in short, the major principles of nationalist thought as they took shape in late Meiji and as they would later be enshrined in two books that assumed great importance for the militarists of the 1930s and 40s, the *Kokutai no hongi* (国体の本義、Principles of the National Polity) and the *Shinmin no michi* (臣民の道、The Way of the Subject). (This is not to say, of course, that Hearn’s understanding of the major components of Japanese culture was complete or always accurate from a native point of view. His emphasis on the Gothic, ‘ghostly’ aspects of Shinto, for instance, has been questioned by Japanese scholars who have suggested that it has more to do with Irish than with Japanese mythology and folk tradition.¹⁹)

It might be added that Hearn’s ‘revitalization’ of Japanese folktales by an imaginative rewriting of them to appeal to modern taste—perhaps his greatest achievement as a creative writer—was also very much in the nationalist spirit of

the day. As with earlier German Romantic nationalists such as the Grimm brothers, turn-of-the-century Japanese Romantic nationalists such as Shimazaki Tōson (島崎藤村) had begun to discover in folktales a popular expression of the 'national soul.' In a poetic manifesto written in 1904, the year of Hearn's death, Tōson proclaimed that: 'Youthful imagination has awoken from its long slumber and adorns itself with the words of the common folk! Legends have come back to life!'²⁰

But it should also be pointed out that nationalism was not the only popular intellectual current in Hearn's Japan: indeed, the 'native' Japanese nationalist writers, if I might call them that to distinguish them from Hearn, were very much aware, in shaping their new ideological construct of Japan, of being in contention with what they regarded as antithetical movements, such as socialism, Christianity, and Nietzschean individualism, which were also on the rise in late Meiji Japan. Was Hearn naively unaware of these ideological battles in the Japanese society that surrounded him? Not entirely, I suspect, but, judging from his writings, he would have agreed with his fellow nationalists that such Western-derived philosophies, ideologies and religions were fundamentally incompatible with Japanese culture and therefore posed a danger to its survival. (Christianity, for instance, he described with some hyperbole as 'excepting, perhaps, the division of the imperial house against itself in the twelfth century, the greatest danger that ever threatened Japanese national integrity'.²¹ A greater danger than even the Mongol invasions!?) Thus, he chose to side with the conservatives or, it could be said, the reactionaries of the Meiji political establishment.

What was it about Japan—as opposed to, say, Ireland, England or America—that changed Hearn from an old-fashioned Romantic Herderian nationalist into a more aggressive or militant modern state nationalist? On the one hand, Japan's culture seemed threatened with extinction—he agreed

with Spencer that this was the threat posed by the West. On the other hand, in contrast to the Creoles and the Afro-Caribbeans he had written about earlier with such nostalgia—so that he was often described in the American media as an ‘elegist of dying cultures’—the Japanese were just strong enough to have a chance of escaping the fate of other non-Western peoples. (We must remember the extraordinary fact that, of all non-Western nations at that time, Japan alone seemed capable of preserving its independence.) In other words, in Japan he found a non-Western civilization that actually seemed to have a chance of surviving, but, in his view, it could survive only by outdoing the West as an imperialist nation state. Needless to say, this was also the view of many of his Japanese contemporaries.

In becoming a modern state nationalist Hearn parted company with Herder, but not with all of Herder’s followers: many later German Romantics, in response to Napoleon’s conquest of their divided lands, also became fervent state nationalists. But Herder himself was strongly opposed to the newly emerging modern nation states, even in his native Germany (although that obviously would have made Germany more able to resist French cultural imperialism). He feared that, in a unified Germany that would inevitably be dominated by Prussia and Berlin, all of the smaller German ‘nations’ and city-states would lose their autonomous cultural identities. And, of course, that is exactly what was to happen—ultimately with all the disastrous consequences that Herder had predicted.

Nonetheless, the fact that so many of Herder’s disciples did become modern state nationalists is a significant one, and I think helps us to understand why Hearn also ultimately was ‘converted’ to the same kind of nationalist ideology. If, as Kevin Doak has pointed out, there were basically two kinds of modern state nationalism—the Franco-American kind based on citizenship, and the German kind based

on ethnic identity—then Herder's ideas of the 'folk soul,' 'folk culture,' etc., obviously fed into the latter kind, whose ultimate outcome was Bismarck's and then Hitler's Germany (ironically, of course, since both would have been anathema to Herder).²² Herder's ideas, selectively adapted and popularized through nineteenth-century German Romantic culture, proved highly useful both to Prussian unifiers and Nazi racists. The key point, it seems to me, is that Herder, despite or perhaps because of his great appreciation of cultural diversity, was not what we would call today a multiculturalist. He believed, in fact, in a kind of cultural *apartheid*: cultures should not be freely mixed; they should be kept separate in order to maintain their uniqueness, the pure originality of each 'folk soul.' He elaborated this view originally, of course, in defense of the cultural independence of small German states that seemed in danger of being overwhelmed by the hegemonic power first of France, then of Prussia. But, as it turned out, the vicissitudes of history over the following two centuries twisted his ideas to far more sinister uses.

Of course, I am not trying to suggest any kind of exact equivalence between Hearn's brand of Romantic nationalism and that of the Nazis (for one thing, it would be anachronistic to do so), but he did subscribe, more or less, to the Bismarckian ideology of the late Meiji state, and, just as the Second Reich, Imperial Germany, paved the way for the Third Reich, Nazi Germany, Meiji Japan may be said to have paved the way for the militarist Japan of the 1930s and '40s. Indeed, Hearn lived to see and rejoice in at least the opening phase of the proudest moment of the Meiji nation state, its David-and-Goliath victory over the Russian empire in 1905 (with a little help from its British friends). As with Japan's surprise victory over China ten years earlier, this only seemed to confirm the rightness of the Meiji state's conservative, militaristic, and nationalistic policies—and the rightness of Hearn's support of these. But, of course, he did not live to see the

ultimate outcome of the Meiji state's legacy in the 1930s and '40s.

One wonders what Hearn's position would be if he were alive today, in this age when even modern nation states and national cultures seem under threat from the forces of globalization? Since his advocacy of Japanese state nationalism was based mainly on a desire to preserve Japan's cultural autonomy, and since nation states no longer seem able to do so, I suspect that he might have changed back again, as many who value diversity over homogeneity have done, into an Herderian regionalist, advocating the cultural autonomy of areas such as Tsugaru, Okinawa, or perhaps even his beloved Izumo, areas both geographically and culturally remote from contemporary Japan's metropolitan mainstream.

v. Concluding Thoughts on Hearn as Japanese Nationalist

The Herderian kind of Romantic cultural nationalism, because it took cultural uniqueness as its supreme value, and understood this to be rooted in an ethnically defined nation, was not compatible with the modern ideal of multiculturalism. Rather it mandated that national cultures each be allowed to develop in their own discrete place, while retaining their own discrete ethnic identity. As someone deeply imbued with this nineteenth-century nationalist ideology, it was natural for Hearn to endorse Spencer's 'isolationist' advice to Japan, even though this contradicted his own internationalist, multicultural, 'twenty-first century' lifestyle.

It should be acknowledged, however, that Hearn was by no means alone among his Western contemporaries in his 'positive' attitude towards Japanese nationalism. In fact, this was a fairly common attitude among Westerners in the late nineteenth century, who often favored the 'patriotic,' 'aggres-

sive,' and 'energetic' Japanese over other Asians, who supposedly lacked these martial virtues and were incapable of stirring themselves from their millennial lethargy. This was one reason why Britain, for instance, was happy to enlist Japan as its ally against Russia. If we look at the popular British press at the time, it is full of images of 'plucky,' stalwart, samurai-warrior Japan as the 'Great Britain of the Far East,' a worthy ally of the British Empire.²³ Needless to say, this was a very different attitude towards Japanese 'militarism' than would prevail in the English-speaking countries a few decades later, after that militarism had begun to threaten not only Russia, Korea, and China but the British and American empires themselves. But, to return to the nineteenth century, on a more elevated social level, as Ian Nish has pointed out, the veteran British diplomat, Sir Ernest Satow, 'like others of the Victorian era, admired Japan as the country in Asia which exhibited patriotism and efficiency. If the prevailing global philosophy was Darwinism, Japan was seen as the symbol of the survival of the fittest. It was a country that appeared to have the potential for survival in a hostile expansionist world.'²⁴ To some extent, then, Hearn's Japanophilism was as typical of the English-speaking peoples of his age as was his Darwinism. But, of course, he carried it much further in that he wanted to be not just a distant admirer but, as he implied, an 'insider' or, at least, one who had an insider's view of Japanese culture.

We should probably not make too much of the fact that Hearn became a Japanese citizen in 1895, as apparently, he did it more for practical than for patriotic reasons: namely, to ensure that his Japanese wife and children would inherit his property after his death. (Had he remained a British citizen, his property could have been claimed by his British relatives or by his former American wife—another legacy of the unequal treaties that had been imposed on Japan by the

Western powers.) Nonetheless, the fact that Hearn was a Japanese citizen and adopted a Japanese name must certainly have had some psychological effect on him over the years, enabling him all the more to feel like an insider.

Furthermore, the fact that Hearn wrote his books in English by no means disqualifies him from belonging to the mainstream of late Meiji nationalist writing. Indeed, in this first period of modern Japanese nationalist writing this almost became a norm, even for native Japanese writers. It is an interesting and ostensibly odd fact that a good number of the most influential nationalist works—influential in shaping the Japanese sense of national identity as well as in shaping the Western image of Japan—were written in English first (and therefore directed at an international readership) and only later translated into Japanese. Writers such as Okakura Tenshin (岡倉天心), Nitobe Inazō (新渡戸稲造), and Uchimura Kanzō belonged to the generation of what Yuzo Ota has called the *eigo meijin* (英語名人), whose mastery of English was a result of their having attended university in Japan at a time when most of the education was delivered in that language. Conversely, there was also a good deal of laudatory, Japanophile work written by Westerners at this time. In the recent ten-volume collection of what the editors call ‘Japanese propaganda,’ works by ‘Anglo-Saxon’ authors actually outnumber those by native Japanese.²⁵ These people at least had the virtue of consistency: since they believed in the ‘civilizing mission’ of the British and American empires, they also believed that the Japanese empire could perform a similar historical function.

As for Hearn’s own influence on mainstream Japanese nationalism, one could, in summary form, point to the following main areas:

Firstly: he helped to revive academic interest in Japanese folklore and folk culture. As Makino Yōko (牧野陽子) has con-

vincingly shown, Hearn was a major early influence on Yanagita Kunio (柳田國男), the undisputed doyen of Japanese folklore studies.²⁶

Secondly: translated back into Japanese, his renditions of Japanese folktales became a much-loved part of the modern literary canon, familiar to every schoolchild (as, for instance, the former Prime Minister, Nakasone Yasuhiro 中曽根康弘, has testified).²⁷ And, of course, Hearn's retellings of Japanese folktales also became the basis of one of the masterpieces of the golden age of Japanese cinema, Kobayashi Masaki's *Kwaidan* (1965).

Thirdly: his lyrical essays on the Japanese '*kokoro*' and other aspects of Japanese culture have had a considerable, if incalculable, influence on *nihonjinron* writers (writers of a vast literature, in Japanese, English, and other languages, devoted to defining the 'Japanese national character').

Fourthly: Hearn generally gets high marks from Japanese readers for his intuitive understanding and keen appreciation of the 'national religion,' Shinto—at a time when most of his Western contemporaries viewed it through jaundiced Victorian Christian or scientific eyes, as a primitive form of pagan worship. (Although, as already mentioned, some Japanese scholars have also pointed out the limitations of Hearn's understanding: for instance, that his emphasis on ghosts and faeries seems more redolent of Irish folklore.)

Finally, and more generally speaking, it could be said that, along with Ernest Fenellosa (but on a more popular level than Fenellosa, who was read mainly by intellectuals), Hearn encouraged the Japanese to re-evaluate their own culture at a time when many held it in rather low esteem (and equated 'civilization and enlightenment' with the West).

Whatever one's feelings about nationalism *per se*, then, it must be acknowledged that Hearn's achievements as a Japanese nationalist have proved to be considerable, indeed remarkable for someone of foreign birth. We can see this all the more clearly now, looking back over a full century of his influence, first in the West and then in Japan itself. Influence is, of course, a notoriously difficult thing to measure, but, as noted above, we can point to several major dimensions of Hearn's influence, each of which has helped shape the Japanese sense of national identity over the past century.

I doubt that many of us latter-day foreign writers on Japan can expect to have our face on a Japanese postage stamp a century after our death, but the fact that Hearn has received this ultimate accolade does not, after all, seem all that surprising. Indeed, one wonders what might be next—Hearn as the first 'foreign face' on a thousand-yen note? Or would that be going too far?

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- 1 John Moran, 'The Most Famous Irishman You've Never Heard Of,' *The Irish Times*, Dublin, September 20, 2004.
 - 2 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).
 - 3 See, for instance, Jonathan Cott, *Wandering Ghost: The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn* (New York: Knopf, 1991); Carl Dawson, *Lafcadio Hearn and the Vision of Japan* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992); Paul Murray, *A Fantastic Journey: The Life and Literature of Lafcadio Hearn* (Folkestone: Japan Library, 1993); Sukehiro Hirakawa, ed., *Rediscovering Lafcadio Hearn: Japanese Legends, Life and Culture* (Folkestone: Global Oriental, 1997); and Sean G. Ronan, ed., *Irish Writing on Lafcadio Hearn and Japan* (Folkestone: Global Oriental, 1997).
 - 4 Lafcadio Hearn, *Japan: An Attempt at Interpretation* (New York: Macmillan, 1905), p. 529.
 - 5 *Ibid.*, p. 531.
 - 6 *Ibid.*, p. 532.
 - 7 See figure 2.
 - 8 Hearn (1905), p. 533.
 - 9 Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999), p. 64.
 - 10 *Ibid.*, p. 65.
 - 11 Hearn, *Kokoro: Hints and Echoes of Japanese Inner Life* (London: Gay and Bird, 1906), p. 6.

- 12 Yuzo Ota, *Basil Hall Chamberlain: Portrait of a Japanologist* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1998), pp. 186–89.
- 13 Quoted in Koosaka Masaaki, ed., *Japanese Thought in the Meiji Era*, vol. IX, translated by David Abosch (Tokyo: Pan-Pacific Press, 1958), p. 360. For a reprint of the Japanese original, see Koosaka, 高坂正顕, 明治思想史. 京都: 燈影舎, 1999.
- 14 Carol Gluck, *Japan's Modern Myths: Ideology in the Late Meiji Period* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985), p. 136. Gluck is quoting from (Takayama), *Chogyuu zenshū u* vol. 4, pp. 434–35. Along with Gluck's work, another excellent study of late Meiji intellectual history is Kenneth Pyle, *The New Generation in Meiji Japan: Problems of Cultural Identity, 1885–1895* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1969).
- 15 For a nuanced and balanced analysis of Japanese pan-Asianism that takes into account both the idealistic and cynical uses made of it, see Prasenjit Duara, 'The Discourse of Civilization and Pan-Asianism,' in *Nations Under Siege: Globalization and Nationalism in Asia*, pp. 63–101, edited by Roy Starrs (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); see also Jung-Sun Han, 'Envisioning a Liberal Empire,' in *Japanese Cultural Nationalism: At Home and in the Asia Pacific*, pp. 231–251, edited by Roy Starrs (Folkestone: Global Oriental, 2004).
- 16 See Koosaka Masaaki, ed., *Japanese Thought in the Meiji Era*, vol. IX, translated by David Abosch (Tokyo: Pan-Pacific Press, 1958), p. 347.
- 17 See Yuzo Ota's discussion of this issue in *Basil Hall Chamberlain: Portrait of a Japanologist* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1998), pp. 162–3.
- 18 Quoted in Masaaki, *Japanese Thought in the Meiji Era* (1958), p. 379.
- 19 For instance, Toda Masaru, 'Hearn and Shinto,' a talk at the 'Hearn and Shinto' Symposium (Otemae University, Kobe, September 29, 2004).
- 20 Quoted in Michael K. Bourdaghs, *The Dawn That Never Comes: Shimazaki Tōson and Japanese Nationalism* (New York: Columbia UP, 2003), p.4.
- 21 Hearn (1905), p. 333.
- 22 Kevin Doak, 'The Uses of France and Democratic Nationalism in Postwar Japan,' in *Confluences: Postwar Japan and France*, edited by Doug Slaymaker (University of Michigan: Center for Japanese Studies, 2002), pp. 127–47.
- 23 See, for instance, the articles reprinted in Hirokichi Mutsu, ed., *The British Press and the Japan-British Exhibition of 1910* (Melbourne: Melbourne Institute of Asian Languages and Societies, University of Melbourne, 2001).
- 24 Ian Nish, 'Nationalism in Japan,' in *Asian Nationalism*, pp. 82–90, edited by Michael Leifer (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 83–84.
- 25 Peter O'Connor, series ed., *Japanese Propaganda: Selected Readings* (Folkestone: Global Oriental, 2004).
- 26 Yoko Makino, 'Lafcadio Hearn and Yanagita Kunio: Who Initiated Folklore Studies in Japan?,' a talk at the 'Lafcadio Hearn in International

- Perspectives' Symposium (University of Tokyo: Komaba, September 25, 2004).
- 27 In a conversation of 1988, Nakasone told Tony O'Reilly that Hearn 'made my childhood, and that of almost every other child in the Japan I grew up in.' See O'Reilly, Foreword, in *Irish Writing on Lafcadio Hearn and Japan*, pp. 5–11, edited by Sean G. Ronan (Folkstone: Global Oriental, 1997), p. xi. No less a personage than Emperor Hirohito was equally laudatory of Hearn's work in a speech welcoming the Irish President in 1983 (*The Irish Times*, Dublin, June 4, 2002).

2. Writing the National Narrative: Changing Attitudes Towards Nation-Building Among Japanese Writers, 1900-1930

When Japanese writers began to read and translate Western literature in the late nineteenth century, they encountered a very powerful vehicle of national narrative: the nineteenth-century Western novel. Just as one of the main features of Western political history over the previous few centuries had been the rise of the modern nation state, so an equally central feature of Western literary history had been the rise of the novel. These two phenomena were not merely parallel but symbiotic: each had contributed to the other's growth. And this mutually enriching relationship reached its climax and apogee in the nineteenth century—at exactly the historical moment when Japan 'reopened' to the West.

The nineteenth-century novel brought the full scope of national life alive to the imaginations of the newly literate peoples of Europe and America in a way possible to no other artistic form, and perhaps rivalled only by the newly emergent national newspapers—with which, by no coincidence, many novelists were associated and in which they often first serialised their novels. Nineteenth-century nationalism joined together with the nineteenth-century novel to produce some very impressive examples of what we might call the 'national novel'. The paragon of them all was Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1865–69), which is undoubtedly the greatest national narrative of the nineteenth century, not only a masterful novel in the usual sense of the term but a grand-scale epic celebrating the Russian people's victory over the invading armies of Napoleon.

The Meiji Japanese recognised quite early on this nation-building function of the Western novel, and realised that, like the national flag and the national anthem, the national novel was one of the standard fixtures of the modern nation state, even though it was a 'cultural property' which could not be so easily assimilated. Spurred by the obvious disparity between Western and Japanese images and practices of fiction, the influential Meiji novelist and critic, Tsubouchi Shōyō published his stirring call to arms, *Shōsetsu shinzui* (*The Essence of the Novel*), in 1885, urging his fellow writers to improve the quality of their fiction so that 'we may finally be able to surpass in quality the European novels'.¹

This was obviously an appeal to the nationalism and competitive spirit of Japanese writers, but their response over the following years was not as resoundingly nationalistic as might have been expected. Despite all the pressures on Meiji writers to contribute in their own way to the great nation-building project of the age, no Japanese Tolstoys arose to celebrate their nation's heroic struggle against and ultimate victory over the nineteenth-century imperialist West, which had threatened to reduce the divine land to the status of a colony. Indeed, nothing approximating a Tolstoyan, epic treatment of the age appeared until Tōson's *Yoake mae*, which, although written by a writer whose career began in the Meiji period, was written very much in retrospect, several decades after that period had ended. Also, as we shall see, Tōson's view of Meiji nation-building as a human experience was more tragic than heroic. If one, then, were to regard the large-scale nineteenth-century Western novel as the only form of fiction capacious enough to serve as a national narrative, one would have to conclude that Meiji Japan, despite all its frenetic nation-building, produced no national narratives of any significant literary quality.

But, of course, developments in the theory and practice of fiction, especially of the short story, since the nineteenth

century have taught us the various ways in which fiction may take on metaphorical or symbolic overtones, and thus encompass very large areas of meaning within even the smallest areas of text. Using this approach, even a short story can present a meaningful image of an entire nation or period.

The best Meiji fiction writers took easily to the new approaches of symbolic fiction, and thus were able to write their own style of what we might describe as national narrative on an intimate scale. Mori Ōgai's short story, 'Fushinchū' (Under Reconstruction', 1910), is an excellent case in point. At first glance it appears to present a slight if charming vignette from the love life of an upper-class Meiji gentleman, a government official: in a small hotel under reconstruction, he has a brief re-encounter with a former lover, a German woman now touring the world as a professional singer. On this immediate level it is a beautifully written, understated story of faded love: the couple find that they cannot rekindle the old flame—sadly, time has taken its toll on their former passion. But the story also works brilliantly on another level: as Ōgai's image of the uneasy mixture of Eastern and Western culture in late Meiji Japan. As the government official himself tells the German lady, not just the hotel, with its awkward melange of Western and Japanese decor, but the whole country is 'under reconstruction', and the very awkwardness of their meeting, the result not just of lapsed time but of culture clash, echoes the awkwardness of Japan's encounter with the West.

The symbolic approach to fiction, though, was not so much a matter of particular techniques—such as Ōgai's use of synecdoche, a hotel representing the nation as a whole—as it was a whole new attitude towards fiction as symbolic. Any element of the story can function as a symbol—even the characters themselves. Perhaps the first significant example of this kind of symbolic use of character was the 'superfluous man' of mid-nineteenth century Russian literature, an early

symbol of the modern social disease of anomie or alienation, appearing in writers such as Lermontov, Gogol, Goncharov and Turgenev. It was precisely from this rather nihilistic tradition of Russian literature, rather than from Tolstoy, that Futabatei Shimei learned what proved to be of most use to him in writing the first significant and successfully modern Meiji novel, *Ukigumo* (*Drifting Cloud*, 1886–89). As Futabatei himself said, when he began to study Russian literature, he had two motives: a nationalistic one, to know an important potential enemy, and an aesthetic one, to enjoy reading great literature, but soon, he wrote, ‘my nationalistic fervor was quieted and my passion for literature burned on’. It seems that much the same was true for many Meiji writers. Nevertheless, this did not mean that Futabatei became a pure aesthete without any concern for the state of the nation. On the contrary, *Ukigumo* may be read as a bitter criticism of the social values encouraged by the Meiji oligarchs. Futabatei’s anti-hero, Bunzō, who loses both his job and his fiancée, is on his way to becoming a superfluous man because he is too honest, in the old samurai way, to prosper or even to survive in the ruthlessly competitive society of early Meiji, a *nouveau riche* society of self-made men.

This theme of the man too sensitive to survive in the brave new world of modern Japan would become a very familiar one, and Futabatei’s alienated anti-hero, his superfluous man, became an archetypal character in modern Japanese literature, reappearing again and again in different forms, often as an obvious *alter ego* of the author himself, in the work of many of the major writers of twentieth-century Japan—including, as we shall see, Tōson’s *Yoake mae*, although here as an *alter ego* of the author’s father rather than of the author himself. Obviously, then, we might say that Futabatei created a powerful national symbol in this character, and that his novel, *Ukigumo*, came to be accepted, by

Japanese intellectuals at least, as a compelling national narrative, albeit of a negative or critical rather than a positive or celebratory kind.

Once we accept this more comprehensive idea of a national narrative—that is, as any work of fiction which attempts to present an image of the nation as a whole, whether literal or symbolic, positive or negative—then it becomes clear that the two major writers who appeared in the late Meiji period, Mori Ōgai and Natsume Sōseki, were national narrators *par excellence* and—a point I would particularly like to emphasise—they were national narrators in a way that the writers who came immediately after them, the writers of the Taishō generation, were not.

Ōgai, for instance, was so constantly preoccupied with the state of the nation that even in a story which seems entirely personal, ‘Hannichi’ (Half a Day’, 1909), which is about the tensions between his own wife and mother, we still feel larger issues looming in the background. Thus, a very perceptive critic, Mishima Yukio, was moved to remark after reading this story: ‘I believe it is true to say that Ōgai saw in his own household the failure of Japan’s modern age’.²

At any rate, to illustrate the way in which both Ōgai and Sōseki were sensitive readers of the pulse of the nation, one could do no better than examine their responses to the disturbing events of late Meiji. The political situation of the late Meiji period was rather volatile: on the one side, a rising tide of liberal democratic and socialist opposition to the status quo, on the other side an increasingly authoritarian and oppressive government of elder statesmen. The climax came in 1911 with the execution of the distinguished socialist leader, Kōtoku Shūsui, along with others, because of their supposed plot to assassinate the emperor. Ōgai himself had felt the oppressive weight of intolerant authority just the year before when his novel *Vita Sexualis*, a satire on the naturalists’ obsession with sex, was banned by the censors and Ōgai was

personally reprimanded by the Vice-Minister of War. As a high official himself in the Imperial Army medical corps, he of course could not afford to openly criticise what he considered to be the irrational behaviour of higher officials. But his stories of this period clearly reflect his dissatisfaction—using the symbolic fictional approach he had by now mastered. ‘*Chinmoku no tō*’, (‘The Tower of Silence’, 1910), for instance, borrows an image from India—the tall towers on Malabar Hill in which the Parsis dispose of their dead—to symbolise the way the Meiji government silences people who read, translate or write ‘dangerous books’, which are defined as ‘books about naturalism and socialism’. Ōgai ends the story with a bold rhetorical flourish, condemning all forms of censorship:

Both art and the pursuit of learning must be seen to be dangerous if you look with the conventional eye of the Parsi clan. Why is this? In every country and every age, crowds of reactionaries lurk behind those who walk new paths awaiting an unguarded moment. And when the opportunity arises they inflict persecution. Only the pretext changes, depending upon the country and the times. ‘Dangerous Western books’ is no more than such a pretext.³

Just two years after this story was written Ōgai’s work underwent a dramatic transformation, and in an unexpectedly conservative direction—surprisingly for a writer who had seemed so pro-modern and pro-reform in his scientific rationalism. The immediate cause was the death of the Emperor Meiji and the subsequent *junshi* or ritual suicide of his vassal, General Nogi. Like many of his contemporaries, Ōgai was deeply moved by both events: on the one hand, the emperor’s death bringing to an end a long and remarkable reign, on the other hand, the general’s suicide harking back to the samurai values of an earlier age. These two events naturally produced a mood of nostalgia in many people, but in Ōgai they seemed to have produced a lasting change of heart. It was as if they shocked him into realising what he really valued: now that the world of traditional, heroic values seemed to be passing away, he would devote himself as a writer to

preserving its memory. The irony, of course, is that Ōgai himself up to this point, as both a writer and a doctor, had done his best to precipitate the very process of modernisation which was destroying the culture he most valued. But he was not alone in his ironic ambivalence: in this too he was emblematic of the whole elite class to which he belonged, the Meiji nation-builders.

Before 1912 there seemed to have been two Ōgais: the army officer, a descendant of samurai, and a high-ranking official in the Meiji establishment; and, on the other hand, the writer, a sceptical rationalist and a lover of Western literature and philosophy, somewhat rebellious in spirit and anti-establishment in many of his attitudes. It was as if the army officer used writing as a means of escape from the oppressive confines of his official life. After 1912, however, the two persona seemed to come much closer together: the essential conservatism of the samurai-class army officer found expression in the writing of historical stories and biographies. For many Western readers, the earlier Ōgai may seem a more attractive writer. But Japanese critics generally regard his historical works as his major achievement. One thing certainly may be agreed upon: in the fiction Ōgai wrote in the last decade of his life, modern Japanese literature finally gained a national narrative of a positive, celebratory kind.

In the four days immediately following General Nogi's *junshi*, Ōgai wrote a story, *Okitsu Yagoemon no isho* (The Last Testament of Okitsu Yagoemon', 1912), which is a moving tribute to this ultimate act of loyalty: the faithful samurai Yagoemon commits *junshi* to follow his master into death and, like General Nogi, to atone for a mistake he has committed in the distant past—but what is presented as even more admirable is that, like Socrates paying off his debts before his death, Yagoemon allows himself the privilege of committing *junshi* only after he has discharged his various worldly obligations—even leaving behind enough money to

pay for his own cremation. In short, he is a paragon of the samurai virtues of loyalty, courage and dutifulness, and, in the second version of the story, published a year after the first, Ōgai makes it clear that he was rewarded with a brilliant posterity, which is described in a genealogical table of almost Biblical proportions, down to the eleventh generation!

Since Ōgai's day, of course, samurai stories of this kind have become a standard part of Japan's popular national myth, functioning in much the same way as do Hollywood Westerns in the U.S.A. But Ōgai's historical fiction is far above the standard: he performed an important service as a national narrator by bringing the samurai story to a new level of intellectual and literary sophistication.

From our present point of view more than a century later we may judge a story like *Okitsu Yagoemon* to be anachronistic—or worse, potentially to have contributed by its apparent reverence for *bushidō* to the atavistic attitudes and behaviour of the ultranationalists and militarists of the early Shōwa period. And it could be argued that, by retreating into the past and its traditional values, Ōgai was trying to escape further censure from increasingly intolerant authorities—in effect, caving in to their intimidation and sacrificing his writing for the sake of his career. But even if all this were true or partly true, it would not vitiate the literary quality of Ōgai's historical literature. And when we read that literature as a whole, the impression we are given is far from that of a mindless, reactionary traditionalism. He did not abandon his modern education, his scientific rationalism or his critical intelligence after 1912.

In fact, the very next story he wrote, *Abe Ichizoku* (The Abe Clan', 1913) is a critical, even satirical treatment of the practice of *junshi*: when a certain daimyō dies, so many men end up killing themselves—even men who hardly knew the daimyō—that we have a farcical as well as tragic *reductio ad absurdum* of the whole custom; on the other hand, choosing

not to commit *junshi* in this society could lead to equally tragic consequences, as we are shown by what happens to Abe Michinobu. Even though he is ordered not to kill himself, a conflict arises between his samurai duty to obey orders and his samurai sense of personal honour: troubled by rumours that he has failed to commit *junshi* because of cowardice, he finally feels obliged to kill himself in front of his five sons. But the matter does not end there: persecuted by the new dai-myō, Abe's whole family is ultimately destroyed, the young and the old, men, women and children, and the story ends with a bloodbath of more than Shakespearian proportions. But with a very modern sense of absurdity rather than with any cathartic sense of tragic greatness; as Ōgai writes of the final fighting in the Abe mansion: 'Just as street fighting is far uglier than fighting in the field, the situation here was even more ghastly: a swarm of bugs in a dish devouring one another'.⁴

In fact, when one surveys the bulk of Ōgai's historical stories and biographies, one finds that most of them celebrate more quiet virtues than the heroic ones demonstrated in *junshi*. This is especially true of the *shiden* or historical biographies: one author of a recent study of them has aptly characterised their subjects as 'paragons of the ordinary'.⁵ Although samurai of the Tokugawa period, they epitomise not so much the martial virtues as the Confucian/samurai virtues of a time of peace, leading quiet lives of moderate, usually scholarly, achievement. These historical biographies are far from being 'blood-and-guts' samurai adventure tales; indeed, the problem with them for many readers may be the blandness of their central characters and the uneventfulness of the lives portrayed.

In *Shibue Chūsai*, for instance, Ōgai commemorates the life of a now-forgotten samurai-physician and scholar of that name, whose career, Ōgai felt, 'strangely resembled my own'.