Traditionalism and Modernization: The Case of Mori Ôgai

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During the period between the start of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904 and the end of the First World War in 1918, Japan came into its own as a modern world power—the first non-Western country to achieve this status. It was a remarkable accomplishment for a country that, at the start of the Meiji era just fifty years before, had been in danger of losing its independence to the very powers among which it was now included.

The new status did not come without a price, and it has become conventional to view the modernization of Japan as accompanied by the decline of its traditional culture. To speak of the price of modernization in terms of Japanese culture, however, is to slight those aspects of the bargain that Japan shares with other modern or modernizing countries. The new conditions of life in Meiji-era Japan furnished a natural theme for writers of that time, among whom one was especially sensitive to the universally problematical aspects of modernization: Mori Ôgai (1862–1922).

J. Thomas Rimer, who has edited or co-edited two collections of Ôgai's stories in English translation, writes in an essay introducing one of these collections that “Mori Ôgai has yet to achieve any satisfactory reception in the West,” despite the fact that the “nature of his mental world...was overwhelmingly cosmopolitan.”

One obstacle to such a reception may be the difficulty of classifying Ôgai's work according to conventional notions of literature—a consequence of his conviction about “its use as a means to convey philosophical ideas.” The ideas conveyed in this way include those having to do with issues surrounding Japan’s transition to membership in the modern community of nations.

According to Katô Shûichi, Ôgai met the challenge of modernization on the level of political thinking more successfully than his literary contemporaries: “His objective was the enlightenment of the intellectual public, taking into account both national traditions and Western ideas.”

Still, there is a paradox in Ôgai’s career that deserves more attention than Katô has given it. In the last decade of his life, Ôgai turned
from fiction to history; more precisely, he turned to a kind of historical literature in which the fictional element played an increasingly minor role. Ōgai’s reverence for the pre-Meiji past as revealed in his late works would seem to put him at odds with the modernizing ambitions of many Japanese of his generation. He explained his turn to history in a 1915 essay, “Rekishi sono mama to rekishibanare” (“History as It Is and History Ignored”):

In studying historical records, I came to revere the reality that was evidenced in them. Any wanton change seemed distasteful to me. This is one of my motives. Secondly, if contemporary authors can write about life “just as it is” and find it satisfactory, then they ought to appreciate a similar treatment of the past.

Ōgai’s views carry special weight because he experienced reform at first hand. Ōgai was born in the last years of the Tokugawa shogunate, when Japan was in turmoil over the government’s new policy of opening to the West, limited as that policy was. Following the accession of the Emperor Meiji and the restoration of direct Imperial rule, Japan remade itself as a modern nation-state; in the process it opened itself to foreign influences in a far more radical way than it had done under the shogunate.

There were important consequences for education, among many other things. As a child in a samurai household Ōgai received a traditional Confucian education. In Rimer’s words, “At the age of five he began his studies in the traditional fashion and was tutored in Mencius, Confucius, and some of the Japanese classics. His generation was perhaps the last to receive as a matter of course such classical training (roughly equivalent to Greek and Latin in the West).”

Less than twenty years later, having in the meantime graduated from newly founded Tokyo University and joined the army medical corps, Ōgai “found himself in Germany, doing research for the Japanese government on advanced techniques of hygiene and military medicine”; he also “read much of the best in Greek, German, and other classical and modern literature.” The frontispiece to the second volume of Ōgai’s historical literature in English shows him in his military uniform, seated informally in an elaborately carved Western-style chair, with a cigar in his hand—to all appearances a thoroughly modern Japanese. Indeed, Ōgai’s stance was by no means anti-modern. Rather, in addition to the motives he cites in the essay on “history as it is,” Ōgai drew upon the Japanese past to supply what he took to be missing from mod-
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ern life.

Ôgai undoubtedly sympathized with the aim of the original modernizers, members of his parents’ or grandparents’ generation. This aim is expressed in the slogan *fukoku kyôhei*, “rich country, strong army”: a country rich enough and strong enough to preserve its independence against the Western powers. The slogan also implied a sober recognition that Japan lagged behind these powers in technical development and that it would have to enter into relations with them and learn from them if it was to match them in national wealth and military strength.

Another slogan from the time is more direct: *tôyô no dôtoku, seiyô no gakugei*, “Eastern ethics, Western technique,” or more concisely, wakon yôsai, “Japanese spirit, Western learning.” *Wakon yôsai* represented the political limit of openness to Western influence in the Japan of the 1850s and ‘60s. It was the position associated with the declining shogunate, but when the shogun’s government was definitively overthrown in 1868, the modernizers’ position was quickly adopted by the leaders of the new Imperial government.

The success of *wakon yôsai* raised further questions, however. One of the first to perceive its weaknesses was the writer and educator Fukuzawa Yukichi. In his translation of Fukuzawa’s *Autobiography* Kiyooka Eiichi includes a note describing the factions in Japan at the time of the overthrow of the shogunate and the schools of thought they represented:

> [Among the scholars there were two schools of thought. One of them advocated isolation because it was dangerous to open intercourse with foreigners before reforming the people’s lax morale, for samurai were lazy and effete after the long peace and the feudal discipline was in degenerate state. The Western ideas which gave too much importance to profit and practical usefulness would further degenerate the Japanese.]

The other school advocated limited intercourse with the West, because in their thinking, foreign aggression, as proved by the Opium War of 1840, was too urgent to wait for internal reform. The country should be opened peaceably in order to learn the technique of gunnery and steamship, etc. in order to place Japan on an equal footing with the West. ... Both schools were agreed that the only thing the West had to teach was the mechanical technique; Japan had superior knowledge in ethical and social fields....

The forces which rallied around the Imperial court took to the former
school of thought, and the shogunate by force of circumstances took to the latter school. This opposition soon turned into a violent political conflict. ... 

In this situation, Fukuzawa and the small group of enlightened scholars had to demonstrate that the West had more to give than the technique, that the Japanese concept of man and society was what retarded the development of their technique, and that the whole way of thinking must be reexamined.6

Fukuzawa’s view, in turn, prevailed: wakon yōsai gave way to bummei kaika, “civilization and enlightenment.” Again, Ōgai was undoubt- edly in sympathy with the view of the “enlightened scholars” that “the Japanese concept of man and society was what retarded the development of their technique.” If Ōgai’s late work gives the appearance of a retrogression to wakon yōsai, his turn to history does not stem from any desire to exalt “Japanese spirit.” Rather, Ōgai recognized that bummei kaika was not without problems of its own. The problematical nature of modern life is recognizable above all in the divorce of facts from “values.”

Katō Shūichi accounts for the disparate tendencies in Ōgai’s career by reference to the distinction between science and ethics that also underlay wakon yōsai:

Having come back from the leading medical laboratories of Germany at the end of the 1880’s, Mori Ōgai argued vigorously that there was but a single real medicine and that one could not speak of such things as “Western” or “traditional Japanese” medicines. He then proceed- ed to stress the importance of cultivating the “seeds of science” instead of being satisfied with taking from outside the “fruits of sci- ence.” ... But of course Western culture meant for Mori Ōgai not only science but also literature, philosophy, ethics, and way of life. All these were closely connected with history, and Mori Ōgai’s attitude toward the indiscriminate introduction of Western ideas was very ambivalent. He thought that the cultural traditions of Japan should be respected as much as possible in any program of reform. ...Mori Ōgai seems to have thought that the only practical solution to the problems raised by Japan’s accelerated modernization was the encouragement of the scientific spirit, combined with a sort of traditionalism in creative arts and literature, and in morals and social reforms.7

No thoughtful person can be altogether satisfied with this sort of dualism, which assigns human beings’ bodily lives to a science that is
everywhere the same and their moral lives to various and conflicting cultural traditions. There is no evidence that Ogai found it satisfactory, though he seems to have concluded that it was the best thing available. His reasoning, however, had little or nothing to do with the “cultural traditions of Japan” as such. Ogai’s view of Japanese tradition must be seen in relation to his doubts about whether modern science can be successfully applied to non-technical problems in human life.

Ogai directly addresses questions provoked by modernization in two autobiographical or semi-autobiographical stories that he wrote in 1911 and 1912, shortly before his turn to historical literature: “Mōsō” (translated under the titles “Daydreams” and “Delusion”) and “Ka no yô ni” (“As If”). Ogai’s seriousness in regard to the possibility of being guided by modern science is shown by his comments in “Mōsō,” on two sorts of cases that combine technical and non-technical problems, namely architecture and diet.

The narrator, apparently Ogai himself (the only conspicuous departure from fact in his self-presentation is the description of the narrator as an old man living in retirement), recounts that architecture and diet were matters being debated in Japan at the time of his return from studies in Germany. Ogai contributed to the debate: he defended tradition, but not for tradition’s sake. He did not think that Tokyo should be rebuilt with skyscrapers (Ogai uses the German word Wolkenkratzer), not because this style of building is un-Japanese but because a high density of population is unhygienic.

Similarly, Ogai expressed his view that the Japanese should retain their traditional diet, “because rice and fish were so easy to digest”; in another part of the essay he mentions having cited a German authority in support of this view. In “Mōsō,” Ogai also records how a certain dissatisfaction with his medical studies induced him to look into philosophy, but his investigation of the philosophy of the time (he names Eduard von Hartmann and Max Stirner) only increased his dissatisfaction. Ogai expressed the conclusion to which it led in these words: “In the end all that remained after the destruction of every illusion was the self. The self was the only thing in this world on which one could rely.” Such a conclusion furnished no satisfactory basis for social or political life; nevertheless he is unwilling to abandon science for faith. Near the end of the essay, reverting to narration in the third person, Ogai says:

The old man, who now regards all philosophical and literary movements with a certain amount of skepticism, still takes an interest,
albeit indirect, in the work of scientists, that patient work of building, heavy stone on heavy stone. Many years have passed since the Catholic editor of the Revue des Deux Mondes, Brunetière, prophesied the bankruptcy of science, but science is still with us.

"Ka no yô ni" also takes up the problem of applying modern scientific methods in a non-technical field. This story brings out more sharply than "Môsô" some ofÔgai's reservations about positions taken by the generation that had been influenced by Fukuzawa. The difficulty was not that that generation had gone too far in Westernizing Japan, as some conservatives feared, but that it had shown an inclination to shut its eyes to inconvenient facts.

The protagonist of the story is a young man named Gojo Hidemaro who has recently returned to his family from studies in Germany. Hidemaro decided at an early point in his studies to make the writing of Japan's history his life's work. This decision has been complicated by his encounter while in Germany with Adolf Harnack's historical-critical theology. Hidemaro writes to his father that among educated Northern Germans there are, in truth, no religious believers in the traditional sense. Nevertheless there are important distinctions among them in their non-belief. One group sees no need for religion and is open about saying so. A second group pretends to see such a need although in fact it does not. The third group has been instructed by modern theology to see the need for religion, if not for traditional views then for "doctrine which has been cleared of all superfluities by specialists."

These distinctions have important political consequences. Those in the first two groups have "dangerous ideas"; the third group produces "healthy thinkers." Hidemaro contrasts the progressive North of Germany with the more traditional Catholic South; more pointedly, he contrasts the strength of the German nation, which "rests on theology," with the weakness of Russia, whose government "leaves the orthodox church to stagnate...and rules the people in a way to suggest they are fools." As a result of the Russian policy, when the people "wake up just a little they become extreme anarchists."

Religion in Japan had been largely exempt from the policy of bum-mei kaika. Hidemaro's father is a viscount, a pillar of the new order; like many others of his class, he became a Shintoist at the time of the restoration of direct Imperial rule. Reading his son's letter he realizes that his own position most resembles that of the second group, which pretends to have faith but does not. The open skeptics may be more dangerous, but they at least have confronted the question squarely.
It seems doubtful that Ôgai regarded Protestant theology as a complete success, however sincerely he admired the political astuteness of the German authorities. At any event Ôgai’s protagonist, now back in his native country, does not proceed as might be expected to the task of Protestantizing Japan’s national religion. Hidemaro cannot begin his history until he has distinguished those things in the records of the Japanese past that really are historical from those that have their basis in myth. This is a sensitive matter because it concerns the origin of the Imperial line, among other things. Hidemaro’s father thinks it would be safer to leave religious questions alone. Hidemaro is afraid to challenge his father, but there is a more fundamental problem: he is not convinced that the world of facts can supply all that is needful in human life.

The title of the story refers to a book that Hidemaro has been reading: Die Philosophie des “Als Ob”—a real book, though Ôgai does not name the author, Hans Vaihinger. This book seems to offer a solution to the religious problem; Hidemaro tells his friend Ayakôji that it explains his own philosophy. Viewed in the light of science, sacred myths may not be any more truthful than novels. Like novels, however, myths “have life in themselves; they have worth.” This is the meaning of the book’s title, The Philosophy of “As If.”

Liberty, immortality of the soul, duty, all these do not exist, but unless we think as if they do exist there would be no ethics. These are called ideals. … Now we have examined religion as well as all branches of human knowledge and have seen that they are established on something which cannot be proved as real. That is to say, “as if” lies at their foundation.

Hidemaro goes on to explain why he believes the philosophy of “as if” is not dangerous.

Whatever has worth in life is centered around “as if.” I bow my head reverently before it, just as men of old bowed their heads before the one or more gods who they believed existed and who they supposed had personality. My reverence isn’t fervent, but it’s a feeling serene and pure. With morality, it’s the same thing. … A certain destruction of duty may be inevitable, but does nothing remain? … Man should act as if duty existed. I intend to act that way.

Ayakôji, who lives “as it were, only with his eyes and ears,” but who nevertheless has a “clear head,” perceives right away that an “as if” theology will not do. Hidemaro’s very earnestness has led him into an untenable position. He had tried to justify “as if” to his friend, who is
a painter, in terms of a work of art. Ayakōji replies that it is unreasonable to expect someone to respond to an image of another person as he would if that person were really present; and “Your ‘as if’ assumes that he will.”

In the end it is unclear whether Hidemaro has faced the problem more squarely than his father. In “Mōsō” Ōgai quoted Goethe’s dictum about the “demands of the day” as the surest way to self-knowledge; Hidemaro has no such demands to meet. Ōgai suggests that for all his young protagonist’s seriousness about ideas, the would-be historian has difficulty facing facts. Ayakōji playfully but pointedly refers to Yuki the parlor maid as a “provable fact”—so she is, and so is Hidemaro’s father. So, too, are the subjects of Ōgai’s historical literature. Because Ōgai drew the subjects of his late work from Japanese history, it is tempting to suppose that he was concerned with Japaneseness as such; his writing from the years immediately preceding his turn to history shows that he had larger matters on his mind. More evidence of Ōgai’s concerns comes to light in the historical writings themselves—most strikingly, perhaps, in the very first of them: “Okitsu Yagoemon no isho” (“The Last Testament of Okitsu Yagoemon”). Like Hidemaro in “Ka no yō ni,” the protagonist of “Okitsu Yagoemon no isho” is forced to confront a very reasonable objection to his own view; unlike Hidemaro he is able to dispose of that objection.

Katō Shūichi notes that “The whole series of Ōgai’s historical stories, which were started just after General Nogi’s suicide in 1912, can be regarded as Ōgai’s appreciation as well as criticism of samurai ethics of loyalty, self-sacrifice, self-discipline, will-power, etc.” Indeed, Ōgai’s appreciation of these ethics and his criticism of them are closely related. Loyalty was arguably the pre-eminent virtue of the samurai, and ritual suicide following the death of one’s master, junshi, was the ultimate expression of this virtue. General Nogi Maresuke and his wife committed ritual suicide on the date of the Emperor Meiji’s funeral; “Okitsu Yagoemon no isho” appeared within days of this event. In the story the ostensible author of the fictional testament, an historical person, explains his own decision to accompany his master in death. Ōgai’s response to the suicide of General Nogi reveals both the writer’s admiration for the deed and his recognition of the limits of loyalty.

Junshi is an expression of loyalty combined with gratitude for favors bestowed. Yagoemon had at first offered to commit suicide for a less exalted reason, namely in expiation for having killed another retainer, but the offer was refused. This is the favor in acknowledge-
ment of which Yagoemon gives up his life many years later. The time is the seventeenth century by the Western calendar; Yagoemon is a retainer of the powerful Hosokawa family. His master has sent him and the other retainer to the port of Nagasaki with instructions to purchase a rare article for use in the tea ceremony, but they are not told exactly what article to buy or how much to offer for it. When a ship arrives from the continent with a cargo of rare scented wood, a bidding war commences between them and a retainer of the similarly powerful Date family of northern Japan, who has been sent to Nagasaki with the same instructions. The wood is in two sections, and both Yagoemon and the Date retainer are determined to secure the more precious section. At a certain point Yagoemon’s companion intervenes; he protests at the expense and a quarrel ensues. The quarrel escalates, and when the companion resorts to violence he is himself killed by Yagoemon.

In a sense the argument between the retainers had been about the meaning of loyalty: each maintained that his own interpretation of the instructions was the genuinely faithful one. Nevertheless, loyalty in the sense of strict fidelity to instructions was not the decisive consideration. Yagoemon at first defended his position against the attacks of his companion on the ground that only the rarest article would meet the standard of fidelity in this sense. His companion answered that if their master himself were about to do something foolish, it would be their duty as faithful retainers to try to stop him; it could not be their duty to be strictly faithful in carrying out instructions the wisdom of which he for one regarded as highly questionable. (In fact, Ôgai has a story on this theme, “Kuriyama Daizen.”) The decisive consideration was then the merit of the action itself—the wisdom or folly of spending a huge sum on an article of no practical usefulness. Yagoemon restated his position accordingly: he was not at liberty to criticize orders, “providing, of course, it was not contrary to moral principles” to carry them out. He was sure that there was no violation of moral principles in the present instance; on the contrary, moral principles supported his position. Yagoemon’s view of the matter is eventually upheld by his master, who tells him, “If we looked at everything with an eye to its utility there would be nothing left to value in the world.”

Ôgai’s turn to history in his late work cannot be regarded as a simple return to wakon yosai, even if Ôgai shared the fear of early modernizers (in the words of Kiyooka Eiichi already quoted) that “Western ideas which gave too much importance to profit and practical usefulness would degenerate the Japanese.” “Our traditions” could not be deci-
sive for Ōgai, any more than “our master’s orders” was decisive for Okitsu Yagoemon and his companion. The decisive question is not “Is it ours?” but “Is it really valuable?” In another of his autobiographical pieces, “Tsuina” (“Exorcising Demons”), which he wrote in 1909, Ōgai paraphrases Nietzsche’s judgment on the modern age:

The best things within us may be an inheritance of the sensibilities of an ancient time. The sun has already set. The heaven of our lives is lighted by the lingering glow of a sun which has already passed from sight. Art is not alone in this. It is the same with things like religion and morality.

It is doubtful that this statement represents Ōgai’s last word on the matter, but there can be no doubt that he continued to regard the ethics of the samurai as being in some respects among the “best things within us”—that is to say, within us as human beings, whether Japanese or non-Japanese.

The point can be made more broadly. The subjects of Ōgai’s historical stories are men and women, by no means necessarily well known, who impressed Ōgai as worthy of his and his readers’ sympathetic attention—not all of them samurai. One of the most unusual is Saiki Kōi, subject of the last piece in the two-volume set of Ōgai’s historical literature in English. Kōi was a wealthy dilettante and patron of artists in Edo (not yet renamed Tokyo), who exhausted his fortune and died in poverty shortly after the Meiji Restoration. Ōgai’s story about him is more properly a biographical essay. Researching Kōi’s life reminded Ōgai of a servant woman in his parents’ house who as a girl had served in one of the establishments of the famous Yoshiwara pleasure district. “This servant considered the *oiran*—the highest ranking courtesan—to be the noblest of human beings. Members of the nobility and high government officials were all, in her eyes, uncouth customers.” Needless to say, Ōgai did not share this judgment; nevertheless he recognized that it was not without foundation. An *oiran* was likely to be highly cultivated as well as beautiful. As for Kōi, he was about as far from a samurai in many respects as it is possible to be, but Ōgai had the breadth of soul to perceive a not altogether dissimilar greatness in him. It is true that Ōgai does not say so directly, preferring instead to let his material speak for itself. More cautiously, then: Kōi belonged to a world that by the time of Ōgai’s writing, 1917, had vanished almost as completely as the world of the samurai; yet it remained accessible in thought. Any attempt at evaluating the past—and with it,
by implication, the present—must begin by taking careful account of the facts. Ōgai’s late work suggests that a solution to the value problem is to be sought not outside the world of facts but by a recovery of that world in its inherent richness.

NOTES

Exact page references have been provided for quotations from secondary sources; readers are invited to consider the quotations from Ōgai’s works in the context of each work as a whole.

1. As in the case of other Japanese writers who adopted literary names—Natsume Sōseki and Nagai Kafū are examples—it is customary to refer to Ōgai by his adopted name instead of by his family name (Mori).


3. Kato Shūichi, “Japanese Writers and Modernization,” in Changing Japanese Attitudes Toward Modernization, edited by Marius B. Jansen (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 428. In the essay Katō gives detailed consideration to three writers in addition to Ōgai: Natsume Sōseki, Nagai Kafū, and Uchimura Kanzō. Sōseki’s “major concern was individual ethics” (p. 428); Kafū’s attitude toward Meiji society “was one of evasion” (p. 431); and Uchimura’s stand, based on a Christian faith that few of his compatriots shared, was “the most isolated of all” (p. 436).

4. “Rekishi sono mama to rekishibanare” (“History as It Is and History Ignored”), translated by Darcy Murray, in “The Incident at Sakai” and Other Stories, pp. 151–54.

5. “The Incident at Sakai” and Other Stories, p. 3.


8. “Mōsō” (“Daydreams”), translated by Richard Bowring, in “Youth” and Other Stories, edited by J. Thomas Rimer


