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INTRODUCTION

## Analytic of the Exquisite

Too much philosophy had been written in Europe; everything from the most commonplace to the most sublime, had been collected, catalogued, commented upon, raked up merely for the sake of raking up barren knowledge. It now became necessary to remove the dust and the cobwebs that had settled upon it, and infuse new life by purifying, remodeling, and developing that heap of knowledge. And what could accomplish this better than Japanese art? Its influence was everywhere felt. It called forth, for instance, the short story literature, in which Anderson, Turgenjew, Verga, and the modern French and Scandinavian writers are masters—a tendency towards brevity and conciseness of expression, which suggests a good deal more than it actually tells. Its law of repetition with slight variation, we can trace in Poe's poems, the work of the French symbolists, and, above all else, in the writings of Maurice Maeterlinck, that quaint combination of Greek, medieval, and Japanese art reminiscences.

— SADAKICHI HARTMANN, *JAPANESE ART* (1903)<sup>1</sup>

Gone were but the Winter,  
Come were but the Spring,  
I would go to a covert  
Where the birds sing;

Where in the whitethorn  
Singeth a thrush,  
And a robin sings  
In the holly-bush.

Full of fresh scents  
Are the budding boughs  
Arching high over  
A cool green house:

Full of sweet scents,  
And whispering air

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Which sayeth softly:

“We spread no snare;

“Here dwell in safety,

Here dwell alone,

With a clear stream

And a mossy stone.

“Here the sun shineth

Most shadily;

Here is heard an echo

Of the far sea,

Though far off it be.”

—CHRISTINA ROSSETTI,

“GONE WERE BUT THE WINTER” (1866)

## I. More than Unsatisfying, Less than Incomplete

Of the descriptions given by the unnamed readers of Christina Rossetti’s poem “Gone Were but the Winter” whose responses I. A. Richards gathered in the second chapter of *Practical Criticism* (1929), his groundbreaking study of the interpretative strategies and presuppositions of Cambridge undergraduates in the 1920s, one of the more sympathetic responses is marked 2.71, and reads “In its own rather tiny way, it is quite exquisite.”<sup>2</sup> Richards was scrupulous in refraining from diagnosis of student motivations, yet this sentence, along with a concluding description of Rossetti’s phrase “mossy stone” as evoking “the intended atmosphere of quietness and uninterrupted peace,” provokes an uncharacteristic intervention from Richards: “In the last reading a reminiscence of the principles of Japanese gardening might be respected. ‘Its own rather tiny way’ supplements the impression” (40). Neither the student nor the poem has mentioned Japan in any way, but the calmness of the mossy stone—in which Richards might be expected to have seen an allusion to Wordsworth’s “violet by a mossy stone / half hidden from the eye”—instead suggests to him an Orientalized form of landscape gardening.

What accounts for this association?

Japanese gardening had, prior to 1929, attracted a good deal of interest from Western horticulturalists. In 1894, San Francisco hosted the *California Mid-winter International Exposition*, for which was constructed a Japanese Tea Gar-

den in Golden Gate Park, the first of dozens in the United States. Travelers to the park often had recourse to literary tropes in narrating their experiences: “to feel truly Brobdignagian, one should visit the Japanese tea garden,” wrote the correspondent for *Overland Monthly*; where “the dainty Yum-Yum” (a reference to the female lead of *The Mikado*) spends her time.<sup>3</sup> But of particular interest to the *Overland* correspondent was the “very fascinating [twist]” that governed Japanese design in general: “their peculiar ideas of proportion. No doubt the fact that the trunks and branches of their stunted pine tree are a miniature copy of the natural tree, while the leaves are of almost normal size, does not in the least interfere with their idea of the beauty of the whole.” British gardeners were also fascinated by these “dwarf trees” (now called bonsai) and the miniature gardens into which they were compiled with “scrupulous exactness”: “dwarf” here indicated not merely a pleasing *miniaturization*, but a potentially disturbing compression/distention of proper proportion in individual parts. The *1900 Supplement to the Dictionary of Gardening*, for example, admitted that “when correctly treated, these trees are properly proportioned as regards trunk and branch, leaf and flower, and not mere outrages upon Nature.”<sup>4</sup> The most assiduous promoter of bonsai gardening in London at the turn of the century was a Japanese commercial trader named Toichi Tsumura, who delivered a paper entitled “Dwarf Trees” at the London Japan Society in 1902, in which, like the author of the *Overland* article, explained Japan by reference to *Gulliver’s Travels*, but in this case describing the plants as “Lilliputian specimens.”<sup>5</sup> Tsumura insisted further that, although Japanese art in general preferred to miniaturize its subjects than to magnify them, it did not follow that “their work is apt to be more often pretty and fascinating than dignified and imposing” (5).

Richards’s student may not have known any of this, of course. But he was tapping into an aspect of aesthetic discourse whose effects have been, like Wordsworth’s stone and Sadakichi Hartmann’s Japan in the epigraph above, “everywhere felt” since the mid-nineteenth century: the *exquisite*. It is a term ubiquitous in the literature of the British aesthetics, though its meanings are grasped only obliquely: it was a word, so to speak, always written in italics. An exquisite object is *extremely* beautiful; it is also *weirdly* incomplete. It is also, as often as not, able to hurt its consumer or contemplator: “a cigarette is the perfect type of a perfect pleasure,” Lord Henry Wotton tells Dorian Gray, because “it is exquisite, and it leaves one unsatisfied.”<sup>6</sup> *It leaves one*: after having marked you with its sharp point, the cigarette departs like a lover in a taxi, leaving behind a cloud and a cough.<sup>7</sup> Yet “exquisite” was more than a synonym for “unsatisfying”; Lord Henry’s “and” (as well as Wilde’s performatively exquisite comma) distinguishes between the two ideas even while it conjoins them. The cigarette is its own effect, complete in itself, without either a

half-life or much of a consequence: for all the intensity of the exquisite (and, in certain respects, there is no louder word in nineteenth-century aesthetics) it remains in another sense muted, familiar, a current easily tapped within the broader flow of consumer goods. The first paradox of the exquisite: it is both high-intensity and low-intensity, unspeakably alien and unremarkably familiar, intensely-to-be-desired and easily-to-be-obtained.

The association Richards made between Japanese cultural practices and a Victorian lyric poem was not, obviously, correct, but neither was it simply wrong. By the end of the nineteenth century, a set of ideas, forms, and feelings associated with Japanese art were thereby *also* associated with great achievements in the arts—particularly the literary and visual arts, and particular instances within one of those two media that referenced the other (paintings inscribed with poems; poems especially attentive to typographical composition). By the 1870s, Japan appeared to have outstripped Western cultures in its production of objects universally recognizable as beautiful. According to some of the strongest formulations of that position, Japan had not merely approached but already attained the position of universal aesthetic legibility—a development that threatened Euro-American cultural power. “Japanese art is not merely the incomparable achievement of certain harmonies in colour,” wrote the Victorian poet A. C. Swinburne, “*it is the negation, the immolation, the annihilation of everything else.*”<sup>8</sup> The principle of aesthetic universality that underpinned Swinburne’s assessment of Japan distinguished his interest in Japan both from earlier and contemporary Orientalisms. An appreciation of Japanese art did not mean mystified genuflection towards the latent creativity of the Other—this was not the kind of condescension that, in Edward Said’s influential account of Orientalism, formalized the logic of imperialism for the written word.<sup>9</sup> Rather, Japanese art appeared as a force already manifested, a creativity already cultured: an *other*, in other words, whose claims to aesthetic universality had already gained priority over the Western *self*. Japan’s ontological priority conditioned for Victorians—and, this book will argue, continues to condition—a wide range of aesthetic, historical, political, and cultural fantasies, both populating and sharply delimiting the imaginative field of the modern world.

The late-Victorian tendency to represent Japan as an exception to various rules was also relatively discontinuous from the attitudes towards Japan that preceded it. In his important 1856 book *The Grammar of Ornament*, the architect Owen Jones constructed a detailed comparative history of ornamental representational practices, written towards the Arnoldian aim of improving contemporary art by furnishing artists with a better critical vocabulary. His book ranges from the ornamental practices of “savage tribes,” among whom, he notes, “there is scarcely a people, in however early a stage of civilization,

with whom the desire for ornament is not a strong instinct" (13). He follows ornamental forms through the Asian and European stages of his contemporary historiography, and derives from his narrative thirty-seven normative propositions, printed at the book's opening, which treat Oriental ornament as illustrative of the principles of natural law. According to Proposition 12, for example, "All junctions of curved lines with curved or of straight lines with straight should be tangential to each other. *Natural law. Oriental practice in accordance with it*" (6). That neither Japan nor Japanese ornamentation appears in *The Grammar of Ornament* is only somewhat surprising: it was published only three years after Commodore Matthew Perry arrived in Japan, and it was written in part as a record of the Great Exhibition of 1851 for which Jones had served as interior designer.<sup>10</sup> Yet the absence of Japanese art from one of the midcentury's major accounts of comparative aesthetic theory points to a larger truth of the period: that, as a rapidly modernizing and militarizing empire, Japan could not easily be forced to conform to the earlier Victorians' teleological histories of culture, narratives which tended to culminate in a celebration of European cultural supremacy.

As Richards's editorial comment suggests, "exquisite" was indeed the later Victorian period's favorite word for Japanese culture. It appears everywhere in writing on Japan from the 1860s onwards, and will be encountered throughout this book to describe the smallness of a tree, the sadness of a poet, and the effect of a sword slicing through flesh. Laurence Oliphant's *Narrative of the Earl of Elgin's Mission to China and Japan* (1860) mentioned the "exquisite taste displayed in the gardens and cottages upon the roadside" in Edo suburbs.<sup>11</sup> In *Tales of Old Japan* (1871) A. B. Mitford talked excitedly of the "exquisite designs, harmonious colouring, rich gilding" of the same city.<sup>12</sup> Isabella Bird's popular *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* (1880) uses the word sixteen times to describe a parade of Japanese objects: a *kakemono*; a piece of moss; a number of silk scarves; a small wooden Buddha; a basket; a small but comfortable bedroom ("I almost wish the rooms were a little *less* exquisite"); "Japanese agriculture"; a piece of hemp.<sup>13</sup> Further examples, in their dozens, will be forthcoming. These associations did not derive from Japanese writers or artists themselves, but from the Orientalists: they nonetheless furnished such writers, when they approached the English language, with a set of stereotypes and associations with which they were compelled to grapple. Those associations are quite clear: Japan is elegant, but perhaps excessively so; its decorative arts exhibit an economy of arrangement, which is perhaps indicative of parsimony; the price of Japanese supremacy in the aesthetic realm is an indefinite, but persistent, discomfort.

An Oriental imaginary in which a tasteful formal arrangement is distinctively associated with an experience of some kind of pain: such is, indeed, the

oldest version of “exquisite” that obtains in the English language, at least according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The word’s very etymology, exquisite, indicates an object that has been “sought out,” whose preciousness is dependent upon the distance one has traveled to obtain it. It is found in the early histories of Oriental adeptness in the arts of torture: Richard Knolles’s *General Historie of the Turkes* (1603) dwelt salaciously on the “exquisite torture” (704) and “most exquisite torments” (770) enacted in the Constantinople of Suleiman the Magnificent.<sup>14</sup> And “exquisite” has become, in the past century, an almost (but still not entirely) schlocky term to describe the copresence of erotic desire and unsublimated violence: “Dear Miss Steele, you are quite simply exquisite,” writes Dorian’s near-namesake Christian, initiating another interminable series of emails.<sup>15</sup> There is a formal similarity between Knolles’s torture and Bird’s slightly cramped bedroom, despite the difference of degree, and though we will certainly find “exquisite” deployed to describe moments of powerful thematic violence (in, for example, critics’ abundant use of the term to describe the gorier moments of Quentin Tarantino’s movies), such thematic discomfort is logically secondary to, and (I will argue) a symptom of, the conceptual disfiguration within the formulation of the exquisite.

Conceptual disfiguration—a representation premised on the failure of representation; an attempt to sublimate into form the *fundamental* incongruity of the represented object—undergirds a range of Western aesthetic constructions of Japan, which have been, from the outset, particularly moved to explore the violence implicit in beauty. Ruth Benedict’s widely read popular ethnography, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946), describes Japanese culture’s central contradiction as between “militaristic and aesthetic” characteristics, the bipolarity of which gives her study its title. Both her claim that beauty and violence were twinned, and her sense that “shame” was the primary conceptual framework through which that contradiction was managed, were aimed with ethnographic brio at Japanese “culture,” but succeeded instead in describing the Western theory of the aesthetic *itself*. The “annihilation of everything else” that Swinburne imagines as the cost of Japanese achievement in color expresses, to be sure, an anxiety about Japanese cultural influence that recurs in a more extreme form in various invasion narratives (such as H. G. Wells’s *The War in the Air*) or the period’s various “yellow peril” novels. But that is only an extreme example of the general case. In the depictions of hyper-aestheticized Japanese womanhood common to the *Madame Chrysanthème* genre (a central focus of this book’s fifth chapter), the beauty inheres in suicide considered as one of the fine arts. As the *Madame Chrysanthème* genre attests, the emblematic suggestiveness of the katana—a symbol that limns intense beauty to unbearable violence—that is, in a sense, *already both*

*chrysanthemum and sword*—both predated and has outlasted Benedict’s analysis of Japanese culture. The “shame” associated with Japanese aesthetics, though it is understood differently between and among Victorian Orientalists and Japanese émigrés, reverberates through the Savoy Opera *The Mikado*, (which depicts a world in which flirtatious speech is punishable by death), the Japanese-inflected writings of W. B. Yeats (for whom the Japanese and the Irish were similar castes of aristocrats, humiliated by their more vulgar neighbors), and perhaps most poignantly of all in the writings of the Japanese Ruskin enthusiast Mikimoto Ryuzo, who wrote copious notes detailing his desire to be closer to his (long dead) mentor.

Let me construct an imaginary reading of the Rossetti poem—a reading that, quite possibly, has never occurred to a reader before, certainly did not occur to Rossetti, and may not even have occurred to Richards’s misguided student. “Gone Were but the Winter” is, after all, about Japan—or rather, it is about the aesthetic formation that became, by the end of the nineteenth century, unthinkable without Japan. The poem’s meter, which begins in sententious coupleting, gradually loosens to the point of exhibiting, in its final five-line stanza, something like a *tanka*, which unspools over five plain lines a pair of gnomic contradictions. The first asserts that the sun, impossibly, “shineth / most shadily,” a presentation that prepares the reader for another, less resolved contradiction: “here,” in an English “covert,” or thicket, the poet recounts hearing “an echo / of the far sea / though far off it be.” Audibly virtual, the echo does not bring the sea closer, but it does make it more *present*—the “far off” location rendered by poetry, and absent as place. This poem expresses the ambivalent optimism, tempered by responsibility, of an enormous distance breached by form and representation, and its effect is somber, sober, and powerful. These effects, indeed, are not mitigated by the poem’s evident silliness: its talking air, and its awkward—but precise—repetitions of “sing,” “scents,” and “dwell.” (This latter, incidentally, is proof positive that the poem is about Japan, because how could it not be a reference to Yone Noguchi’s lines “I dwell alone / Like one-eyed star, / In frightened, darksome willow threads”?) There is more to be said, to be sure—my eye is especially drawn to the unusual use of the noun “covert,” which surely calls to be read not merely as a noun but, punning, as an adjective, and indicating, in a poem concerned with duty, protection, and freedom, an indirect relation to legal *coverture*. But given its ambient poignancy, animistic sense of responsibility, and domesticated exoticism—especially notwithstanding that this poem is, in the very same ways, rather trivial, tedious, and cringeworthy—I, at least, can hardly disagree that it is *quite* exquisite. At least a world within a misreading of Rossetti. But where did it come from?



## II. The Melancholic Condition of the Subjective Universal

So, by the end of the nineteenth century, “Japan” had come to signify an affective conundrum that had been discovered by the Western discourse of aesthetics. It was, in that sense, the name for a *problematic* within aesthetics: a term that Michel Foucault uses to designate the moment when an old idea is felt to be newly in need of a solution, to be “take[n] care of”; or when a certain logical or rhetorical premise is newly unsettled and challenged.<sup>16</sup> That problem was nothing less than the entire project of aesthetics as such—of describing or justifying the apparent existence of a judgment devoid of both moral value and logical necessity, but possessed of the same kind of universal ambition as a moral or mathematical claim. The condition that became problematic in this sense was powerfully and famously described by Immanuel Kant, whose theory of aesthetic judgment was undergirded and suffused by a melancholic dimension that has been palpable to many of his readers. Not least to Thomas De Quincey, whose comic essay “On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts” not only appears in the *OED* as the first text to contain the word “*aesthetically*,” but which satirizes Kantian thinking on morality and aesthetics as tending to produce split subjects and moral panics.<sup>17</sup> Kant’s first approaches to the emergent branch of philosophy called, by Alexander Baumgarten, “*aesthetik*,” (1750) are contained within his early book *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764), which contains prefigurative elements of the systematic theory of aesthetics outlined in the *Critique of Judgment*.<sup>18</sup> Kant’s early enthusiasm for the science of aesthetics, as Baumgarten had laid it out, is visible in many of his earlier works: as early as 1771, he wrote to his student Marcus Herz that he wanted to write a foundationalist philosophical treatise establishing, among other things, “the theory of taste.”<sup>19</sup> That neither the *Observations*, nor the occasional dismissive references to Baumgarten in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), accomplished that task did not dissuade Kant from trying again almost decade later; the *Critique of Judgment* was published in 1790, and at last established, to its author’s satisfaction, the existence of a priori principles governing aesthetic judgment.

The earlier text can appear quite “un-Kantian” at times, since it is temperamentally inductive, and not yet committed to the “critical” position with which Kant’s three *Critiques* are associated: “sublime” and “beautiful” are terms the philosopher uses to aggregate quite diverse phenomena, both objective (a flower is beautiful) and subjective (taste for the beautiful can, in men, degenerate into foppishness). The relative weakness, indeed contingency, of the bonds grouping these uses of the term together becomes clearest in the fourth and last of the book’s four sections, in which Kant comes to consider “national characteristics, so far as they depend upon the distinct feeling of the

beautiful and sublime.” The “national characteristic,” as Kant adduces it here, is necessarily both subjective (it is felt by individuals) and objective (it is recognizable as an empirical datum in the world), and its origins needn’t brook too much inquiry: whether “these national differences are contingent and depend upon the times and the type of government, or are bound by a certain necessity to the climate, I do not here inquire.”<sup>20</sup>

The title of the book, *Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen*, differs in a couple of interesting respects from that of Edmund Burke’s 1757 book on the same topic: *A Philosophical Enquiry* (rather than Kant’s mere “observations”) *into the Origins of Our Ideas* (in Kant, no origins, no “us,” and no ideas) *of the Sublime and the Beautiful*.<sup>21</sup> In the “First Introduction” to the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant laid the (reasonable) charge against Burke that the latter’s *Philosophical Enquiry* was merely inductive in its logic, and therefore incapable of sustaining a properly *philosophical inquiry* into the a priori nature of aesthetic judgment. In place of “origins,” then, Kant had developed an extraordinary geographical analogy, which connects European national differences to counterparts in Asia: Arabs are the “Spaniards of the orient”; the Persians are like the French (“good poets, courteous, and of fairly fine taste”), and

the Japanese could in a way be regarded as the Englishmen of this part of the world, but hardly in any other quality than their resoluteness—which degenerates into the utmost stubbornness—their valor, and disdain of death.<sup>22</sup>

The Japanese and the British: death cultists. Versions of this analogy will recur throughout this book—to take two examples: in the association between the death penalty in Japan and domestic British satire in *The Mikado*, and in the poet Yone Noguchi’s melancholic relation to a Victorian poem about death in his own haiku—but Kant’s analogy entails the bold claim that aesthetic taste as an index of racial essence.

This aspect of Kantian aesthetics is, of course, less than central to Kant’s more famous formulations. But a sense of cultural belonging as logical grounds for the transcendental aesthetic never disappears entirely. In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant sets out to ground a transcendental account of aesthetics in a circuit of perception and cognition called “reflective judgment,” of which he admits four species: the agreeable, the good, the beautiful, and the sublime. The latter two are aesthetic judgments, “by which is understood one whose determining ground cannot be other than subjective.”<sup>23</sup> Yet although grounded in the subject herself, aesthetic judgment calls out to the world of objects for consent and agreement: “we allow no one to be of a different opinion, without, however, grounding our judgment on concepts, but only on our

feeling, which we therefore make our ground not as a private feeling, but a common one.”<sup>24</sup> This is the melancholic condition of the “subjective universal”: we demand that everybody feel the same way about a beautiful object as we do, even as we know that not everybody will. “[Common sense] does not say that everyone *will* concur with our judgment but that everyone *should*” (§22). The *Critique of Judgment* offers an array of such unmet demands: “when we call something beautiful, the pleasure that we feel is expected of everyone else, just as if it were to be regarded as a property of the object . . . but beauty is nothing by itself, without relation to the feeling of the subject.” This “feeling” is not “emotion,” a term that Kant aligns with “charm” to designate the pathological modality of interested judgment. (I mention this observation, which I take from Jean-François Lyotard’s work on the Kantian sublime, in order to differentiate the position I have called “melancholia” from “feeling” as the term is sometimes used, to designate particular emotional states, oriented to and in some sense determined by, objective conditions. The absence that I have been describing as constitutive of Kantian judgment preexists the pleasure that may follow from the successful *completion* of the judgment of the beautiful—or, for that matter, that may be incurred in the final movement of the judgment of the sublime.)<sup>25</sup>

Nor is the satisfaction the Kantian subject receives from the judgment of the beautiful reducible to conscience, or the usual meaning of “common sense.”<sup>26</sup> In an essay glossing Hannah Arendt’s foundational rereading of Kant, Ronald Beiner usefully distinguishes between four distinct kinds of reasoning, which might otherwise be conventionally lumped together as “common sense.” The first, which he does indeed call (1) “common sense,” is the “ideal norm” that, in aesthetic judgments, everybody ought to agree with me. Common sense thus immediately postulates another form of agreement, which Arendt calls (2) “consensus”—but this kind of reasoning is merely posited, and neither logically nor empirically consequent from the first kind. At a still further degree of reflective remove from the initial judgment “this object is beautiful,” a subject may be able to estimate whether or not that judgment *will indeed* meet with general assent—that is, whether or not the object thought beautiful will be held so by others. This form of reasoning, which Beiner calls (3) “*sensus communis*, or “public sense,” seeks to determine whether or not one’s judgment conforms to “good taste”—with the caveat (I would add) that, in the case that it does not, it is rather too late in the process of reflection to do anything about it. A quite distinct notion of common sense, which Beiner imports from Kant’s essay “What Is Enlightenment?,” is (4) the “public use of one’s reason,” which she takes to argue that “thinking *in public* can be constitutive of thinking *as such*.” By placing Kant’s explicitly political essay into a series of notions of publicness that she derives from his account of aesthetic judg-

ment, Beiner argues, Arendt articulates a powerful case for the *Critique of Judgment* as an implicitly political book concerned with using reason to modulate between the cognitive lives of individuals and the social demands with which they must negotiate.

The subjective universal character of the judgment of taste is its flaw, a crack between the bounded exocentric position of the subject and the regime of objects (here including, indeed primarily comprising, other people) to which that subject appeals for concurrence and affirmation. It is in this sense the subjective counterpart of the exquisite objects I have been describing, which nestles between their beauty and their capacity to harm. The “harm” implied by subjective universality is, as Lyotard reminds us, never actually incurred by the melancholy subject—because the *ascription* of assent is sufficient for Kant’s judgment of taste to be enjoyable, whatever anybody else thinks—but the position of the subject fantasizing reciprocity for his own affective investments in objects is, in the real world, a highly precarious one.<sup>27</sup> It implies a very fragile social relation between the aesthetic observer and the Other with whom he shares a “common [feeling],” who is thereby positioned as the phantasmatic guarantor of his own judgment—which then the Other may fail or refuse to ratify. Such failures and refusals constitute the central part of the history of cultural engagement between Japan and Britain: in Whistler’s rejection of Mortimer Menpes after the latter’s trip to Japan; in Yone Noguchi’s plagiaristic relation to Victorian verse; in Mikimoto Ryuzo’s intolerable distance from his beloved John Ruskin. These are stories about the inherent defectiveness of subjective universality—stories in which people *believe* that they can experience a “common feeling” with another human being through an aesthetic medium, and find that belief cruelly rebuffed. To be sure, the connection “Japan/the West” holds no necessary logical relation to these aspects of Kantian aesthetics. But, for historical reasons that the philosopher could hardly have seen coming, Japan became, in the nineteenth century, a highly privileged site for testing philosophical “universals” of a number of kinds, and in the aesthetic domain above all.

The word “melancholy” has a number of distinct resonances in psychoanalytical discourse relevant to the reading of Kant I have outlined, centrally the foundational paradox as Freud describes it: “the analogy with mourning led us to conclude that [the melancholic] had suffered a loss in regard to an object; what he tells us points to a loss in regard to his ego.”<sup>28</sup> The problematic *location* of absence that a melancholic may exhibit as self-censure or self-hatred, following the loss (through death or departure, for example) of a loved one, can be resolved, Freud thinks, if one observes that what appear to be self-censures on the part of the melancholic are, more authentically, reproaches directed at the loved object that, by virtue of being lost, can no

longer receive them. Thus the melancholic directs at herself an animus originally destined for another. Kant's view of the judgment of the beautiful is likewise predicated on a fuzziness concerning subject and object—we are wont to describe an object as beautiful, he argues, whereas in fact “the beautiful” more properly names a subjective procedure of perception and judgment. This much is well understood. The part that, in my view, has been missed by most readers of Kant, is that, on the grounds of that subject/object confusion, the *ascription* of object-like qualities to “the beautiful” inscribes an absence into the scene of a cognitive judgment that should, by rights, be experienced as pure self-presence. Aesthetic judgment persuades an observer that his judgment is objective, whereas in fact it is only universal and not objective at all, so that the appeals an observer makes to the “common sense” of others rests on shaky grounds.

Certain scholars of Kant have already found ways to explore the melancholic dimension of his thinking, so it is worth distinguishing between the Freudian account of melancholy I offer here to the Lacanian version articulated by Roberto Esposito in *Terms of the Political: Community, Immunity, Biopolitics*.<sup>29</sup> Esposito understands Kantian phenomenology, his famous bracketing of the *ding an sich*, as a melancholy self-exclusion from the narcissistic fantasy of self-presence in line with Lacan's famous barring of consciousness from the world of “the Real.” The ethical dimension of Kantian thinking, Esposito argues, derives from Kant's experimental approach to freedom in the absence of the *ding an sich*: “Kant's melancholic man knows that community as such is unrealizable, that the *munus* of our *communitas* is the law that prohibits its perfect fulfillment. Yet perhaps Kant's melancholic man is also the first to know that *munus* is also a gift, that that impossibility which reminds men of their finitude also endows them with the freedom to choose that it may become its necessary opposite” (34). Esposito is arguing towards a different *telos* than the present work: he wonders what use Kant might be in establishing political communities in the present and future, while I am charting how Kant has helped to construct and deconstruct aesthetic communities in the present and past. But that is not the only difference between us: my (more pessimistic) view is that the subjective universal character of the judgment of taste is not, for Kant, an enabler of freedom, but rather the origin of a deep dysfunction within subject/object relations, one that, like narcissism (Freud's analogy, p. 249), ensures the fundamental severance of any *subjective* practice of freedom from any *objective* relation of community.

In this sense, my own position vis-à-vis Kant coheres perhaps surprisingly with the reading of the *Third Critique* offered in a spirit of criticism towards the end of Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction*. Bourdieu, as is well known, sets out to prove that the supposedly “pure” nature of the judgment of taste reflects

nothing more than “the universalization of the dispositions associated with a particular social and economic condition” (495). Yet, though his work has doubtless been vulgarized into a churlish debunking of the kind he struggles, at all turns, to resist, *Distinction* refuses to allow its reader the satisfaction of concluding that sociology will provide, since aesthetics cannot, a firm ground for the objective analysis of taste.

Since we know that the very principle of the symbolic efficacy of philosophical discourse lies in the play between two structures of discourse which the work of formalization seeks to integrate without entirely succeeding, it would be naïve to reduce the truth of this double-discourse to a subterranean discourse in which the Kantian ideology of the beautiful is expressed and which analysis reconstitutes by reconnecting the web of notations blurred by the interferences of the structures. The *social categories of aesthetic judgment* can only function, for Kant himself and for his readers, in the form of highly sublimated categories, such as the oppositions between beauty and charm, pleasure and enjoyment of culture or civilization, euphemisms which, without any conscious intention of dissimulating, enable social oppositions to be expressed and experienced in a form conforming to the norms of expression of a specific field. What is hidden, that is, the double social relationship—to the court (the site of civilization as opposed to culture) and to the people (the site of nature and sense)—is both present and absent; it presents itself in such a guise that one can in all good faith not see it there and that the naively reductive reading, which would reduce Kant’s text to the social relationship that is disguised and transfigured within it, would be no less false than the ordinary reading which would reduce it to the phenomenal truth in which it appears only in disguise. (495–96)

Bourdieu has been generally understood as a mere adversary of Kant, but in this context he appears rather as an eminent chronicler of the social causes and effects of Kantian aesthetic judgment, which were understood as dialectical not merely by the Marxian sociologist, but by the Prussian transcendentalist who, we have seen, installed the phantom community at the center of his account of aesthetics. That melancholy dimension of the subjective universal judgment makes itself felt as a series of apparent contradictions within the exquisite object: the exquisite can be (too) small, but it can also be (too) grand; (too) sublime or (too) beautiful; (too) close or (too) far away; (too) sadistic or (too) masochistic—it can be *too too*, as the late-Victorian period’s mercurial pleonasm has it. These distortions can be dwelt with in theoretical and critical terms—and they will be, over the course of this book. They are not, however, merely historical data—surplus evidence that, when people talk

about aesthetics, they frequently say things that are inconsistent or nonsensical—but evidence of the difficulty of *gathering* historical data about aesthetic experiences. Treated as historical phenomena, in other words, these conceptual distortions seem less like mere eccentricities, and more like the staging of “mere eccentricity” as a historical problem.

### III. The Ethnic Eccentric

Simply because Victorians granted to Japan the ambiguous privilege of being the Other Empire, does not mean that Japan indeed modernized the way that Victorians thought they did—or, indeed, that Victorians knew much about the subject at all. Whether Japan really was that kind of historical exception—the world’s first non-Western modernity—is a matter of deep and ongoing controversy among scholars in East Asian studies: there are, to be sure, good reasons to treat the notion with deep suspicion. The difficulty is well framed by Tani Barlow in her introduction to the collection *Formations of Colonial Modernity in East Asia*. “A binary [of Self and Other] disciplined the discourses of modernization in Japan because lacking a homogenous ‘Japanese’ self, the heterogeneity that had been the enabling condition of life in the archipelago before would reassert itself, and the project of colonial modernity—the formation of the Japanese nation-state through the colonization of Asia—might have foundered, as state-making ventures foundered in China before 1949. The colonial modernist binary worked both ways, however. It required constant efforts at consolidation to maintain a seamless, unperturbed homogenous self, but the effort rested on recruiting (or, more crudely put, in incorporating) compliant others. Japanese imperialism established the conditions for always complicit others—[Alan S.] Christy’s example is Okinawan elites—to desire their own ethnicization and embrace their diminished status as “not yet modern” (under Japanese inscription) or as ‘modernizing’ (in the U.S. cold war lexicon)” (12). Christy’s essay explores the distinctive position of Okinawa in the construction of a Japanese mythology of modernity, and in particular argues that the “assimilative slant” of the Japanese national project depended on a complex negotiation between Japanese state officials and Okinawan cultural workers.<sup>30</sup> Yanagi Soetsu, the central figure of the *Mingei* (“arts and crafts”) movement within Japanese modernism, exemplifies Christy’s sense of this complexity. In the “debate on dialects” of 1940, Yanagi spoke passionately in favor of maintaining Okinawan dialects. He did so, however, not in order to resist the ethnicizing project of the Japanese state, but to dispute its methods, and to commend the value of indigenous culture as a secondary practice of modernizing Japanese citizens. Later, the story coming full circle, Yanagi was

“adapted” into English by the potter Bernard Leach and enjoyed a brief spell of popularity as “The Japanese William Morris.”<sup>31</sup>

Christy’s understanding of the role of both “indigenous” and “Japanese” cultural practices in establishing a modern concept of the nation-state in Japan is extended and amplified in a number of different domains; the question is summarized by Dipesh Chakrabarty, in the afterward to another collection of essays.<sup>32</sup> These essays, in various forms, assert connections between the auto-aestheticization of the Japanese modernist project, and the political formations of capitalism and the nation-state. But Chakrabarty, by analogy with the modernization of South Asia, pressurizes what sometimes seems to him an unduly teleological connection between the two notions: “I know from the Indian examples of Gandhi and Tagore that there is no inexorable logic or process of historical inevitability that must always, anywhere and everywhere, lead romantic/aesthetic nationalism into statist and fascist jingoism. This happened in Japan, and happened in particular instances in Indian history, but these were instances in which, in my terms, the state was able to assimilate to its own ends the much richer, older, and more complex histories of the training of the senses that the subject of modernity embodied. How this happened, and where, is for the historian to explain” (296). Terse as Chakrabarty sounds here, he acknowledges that he writes as a nonspecialist; the difficulty he faces is in encountering a scholarly field in which aesthetics, as such, often seems inextricably linked with social and political metanarratives from which, in other contexts, aesthetic thinking is either forcefully distinguished, or actively antagonistic.<sup>33</sup> Japanese exceptionalist ideology was licensed in the period of imperial expansion by theories of national and racial consolidation—many of which, such as Kuki Shuzo’s influential account of *iki*—were founded explicitly on aesthetic thinking.<sup>34</sup> Even more pertinently, Okakura Kakuzo’s *Ideals of the East*, a foundational text of Japanese art historiography, was written by an imperial bureaucrat towards the goal of promoting Japanese power in Taiwan and Korea, and was mobilized by Japanese imperialists to justify the annexation of those territories and the confiscation of Taiwanese and Korean cultural treasures. Such Japanese texts in English are, obviously, important documents for charting the modernization and cultural hybridity of East Asia: they are also, I claim, important documents for examining the meanings of aesthetics, Victorianness, and the English language in the same period. (It is *solely* this latter importance on which I will place any argumentative pressure: I am *not* a scholar of East Asia, and I do not read Japanese.) These texts intervened in English literary culture in different ways, and with different tactical and strategic objectives, and differences between these writers abound in both their accounts of Japanese aesthetics and their methods of promoting it:



Noguchi's history of the haiku treats it as a portable kind of "effect," Hartmann constructs it as a discrete and regulated genre. They did so while loudly rebutting the mystifications of Western "Japonisme," as both an inhibitor and a perversion of what Okakura calls "any history of Japanese art-ideals" (*Ideals*, 4). Some, like the modernist novelist Soseki Natsume, traveled to the West to promote Japanese literature, and to learn the British canon, with material support from the Japanese government; others, like Hartmann, traveled alone, as bohemian outsiders scraping a living from criticism, poetry, and performance. Some (notably Noguchi) revised their positions as the Japanese Empire collapsed from the fraught liberalism of the Meiji and early Taisho periods into the militarist nationalism of the Showa era. But each of these writers, in different ways, sought to draw connections between the vitality of Japanese aesthetics and the promise of a Japanese national future, both thematically and formally.

As I hope is already clear, this book is less concerned with litigating this historiographical problem than with exploring the imaginary ramifications of exceptionalist ideology for British and Japanese Anglophone writers and artists. There is a complexity here, however. Merely by opening the *question* of whether Japan was an exceptionally modern place that would not, perforce, fall under the British imperial gaze, Victorians *already* placed Japan as an exception to the general principle of Orientalism: that East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet. This second-order exceptionalism, an exceptionalism that operates at the level of aesthetic ideology but *not* at the level of macro-historical narrative, was sublimated into the idea of "eccentricity."<sup>35</sup>

In the British Orientalist imaginary, Japan passed quickly from obscurity into eccentric modernity. Prior to the arrival of the American Commodore Perry's ships in Edo harbor in July 1853, British readers knew little of Japanese culture and history, and that which was known had been filtered through Dutch travelers, who alone among European powers had maintained a trade relationship with Japan through the two-and-a-half centuries of Japanese isolationism. Japan was remote enough that it may as well have been fictional: it almost appeared so, when Lemuel Gulliver arrived there in 1709, and found that, more foreign than even Luggnagg or Laputa, Japan was so inaccessible as to be basically without interest.<sup>36</sup> In 1841, John Murray published an anonymous author's *Manners and Customs of the Japanese in the Nineteenth Century, from Recent Dutch Visitors of Japan, and the German of Dr. Ph. Fr. von Siebold*, which formalized a vocabulary that would outlast the relative ignorance that produced it: customs are "strange," "curious," and "eccentric," rather than barbarous or savage. "We smile at such strange views," wrote one of the book's many reviewers.<sup>37</sup> There are exceptions to this general rule: frequently the Japanese form of government is described as "iron despotism," but even this

is not evidence of a vestigial or premodern mode political system. Indeed, Perry's mission to Japan was conducted not in order to civilize a backward nation, but in order that the United States might be the *first* Western power to snag a new trade relationship with a nation whose fitness for global trade was assumed by all parties.<sup>38</sup>

Perry's was a trade mission freighted with cultural ambitions, inaugurating, on both sides of the Atlantic, a surge in interest in the literary and aesthetic possibilities afforded by the normalization of diplomatic relations with the Japanese Empire—with Perry himself among the first to exploit them. On his return to Europe in 1854, Perry stopped by Liverpool to ask the novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne, who was serving as American consul there, to suggest somebody to write up a report of his travels for Congress and the general public. Hawthorne suggested Herman Melville, among others, and wrote in his journal that the task “would be a very desirable labor for a young literary man, or, for that matter, an old one: for the world can scarcely have in reserve a less hackneyed theme than Japan.”<sup>39</sup> Perry chose instead to commission an Episcopal minister named Francis Lister Hawks to write the *Narrative of the Expedition*, published in 1856, yet the title page of commercial publication places Perry's own name in a more prominent spot, as though his command of the “American Squadron” were the more salient factor in the text's publications, Hawks being cast as the mere amanuensis of a more appropriately epochal form of authorship.

In one important respect, the *Narrative* exceeded even Hawthorne's enthusiastic assessment of the literary potential of Japan for literary writing. While the novelist had written excitedly about the novelty of the “theme” of Japan, Hawks and Perry produce an account of American diplomacy touched, too, by what they took to be Japanese *form*. At various points in both Perry's transcribed notes and Hawks's editorial interventions, the authors become aware that the Commodore's demeanor and method of negotiation might seem arrogant or high-handed. That, the reader is assured, was an important dimension of Perry's “policy,” and was predicated on an intuition that the Japanese would respond to theatrical performances of pomp, given the very theatricality of the courtly culture he encountered. “In a country like Japan, so governed by ceremonials of all kinds, it was necessary to guard with the strictest etiquette even the forms of speech; and it was found that by a diligent attention to the minutest and apparently most insignificant details of word and action, the desired impression was made upon Japanese diplomacy; which, as a smooth surface requires one equally smooth to touch it at every point, can only be fully reached and met by the nicest adjustment of the most polished formality” (238). Form, then, appeared to Perry as both ethnically particular (it is Japanese) and as functionally universal (an American can learn it). And

18 INTRODUCTION

NARRATIVE

OF

THE EXPEDITION OF AN AMERICAN SQUADRON

TO

THE CHINA SEAS AND JAPAN,

PERFORMED IN THE YEARS 1852, 1853, AND 1854,

UNDER THE COMMAND OF

COMMODORE M. C. PERRY, UNITED STATES NAVY,

BY ORDER OF THE GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED STATES.

COMPILED FROM THE ORIGINAL NOTES AND JOURNALS OF COMMODORE PERRY AND HIS OFFICERS, AT HIS REQUEST, AND UNDER HIS SUPERVISION,

BY FRANCIS L. HAWKS, D. D. L. L. D.

WITH NUMEROUS ILLUSTRATIONS.

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PUBLISHED BY ORDER OF THE CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES.

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WASHINGTON:  
BEVERLEY TUCKER, SENATE PRINTER.  
1856.

FIGURE 0.2. Title page, Francis L. Hawks, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron* (1856).

in his startlingly erotic simile, he begins to imagine the absolute proximity that form alone can provide: the infinite proximity of two smooth outlines brought to occupy the same space, but only after each has been sanded down to an absolute degree. The aesthetic ramifications of Perry's theatrical formalism echoed throughout Victorian aesthetic controversies in which the impact of Japanese modernization could be felt only remotely: in the debates around the "finished" work of art, for example, that animated much of the antagonism between J.A.M. Whistler and John Ruskin, for example, and in the evocative treatments of the samurai sword as an eroticized outline. For now, however, I simply want to note that Perry's diplomatic mission did not merely provide writers with new things to express, but both enabled and necessitated new

modes of expression, modes both charged with the affective turbulence of a newly globalized world, and tasked with resolving that turbulence.

Many readers of *Moby-Dick*, published in 1851 in the midst of an American debate about the best methods of opening trade relations with Japan, have seen the tale of a monomaniacal sea captain bent on netting the big fish as, in some sense, an allegory for the American pursuit of Japanese trade.<sup>40</sup> A couple of years after Melville's novel, the Scottish writer Charles Macfarlane published a new account of Japanese history and culture, in which he offered pointers to the American delegation: "Should force be resorted to, the best means of proceeding would probably be to take possession of one of the smaller islands, or of some peninsula or promontory" (104).<sup>41</sup> Yet even in the midst of that bloodthirsty passage, Macfarlane is careful to note that the Americans should not imagine themselves to be *bringing*, but to be *safe-guarding*, Japanese modernity: "Should our very enterprising and energetic brethren begin with a too free use of Bowie-knives and Colt's revolvers, . . . slaughters and atrocities will be committed, and an interesting people will be plunged back into complete barbarity" (104). On the other hand, as the *Spectator* pointed out in a review of Murray's *Manners and Customs*, "we dare say the system also "works well," as Canning said of the Unreformed Parliaments."<sup>42</sup> Strange, ornamental, lovable, charming, pretty, clever: this was an Orientalism constructed not to prove the backwardness of the Other, but to demonstrate its eccentricity. How to do so?

#### IV. Biographies of Unusual Men

Historians and critics of the cultural relations between Japan and Britain at the fin de siècle have often seized on the theme of eccentricity as a vehicle for detailing, and occasionally sensationalizing, the lives of individual migrant Japanese writers. The title of Christopher Benfey's book *The Great Wave: Gilded Age Misfits, Japanese Eccentrics, and the Opening of Old Japan* (2004), for example, postulates two implicit analogies: first, between cultural mobility (the referent of the Hokusai reference) and a weirdness inscribed on the bodies of Japanese migrants as biographical eccentricity.<sup>43</sup> And, second, between the (American) "misfits" and their Japanese counterparts, who are alike only in their unlikeness from some broadly construed notion of modern (or modernist) norms. Benfey's book is hardly alone in these respects. The Japan Society, founded in 1891 by the decidedly eccentric dandy and son of Hungarian émigrés Arthur Diosy, continues to publish *Biographical Portraits* of British and Japanese personages.<sup>44</sup> These thumbnail sketches by both British and Japanese writers usually focus on diplomats, military personnel, and missionaries, rather than on writers and artists, but among the jingoistic celebrations

of their subjects' manly virtues, there is a recurring investment in their individual weirdness, an embodied minorness that gently works to undermine the major histories of which, nonetheless, they are taken to constitute vital parts.

Among the generic problematics of biography is that by narrating an individual's life and career it thereby isolates that individual, potentially pathetically; the biographical critic reproduces the loneliness of the historical subject. "Loneliness" being one of the aesthetic effects associated with the disfiguration of the subjective universal, nobody is lonelier than the subject of a biography. Nonetheless, both Japanese and British people involved in developing the inter-imperial relationship themselves loudly asserted their own eccentricity too. The poet John Todhunter was, in 1892, the secretary of a literary club named "the Sette of Odd Volumes," and recorded in light verse the "Japanese Night" held there on the 3rd of June:

Again the ODD VOLUMES assembled  
Correctly got up to a man,  
Prepared to discuss, with *hors d'oeuvres*  
THE ART OF OLD JAPAN  
We drank to the Queen; we boasted  
What wonderful Guests we had got:  
And then in a batch they were toasted,  
And served up, hot and hot.  
O, the Inros of Old Japan!  
Kakimonos of Old Japan!  
How instructive to hear the ODD VOLUMES  
On the ART OF OLD JAPAN!<sup>45</sup>

The poem, whose dactylic trimeter and clubbable irony recall the Savoy operas, delights in an eccentricity that is nonetheless emphatically ethnic; this is an *English* oddness, and part of the Englishness here lightly lampooned is a presumption of expertise on a subject so apparently "odd" as Japanese art. The following verse, however, mobilizes Toryish good humor in the service of a decidedly exceptionalist narrative of Japanese modernity:

His *Oddship* asked Captain Kawara  
(I've named him as near as I can),  
To respond for the civilization  
And culture of newest Japan.  
He spoke with aplomb and conviction,  
His speech very much seemed to please;  
But pray don't ask me to report it,

For I don't understand Japanese.

O, the Culture of newest Japan!

Civilization of newest Japan!

The Japs are out-Europing Europe,

I fear, in their newest Japan!

What had been cheerful English ignorance recurs as a species of historical irrelevance. The "Captain Kawara" lecturing these oddballs on Japanese modernity would find himself at a major figurehead of Japanese imperial power, as the captain of the cruiser *Yoshino* (built in Newcastle docks). The *Yoshino* was one of three Japanese warships involved in the ambush on the Chinese navy known as the "Battle of Pungdo," (July 25, 1894), the first engagement of the First Sino-Japanese War that concluded with the Japanese occupation of Korea, Taiwan, and the Liaodong Peninsula. Japanese victory in the war pleased the London literati greatly.<sup>46</sup>

The period's paradigmatic Japanese eccentric was the aforementioned Sadakichi Hartmann himself. According to his magisterially improbable autobiography, he left the mechanical island of Dejima for Hamburg, Germany, in "18?? (date of arrival in Germany unknown)," his mother having died in childbirth. He read "Goethe and Schiller" by the age of nine, and exported his considerable cultural capital to Paris in 1882 (where he became friends with Stéphane Mallarmé), Philadelphia later that year (where he occasionally crossed the Delaware to take notes for Walt Whitman after 1884), Boston in 1887, New York in 1889 (where he was crowned "the King of Greenwich Village"), and eventually Los Angeles in 1923 (in which year he appeared in the early action flick *The Thief of Baghdad*, against a young and pulsing Douglas Fairbanks). Hartmann revels in the privileges afforded to the "white chrysanthemum" (another of his many memorable self-soubriquets), leaving it to others to record that, for example, his relationship with Whitman was brought to an end after other Whitmanian acolytes expressed anxiety about his proximity to the master, who eventually cut off all relations with "that damn Japanee."<sup>47</sup>

Styling himself as "the first Eurasian," Sadakichi (rarely to himself or others "Hartmann," though whether through simple enthusiasm, or miscomprehension of Japanese patronymy, remains unclear) details the enthusiasm with which his literary magniloquence and personal elegance were received, as a modern major-general to whom "all doors opened!" The irony of the remark feels much stronger in retrospect: after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Sadakichi lost the extraordinary privilege accrued over his literary career, and spent his last years under investigation by American authorities, narrowly

avoiding the internment that other Japanese people in America suffered, until his death in 1944. Despite his having been occasionally resuscitated as a witty and unusual literary eccentric, his reputation hardly recovered, and he is still remembered, when he is, mostly as one of the “lost generation” of America’s *belle époque*, as Ezra Pound puts it in his note on Hartmann in *Canto LXXX*.<sup>48</sup> After the dramatic escalation of racial violence that followed the outbreak of war between Japan and the United States, the exceptional quality that had so frequently been attributed to Hartmann (Pound: “Sadakichi has lived. Has so lived that if one hadn’t been oneself it wd. have been worth while to have been Sadakichi”) evaporated.<sup>49</sup>

Hartmann has proven difficult to place into history precisely on account of his eccentricity. He was excluded by name from the *Aiiiiiiiii!!* anthology that inaugurated the tradition of Asian American literary criticism on the historical grounds that that category could only make sense in the age of an American midcentury imperialism that reconfigured the nineteenth century’s ferociously patrolled distinctions between Japanese and Chinese migrants.<sup>50</sup> Along with Yone Noguchi, the *Aiiiiiiiii!!* authors argue, Hartmann “momentarily influenced American writing with the quaintness of the Orient but said nothing about Asian America, because, in fact, these writers weren’t Asian-Americans but Americanized Asians.”<sup>51</sup> If we cannot speak here of a “queer temporality,” as our contemporary lexicon frequently does, we can perhaps designate the history of the eccentric as conditioned by a *quaint temporality*: an aesthetic and elliptical feeling of historicalness that nonetheless seeks to exempt itself from the more muscular historical explanations that have, in recent debates within Victorian studies for example, sometimes been seen as exhaustive of historicism *per se*.<sup>52</sup>

The *Aiiiiiiiii!* editors ascribed to Hartmann two distinct kinds of conspicuous minoriness: first, he did not have much of an impact because he neither came from, nor wrote from within, the major ethnic category of “Asian America.” Devoid of ethnic identity, Hartmann’s impact could be, at best, *anomalous*; not even a “native informant,” in the sense that he was neither native (to Asian America) nor informing on it. Second, the effect that Hartmann *did* have, on the white Americans who interacted with his work, was muted and defunct, concerned merely with “the quaintness of the Orient,” rather than with the more major affects—love, hate, recognition, enchantment, terror—associated with cultural work. Thus “quaintness” as a critical formulation performs, in Chin et al.’s reading of Hartmann, both historiographical and aesthetic work, operating both as a kind of exceptional but shallow alternative to the dominant, nonquaint literatures (in this case, the white avant-gardes of Boston and New York), squib literatures that, alas, prove only that the domi-

nant literature is better after all; and as an emptied out remnant of what once might have been “charm”—quaintness as a low-intensity aesthetic fondness, enabled and finally marred by its reassuring historical irrelevance.

Chin et al. did not stipulate the relation between these two senses of quaint, and their position on the merits of Hartmann’s writing (relative, that is, to the avant-garde work of the Asian American poets the collection promotes) is not one I’m going to dispute, exactly. The problem is that Hartmann’s purported quaintness was merely an extreme example of the general case of how *Japan* was treated by Western thinkers at a far larger scale, no longer of a local avant-garde literary scene in an East Coast metropole, but of the global community of nations. Nineteenth-century Japanese writers and artists were keenly aware that their fetishization by Western aesthetes was something of a poisoned chalice: while, doubtless, it helped to facilitate East/West trade and travel, it deprived Japanese people of a sense of historical efficacy. In the introduction to *Things Japanese*, an encyclopedia of vignettes concerning Japanese culture, the Orientalist Basil Hall Chamberlain recalls a visit by Sir Edwin Arnold to Japan. Arnold, who had been known as an enthusiastic Japanophile, as well as a comparative religious scholar and Oriental linguist, gave a speech extolling Japanese culture: “so fairy-like, said he, is its scenery, so exquisite its art, so many more lovely still that almost divine sweetness of disposition, that charm of demeanour.”<sup>53</sup> Lest any reader mistake the condescending and babying tone of Arnold’s address, Chamberlain recalls an article in the Tokyo press published the next day, in which the editor takes Arnold’s call as an implicit challenge to Japanese industrial and military power. “Art forsooth, scenery, sweetness of disposition! cries this editor. Why did not Sir Edwin praise us for huge industrial enterprises, for commercial talent, for wealth, political sagacity, powerful armaments? Of course it is because he could not honestly do so. He has gauged us at our true value, and tells us in effect that we are only pretty weaklings.”<sup>54</sup> To be the most beautiful thing in the world is still, it would seem, to be merely a thing.

The editor’s implication that aesthetic appreciation compensates for a lack of political will (figured as military or industrial power) is a narrative familiar to scholars of late nineteenth-century European culture as an assessment of the period’s “decadence,” its putative squandering of social energies in aesthetic projects that betray the century’s earlier reforming spirit, and which needed in turn to be renovated by modernism’s radicalization of the aesthetic project a little later. It is a narrative to which Chamberlain (whose account of the exchange between Arnold and the editor is all that remains, and whose motivations will be discussed in this book’s second chapter) may very well have subscribed.<sup>55</sup> The figure of the “pretty weakling” would serve such a



narrative not merely as a descriptor for the feminized Japanese man, but also for the effeminate Western aesthete. Such an assessment appears in the American abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higginson's well-known denunciation of Oscar Wilde as having abandoned the just cause of Irish independence for a certain kind of art: "Is it manhood for [Ireland's] gifted sons to stay at home and help work out the problem; or to cross the Atlantic and pose in ladies' boudoirs or write prurient poems which their hostesses must discreetly ignore?"<sup>56</sup> In Higginson's account, as in that of Chamberlain's editor, the cosmopolitan mobility of aesthetic culture transgressed not merely the boundaries of nation, but the narratives of national growth and power that sustained them.

In other words, the aestheticization of Japanese contemporary history *racialized* a narrative about aestheticized eccentricity that was deployed domestically against both Japanese migrant writers in Britain and the United States, and the pretty weaklings, effeminate, and homosexuals of (particularly) the British aesthetic movement. The analogy was not merely formal: these two worlds were institutionally imbricated, too. The Japanese Anglophone writers shared, often, such institutional spaces with British Orientalists: in Arthur Diosy's London-based Japan Society, for example, where Yone Noguchi lectured a handful of times, or in the publisher John Murray's "Wisdom of the East" series, which printed Noguchi's *Spirit of Japanese Poetry* alongside Laurence Binyon's survey of Chinese and Japanese art, *The Flight of the Dragon*.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, it is striking the degree to which Orientalist and anti-Orientalist positions—or perhaps we should say "allo-Orientalizing" and "auto-Orientalizing" positions—were staked within the same cultural and institutional settings, with destabilizing effects both domestically and transnationally. Aesthetic investments in Japan metastasized into libidinal ones, and vice versa; "Japanese young man" became a euphemism for an effeminate aesthete; Japan was imaginatively transformed into a space of sexually dissident utopian longing. Despite the appeal of Japan to British aesthetes occurring partly on the basis of Japan's minoriness, the aesthetic idea of Japan drew together, in the margins of British public culture, two of the most self-consciously major historical narratives of which Victorians were aware: (1) the sexualization of subjectivity (of which the Wilde trials were among the most spectacular demonstrations), and (2) the terminal project of globalization, whose major flashpoints—the Berlin conference of 1884–85; the growing global consensus around GMT as the epicenter of universal time—occurred during the period of high aestheticism.<sup>58</sup> In that sense, the late-Victorian idea of Japan as eccentric, producing exquisite art, and subject only to quaint styles of memorialization laid the groundwork for the influential post-structuralist historiographies of the twentieth century.

## V. Victorian Postmodernity

A quaint temporality continually conditions accounts of Japanese culture within the broad Continental philosophical tradition we now designate as “theory,” through Japan’s apparently elliptical relation to the historical phenomenon that, whether singular or plural, gets called “modernity.”<sup>59</sup> Roland Barthes writes that the “very specialty” of Japan is “its modernity.”<sup>60</sup> As we have seen, many nineteenth-century observers would have agreed. But what kind of modernity is it, after all, that is defined through this distantiation that, while charged with affective and aesthetic content, is not located on any kind of timeline? Japan did not appear—and Barthes did not think it did—“modern” in the sense in which we discriminate the moderns from the ancients, or from the primitives. If the modernity of Japan distinguished itself from anything, indeed, it was precisely from *modernity*, as usually construed by Western writers. Japanese modernity functioned primarily as a criticism of a narcissistic Western modernity gone wrong. Nearer to the end of the century, this version of modernity was exhibited (almost literally) by Rudyard Kipling, in one of the two most widely cited passages about Japan that the fin de siècle produced. During a trip to Japan, Kipling meets a (fictional) Western professor, and the two begin a conversation about the superiority of Japanese over British “curios,” and grieving that Japanese culture is under threat from Westernization.

We stayed long in the half-light of that quaint place, and when we went away we grieved afresh that such a people should have a “constitution” or should dress every tenth young man in European clothes, put a white iron-clad in Kobé harbor, and send a dozen myopic lieutenants in baggy uniforms about the streets.

“It would pay us,” said the Professor, his head in a clog-shop, “it would pay us to establish an international suzerainty over Japan to take away any fear of invasion or annexation, and pay the country as much as ever it chose, on condition that it simply sat still and went on making beautiful things while our men learned. It would pay us to put the whole Empire in a glass case and mark it, ‘Hors concours,’ Exhibit A.”

“H’m,” said I. “Who’s us?”

“Oh, we generally—the Sahib log all the world over. Our workmen—a few of them—can do as good work in certain lines, but you don’t find whole towns full of clean, capable, dainty, designful people in Europe.”  
(334–35)

The Professor’s allegory draws on a slew of occasionally contradictory suppositions about Japanese aesthetics. Here we have the trope of miniaturiza-

tion, for example, vividly reconstructed: “the whole Empire” can be placed under a bell jar and taken in, presumably, by the singular gaze of the “Sahib log.”<sup>61</sup> Less remarked, however, has been the strange placement of Japan in time: distanced from “our men” by virtue of their advanced skill (which the Sahib can nonetheless be presumed to pick up, given the opportunity), Japan must be told to “stand still” so that we can catch up. Underneath the glass case, Japan is protected from the Western version of modernity, here figured in both military terms (“invasion”) and as cultural influence (the “European clothes”), but its temporal eccentricity remains fully intact. Like the bottle-city of Kandor, Japan sits among its own curios (which are, anyway, more metaphor than metonym) as a microcosmic ensign from the future.

The aestheticized form of modernity—perhaps, to adapt the title of a recent collection of essays on Japanese modernization, a “mirror of modernity”—has been frequently aligned with a now altogether less fashionable periodic designation: postmodernity.<sup>62</sup> In their introduction to a 1989 collection entitled *Japan and Postmodernism*, Masao Miyoshi and H. D. Harootunian offer a pair of explanations for the appeal of Japanese culture to Western theorists of the postmodern. They explain that the heyday of “postmodernism” coincided with the so-called “Japanese economic miracle” of the 1980s, which in turn prompted an Orientalist panic on the part of Western commentators about the possibility that economic growth threatened to make Japan “the hegemon of the twenty-first century” (ix). While Miyoshi and Harootunian are critical of the Orientalist tone of the op-eds they cite, and while they historicize this postmodernization of Japan within the longer history of “Yellow Peril” discourses, they offer the following important discrimination: “it looks far more legitimate this time around, simply because the threat of Japan’s economic power is perceived to be real” (ix). Their second argument for the postmodernity of Japan concerns the persistence of a Japanese colonial historiography in Japan itself—a grand narrative in which Japan and the West are cast as the two great protagonists of global modernity—which has been (in “serious error,” they think) adapted to suit postmodernist claims about the “end of history.” It is this latter that Miyoshi and Harootunian take to be a repetition of a nineteenth-century plot: “Japan’s identification of itself with the first world might be a repeat performance of the archetypal colonial gesture, lusting after the coveted membership in the utopian sanctuary. Japan has lived through this process before in the mid-nineteenth century. Does it need to repeat it?” (xi).

The ascription of a postmodern dimension to the premodernist historiography of the nineteenth century was, to be sure, a staple of poststructuralist theory. As, indeed, was the kind of Orientalist rhapsodizing on Japanese capitalism that Miyoshi and Harootunian align with Japanese colonial historiog-

raphy. The first published of Jean-François Lyotard's *Postmodern Fables*, indeed, is entitled "Marie Goes to Japan," and depicts the eponymous Marie, a (Western) professor of postmodern theory, reflecting on the elegant fakery of her profession while moving through Tokyo airport on her way to give a talk:

The *stream of cultural capital* [in English in original]. But that's me, Marie tells herself, while watching the baggage return rotate at Narita airport. A little stream, but still a stream. Cultural, that's for sure, they buy culture from me. Capital too. I'm not the owner, thank God, nor the manager. Just a little cultural labor force they can exploit. But correctly, under contract, let me add, with my signature. No great discovery here. (3)

Lightly dragged up as Marie, Lyotard reflects on his commodification as a stream of cultural revenue, with the same routinized reflexivity of the baggage carousel. Jean Baudrillard, who visited Japan a number of times, offered an imago less carousel and more mirror: "a strong culture [that] reflects back to us the image of our degraded one."<sup>63</sup> A similar ambush befalls Michel Foucault, in an awkward interview by a Buddhist priest, conducted in a temple in Uenohara. Foucault offers the following, blushing summary of his thoughts about Japan:

PRIEST: Your interest in Japan is it deep or superficial?

FOUCAULT: Honestly, I am not constantly interested in Japan. What interests me is the Western history of rationality and its limit. On this point, Japan poses a problem that we can't avoid, and it's an illustration of this problem. Because Japan is an enigma, very difficult to decode. That doesn't mean to say that it is that which opposes itself to Western reality. In reality, that rationality constructs colonies everywhere else, whereas Japan is far from building one, it is, on the contrary, colonized by Japan.

PRIEST: I have been told you are interested in mysticism. In your opinion, do mysticism and esotericism mean the same thing?

FOUCAULT: No.<sup>64</sup>

The rhetorical difficulty by which Foucault is beset—a series of yes/no questions with little room to maneuver—produces an elliptical and costive response. Japan both is and is not the limit case for this "Western history of rationality" in which Foucault declares his interest: knowing the game of Orientalist discourse, but unable to free himself from its double bind, his answers drift towards sulky negativity.

That Orientalism was one of poststructuralist theory's constitutive blind spots has been a mainstay of critical studies for a generation, and though I am fascinated by the *sociological* conformity of these various moments (French

academics confronted with both the portability of their expertise and its hard limits), I've not cited these Lyotard, Baudrillard, and Foucault passages merely to discredit them—and certainly not to assimilate either their Orientalisms or their broader theoretical projects. My point is rather that the distinction of Japan in these accounts is that it both belongs and does not belong to the history of Western rationality; it can neither be simply included nor excluded from the colonial historiography that each of these theorists has set out to debunk. It cannot, because of the uniquely quaint position that Japan occupies for these theorists, as for the Victorians I have been discussing: *modern*, but not *in the way that everybody else is*.

Such is the condition of a Japan not merely as postmodern, but actually as post-historical—and such is the ideology that is at the root of the poststructuralists' accounts, as Miyoshi and Harootunian imply. This dimension of poststructuralist thought has generally been ascribed to the important influence of Alexandre Kojève, whose foundational reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology* was subject to "a radical change of opinion" after his 1959 trip to Japan, and whose thoughts on the subject were cited explicitly by Baudrillard and Félix Guattari.<sup>65</sup> A "one of a kind" society, Japan alone affords Kojève with an example of a society living at "the end of history," and had indeed dwelled there for "three centuries."<sup>66</sup> This condition had been brought about by, precisely, the aestheticization of modernity: the replacement, in Japan, of "Religion, Morals, or Politics" by "*Snobbery* in its pure form," whose primary forms of expression are Noh theater, the tea ceremony, and *ikebana* (162). The consequences for his reading of Hegel were definitive. Kojève had initially thought that the dialectic would pull humanity through language and towards a new kind of animality—that therefore the "post-historical" moment that would conclude the historical dialectic would lead to the abolition of the "human." But since Japan's post-historical quality was characterized by "Snobbery," or, as he calls it shortly after, "a position to live according to totally *formalized* values," and since, further, "no animal can be a snob," Japan opens up the possibility of a post-historical future in which humanness is preserved, but as *form*, rather than content. That is to say, the example of Japan allows Kojève to conceive of the (Hegelian) subject as such in terms of a kind of aesthetic patterning.

Kojève's diagnosis of Japan as the "end of history" catalyzed the development of American neoconservative ideology through the work of Francis Fukuyama, whose reading of Kojève motivates *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992). On one level, Fukuyama's treatment of Japan conforms to the standard exceptionalist line: "Japan, the first East Asian state to modernize, was the first to achieve a stable liberal democracy. (Japan's democratization was accomplished at the point of a gun, so to speak, but the

result proved durable long past the point where democracy could be said to have been imposed coercively)” (110). Yet his reading of Kojève’s (“Japanese”) aesthetics proves difficult to adopt into the version of liberalism he extends under the banner of *pax Americana*, since while “the Japanese demonstrated that it is possible to continue to be human through the invention of a series of perfectly contentless formal arts, . . . in the United States, our utilitarian traditions make it difficult for even the fine arts to become purely formal.” Accordingly, in America, art will eventually cease to mean *either* what it meant for Kojève’s Japanese, or contemporary Americans: “Artists like to convince themselves that they are being socially responsible in addition to being committed to aesthetic values. But the end of history will mean the end, among other things, of all art that could be considered socially useful, and hence the descent of artistic activity into the empty formalism of the traditional Japanese arts.”

Yet for all the idiosyncrasies of Kojève’s reading of *Phenomenology*, his understanding of Japan as a portent of an aesthetic future to come conforms in large part to that of a nineteenth-century American Hegelian, Ernest Fenollosa.<sup>67</sup> Mostly now read through Ezra Pound, who edited and published his essay on the possibility of importing the Chinese ideogram into Anglophone poetry, Fenollosa taught philosophy at Tokyo Imperial University off and on from 1878 until the end of the century—and is particularly credited with helping to establish the first national art institutions in Japan.<sup>68</sup> His essays of the 1890s treating what he called “the theater of the East” (153) described Japanese modernity in almost apocalyptic terms, as the fulfillment of the Hegelian historical dialectic—the movement of history from the East to the West. Fenollosa writes:

We cannot shirk the responsibility if we would. Whether we like it or not, our lot is thrown with it, for good or ill, from now on, *and to all time*. The test is mutual. It is not merely that the West shall from its own point of view tolerate the East, nor the East the West; not even that the West shall try to understand the East from the Eastern point of view—but that both, planting their faith in the divine destinies of man, shall with co-operation aim at a new world-type, rich in those million possibilities of thought and achievement that exclusion blindly stifles.

For this fusion is to be not only worldwide, but final. The future historian will look back upon our crisis as unique, the most breathless in human annals. Heretofore race unions have existed for limited areas only—composite cultures whose defects and abuses outlying types might eventually rectify. Rome was regenerated by Teutonic character, and Hun tyranny by Tartar freedom. But today each of the pledged factors absorbs the power

and hope of a hemisphere. The Western type of culture is marked, scarred, cast into a hard mould for all Aryan people; the Eastern is full, over-ripe, despairing of new expression in its worn-out words. Each has exhausted the separate fruitage of its seeds. If the union fail now, the defect must be consanguineous to the end; for there is no new blood, no outlying culture-germ for subsequent infusion. Such as we make it now, it must remain till the end. This is man's final experiment.

Fenollosa's apocalyptic tone derives from his sense of the historical exceptionality of his moment: the 1898 Spanish-American War (a culmination of another sort: the first war to be fought westwards across the Pacific) had both necessitated and enabled a "coming fusion of East and West," in which the two hemispheres would finally stand "soul to soul, as if in the sudden meeting of two brothers parted since childhood" (155). And although Fenollosa did not go as far as Kojève, who argues that Japan had *already been* post-historical since the commencement of the Tokugawa Shogunate, as my second epigraph demonstrates, he did think that the coming fusion is both singular and final—that it will produce the end of history, or at least of history as it can be conceptualized through the Hegelian dialectic.<sup>69</sup> Notwithstanding the partisan delight with which Fenollosa considers the American imperial expansion into the Pacific, one might conclude that Fenollosa's Japan is apprehended with the same mixture of apocalyptic excitement and existential dread as Kojève's.

Japan: a precondition for the exquisite aesthetic structure implicit in Kant's description of aesthetic judgment; an Other Empire radically threatening the cultural chauvinism of late-Victorian Britain; an eccentric modernity populated by eccentric men, and a model, therefore, for the subcultural socialities of British aestheticism; a material source of influential writers and artists shaping the emerging aesthetic discourses, usually *away* from the interests of the white avant-gardes whose achievements are all-too-frequently centered in cultural histories of the period; an influence, direct *and* indirect, on the post-structuralist historiographies of theory, and therefore embedded, invisibly, in many of our most cherished categories of cultural analysis. *That* is the Japan this book is about.

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The chapters are organized more or less chronologically, with a couple of wrinkles: from (1) *The Mikado* [1885]; (2) British aestheticism [ca. 1880–ca. 1900]; (3) Noguchi's "My love's lengthened hair" [1902]; (4) Mikimoto's Ruskin collection [1921–40]; (5) a chronological study of the theme of the Japanese sword, from the *Madame Chrysanthème/Madame Butterfly* books,

(continued...)

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