

Spring 5-31-2000

Response to Law

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Recommended Citation

Pradt, Sarah (2000) "Response to Law," *Macalester International*: Vol. 8, Article 16.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl/vol8/iss1/16>

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Response

Sarah Pradt

I'd like to begin with appreciation for the narrative with which Jane Marie Law began her essay, and for the way she employed the story about Rusty as a telling parallel to some of the processes she describes in the Japanese state's appropriation and creation of religious images and traditions. Many students and colleagues who had read Law's essay in advance of the Roundtable remarked on how moved they were by the personal narrative and its relationship to the deepest questions raised in the essay. I am compelled to stress that while certain kinds of critical theory, first among them feminist theory, have insisted that students and scholars examine the structures of fantasy and desire that attract or bind us to the objects of our study, within the various fields that make up Japanese studies, such a move is rare.¹ Students and scholars of Japan—in Japan and outside of Japan—need the kind of rigorous assessment of the relationship between the self and the imaginary or fantastic nature of the object of study that Law performs.

While such self-assessment is undoubtedly desirable for students of any nation or culture, there exists a long history of mythologizing Japaneseness, both conscious and not, on the part of both Japanese and non-Japanese. That history demands that scholars of Japan investigate the relationship to and investment or implications in whatever it is about Japan that draws, motivates, and sustains our work. Fantasy and desire work on many levels and their traces can be found embedded in the production of knowledge about Japan in scholarly writing, in popular culture, and in the news. In Japanese public culture, the discourses of *nihonjinron* ("theories of Japaneseness") form a remarkably large portion of the publishing industry and visual media, with books, magazine articles, and television that obsessively speculate on what it might mean to be Japanese.² Similarly, in American popular culture, explaining the Orient has been an important business ever since Perry was sent to open Japan by force in 1852. Today, a variety of mythologies of Japan are consumed eagerly and unreflectively, their narratives changing with the relative status of Japan *vis-à-vis* the United States.

Recently, the economic competition posed by Japan seems to have subsided, and the lessened threat has evidently allowed for a renewed consumption of a Japan popular in an earlier era. In the late 1950s through the 1970s, many Americans were fascinated by "aesthetic

Japan," by what the novelist Kawabata Yasunari described in his speech accepting the 1967 Nobel Prize for literature as "Japan the beautiful."³ The reemergence of "aesthetic Japan" is evident in the popularity of the recent novel *Memoirs of a Geisha*, by Arthur Golden.⁴ Golden's novel, a first-person narrative in the voice of a woman reflecting on her work as a geisha in the first part of this century, has been praised by American reviewers who have been stunned by its "indubitable authenticity" and by the way "a world so closed and foreign [has] been evoked with such natural assurance."⁵ Yet the novel is deemed "authentic" primarily because both the details and the overarching theme are presented in terms familiar to American readers. The details include dense descriptions of Japanese corporate culture, costume, food, music, and sumo wrestling; these descriptions are stylistically familiar to readers trained by interpretive material at exhibits of "Oriental" art, by travel guides, or by ethnographic explications of Japanese business culture. The novel's overarching theme is familiar in a different way. As Golden's novel unfolds, it becomes clear that this geisha's story provides a dark example of how Japanese society oppresses women in a variety of inhumane, even shocking, ways (girl children are sold by their families into virtual slavery). Yet the narrative also reveals that in the end, women can, in fact, become extremely accomplished and can find great happiness within the strict limits set by patriarchal Japanese culture. The former strand of the story is familiar to readers of news accounts of contemporary Japanese society; the latter, to readers of romance novels.

To illustrate how naturalized certain images of Japan and Japanese-ness have become, particularly when narrated by a Western "expert" (Arthur Golden's graduate work in Japanese history at Columbia figures prominently in most reviews of *Memoirs*), consider in contrast the initial reception of Kazuo Ishiguro's 1989 novel, *The Remains of the Day*.⁶ This first-person narrative, in the voice of an English butler reflecting on his service to an aristocrat in the first part of this century, was, like Golden's novel, a popular success, although Ishiguro's was also a critical success, winning the Booker Prize that year. While Golden was widely praised for having captured Japan with "uncanny fidelity,"⁷ some reviews of *The Remains of the Day* remarked on the "dazzling" ability of the author to inhabit a character so different from himself.⁸ Interestingly, one critic found this "extended demonstration of virtuosity" tiresome and "empty."⁹ Kazuo Ishiguro was born in Japan and has lived in England since he was six; this biographical cir-

cumstance inevitably finds its way into reviews of his fiction, just as Arthur Golden's educational pedigree appears without fail in reviews of *Memoirs of a Geisha*. Evidently, a certain sort of Japaneseness, carefully outlined in a set of images manufactured and consumed, is easily inhabited and ventriloquized, while Englishness is not (and if, by chance, Englishness is achieved, the performance can be found irritating or meaningless). Thus, Law is hardly alone in having been seduced by the images of aesthetic and orderly Japan. But she is rare in her admission and in linking her own seduction to the processes of mythmaking about Japanese culture and national identity.

Jane Marie Law has argued forcefully for the ways that religion has used and has been used by conscious processes of national mythmaking. If anything is missing from her account, it might be an analysis of the contemporary moment in Japanese religious life. That analysis itself could fill whole volumes (and has), and is far beyond the scope of the Roundtable, but one notable phenomenon of recent years bears mention. Probably some of the audience today thought they would hear about Aum Shinrikyo, the religious group which released sarin gas in 1994 and 1995 in urban centers in Japan, killing nineteen and injuring thousands, and which is implicated in the murders of its critics and of former group members. It is crucial to analyze the murderous and terroristic activities and apocalyptic philosophy of this group, and there are scholars and religious thinkers who have done and will continue to do that analysis.¹⁰ The widely publicized acts and thoughts of this group have absolutely rocked Japanese society and have prompted debates about and changes in laws concerning religious freedom. It is also important, however, to remember how tiny this group's membership was and is. Today, Aum has virtually no presence in Japanese public life except in ongoing trials and lawsuits. Aum's existence was conspicuous because of its violent actions, its enormous publicity machine, and because many of its members were from Japan's educational elite — alienated from family, from community, and from common sense by the pressures of a harsh education system, an economy that keeps men (and some women) away from their families, and the frenetic pace of contemporary urban life.

Whether the appeal of Aum's apocalyptic vision and iron-fisted practice suggests that Japan's established religious structures and

practices are insufficient is a question that will no doubt take years to answer. I'm not sure that I perceive the intensive secularization of everyday life to which some of our speakers have pointed. It is clear that, as in other post-industrial societies, some of the recent achievements of Japanese industry have played a role in stripping religion from contemporary life, to the extent that certain technologies and the consumerism which necessarily accompany them work to alienate us from one another and from communities. Yet despite (or possibly because of) this alienation, in Japan, as in other post-industrial societies, there *is* a tremendous hankering after transcendence, after experience of that thing that is *ganz andere*, "utterly and wholly *Other*."¹¹ You have not heard much today about how these longings are fulfilled for some Japanese. Law has described the creation of state Shinto and the later postwar arguments for renewed state support for Shinto, calling the latter process "the dislocation of the religious from the sphere of religion." In order to trace the complex developments of the twentieth century — Japanese fascism and its religious underpinnings — in the short time allotted her, Law has necessarily herself dislocated a discussion of many kinds of Japanese religious activity. I do not fault her at all for this, but I do want to mention some other illustrations of the impulse to religiosity in Japan.

One illustration comes from contemporary literature. At the conclusion of her essay, Law optimistically cites the work of writers like Oe Kenzaburo. In particular, she mentions the power of his 1995 Nobel Prize acceptance speech. In that dense text, Oe himself acknowledges his admiration and humility before the work of others; he speaks of other modern Japanese writers "deeply wounded" by the Second World War, "yet full of hope for a rebirth." Our student respondent, Emily Mandelman, has asked what it is that allowed Japanese to come back from devastation and rebuild into an economic superpower. Oe would not consider Japan's transformation into an economic giant to be of even the slightest importance. But he would answer that what allowed Japanese to become human citizens of the world again does matter. His constant and insistent hope is for his fellow Japanese to recognize that an *openness* to the world is necessary. In the Nobel speech, Oe describes the writers he admires most:

[they] tried with great pains to make up for the inhuman atrocities committed by Japanese military forces in Asian countries, as well as to bridge the profound gaps that existed not only between the developed

countries of the West and Japan but also between African and Latin American countries and Japan. Only by doing so did they think that they could with some humility seek reconciliation with the rest of the world.

Oe is not the sort of novelist from whose fiction it is possible to extract some brief, inspiring passage. His use of irony, of parody, of the grotesque, of what he celebrates as “the laughter that subverts hierarchical relationships” makes his work difficult and sometimes disturbing. I invite our audience to dip into the work of this novelist who takes as his task enabling “readers to recover from their own sufferings and the sufferings of their time, and [curing] their souls of these wounds.”

Early in my graduate studies, it was Law who taught me about some of the ways that the religious impulse plays out in contemporary Japanese society. She introduced me to Rudolf Otto’s concept of the sacred as the *mysterium tremendum*, and spoke of how that experience is manifested in Japanese Buddhism, in Shinto, and in folk religion. In her concluding optimistic remarks, Law also points to the recent designation of “Living National Treasure” (a cultural award of great prestige granted by the government and through the person of the emperor) on a performer from the puppet theater of Awaji island, a theatrical religious tradition which she has studied in great depth. I invite our audience to read her book on that theatrical and religious tradition, in which she describes the truths these puppets speak.¹²

Notes

1. Notable exceptions in the field of Japanese studies include Norma Field, whose *In the Realm of a Dying Emperor* (Pantheon, 1991) and *From My Grandmother’s Bedside: Sketches of Postwar Tokyo* (California, 1997) violate the boundaries between criticism and memoir in most provocative ways; and Naoki Sakai, whose essays collected in *Translation & Subjectivity: On “Japan” and Cultural Nationalism* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997) unflinchingly raise the issue of the relationship of the student of Japan to the object of his or her study, warning that “the object does not exist out there of and by itself, and that, even if it is merely to be described, of necessity it demands a certain participation on the part of the observer,” 118.
2. Naoki Sakai reminds us that *nihonjinron* is “not unique at all in its insistence on national uniqueness among modern nationalistic discourses,” 115.
3. Oe Kenzaburo pointed to the ambiguity of Kawabata’s title in his own Nobel acceptance speech nearly twenty years later. See *Japan the Ambiguous, and Myself: The Nobel Prize Speech and Other Lectures* (Kodansha International, 1995).
4. Arthur Golden, *Memoirs of a Geisha* (New York: Knopf, 1997).

5. John Burnham Schwartz, "Masked Memoir: Bringing a Famous Geisha Back to Life," *The New Yorker* (29 September 1997): 82–83.
6. Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* (New York: Knopf, 1989).
7. Pico Iyer. Blurb on the dust jacket of the first edition of Golden's novel.
8. Lawrence Graver, "What the Butler Saw," *The New York Times Book Review* (8 October 1989): 4.
9. Terrence Rafferty, "The Lesson of the Master," *The New Yorker* (15 January 1990): 102–104.
10. Examples in English include Mark R. Mullins' essay "Aum Shinrikyo as an Apocalyptic Movement," *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements*, Thomas Robbins and Susan J. Palmer, eds. (Routledge, 1997); and Robert Jay Lifton's *Destroying the World to Save It: Aum Shinrikyo, Apocalyptic Violence & the New Global Terrorism* (Henry Holt, 1999).
11. Cited in Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Translated by Willard Trask (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), 9.
12. Jane Marie Law, *Puppets of Nostalgia: The Life, Death, & Rebirth of the Japanese Awaji Ningyo Tradition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997).