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How can we follow the movement of a word across time and place if that word's power depends less on its semantic content than on the images it sets into motion, images that have an affective appeal and evoke an aesthetic experience that is beyond the reach of cognition and narrative representation? "Sublime" is just such a word. Entering Japanese literary and philosophical discussions in the 1890s through German and British Romanticism, it was left almost as it was, rendered as *saburaimu*, even though equivalents were available in the classical aesthetic vocabulary. Native aesthetic terms were ignored in the 1890s, only to be called upon in the 1930s by purveyors of political propaganda, for whom the sublime effects of such native words served as the amorphous but nonetheless powerfully binding agent of a fascist social imaginary. If, in the 1890s, early in Japan's modernity, the experience of the *saburaimu* produced an affective aesthetic moment forging the births of both an intensely felt interior self as well as a self-denouncing socialized self, in the 1930s classical renderings of "sublime" suggested a will-less binding to a tradition whose bonds were to be felt but not understood. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the word itself was absent but the feeling of sublimity provided a language for leftist, anti-militarist critique.

I use "sublime" here to indicate not only evocations of the unnamable, but also the wish for it, in texts that not merely described sublimity but also attempted to harness its affective appeal in order to change people. To quote one of the sublime's foundational

theorists, Edmund Burke, “I know of nothing Sublime which is not some modification of power.”¹ The tradition of theorizing the sublime in the West stretches back to Longinus and moves through Burke and Kant in the 18th century, to recent critics like Neil Hertz, who understands the sublime and its evocations to be a process of containing the powerful emotion felt by those who experience it. For Burke (as for Kant), and for their lineage, the aesthetic of the sublime has a political dimension: it can socialize the individual into political quiescence, or lead, as has often been argued, to the “irrationalist, fascist politics” of a Martin Heidegger.²

The turn from aesthetic experience to political commitment is what Neil Hertz calls the “sublime turn.” I will be looking at this turn in three Japanese historical moments. In the first, the 1890s, sublimity offered the possibility of both self-individuation and self-sacrifice; in the second, the 1930s, it more narrowly offered only the opportunity for self-abnegation. In the third, the late 1950’s and early 1960s, the sublime bound the politics of the anti-nuclear left to the silent suffering of the victims of Hiroshima. In each of these cases sublimity stood in for other words that it either energized or repressed. These were its shadow words.

The word “sublime” arrived in Japan in the 1890s and became a central part of the poetic and existential projects of important writers and intellectuals, but soon after ceased circulating because it was a word that represented an affective experience beyond the capacity of the imagination to fully grasp and beyond the limits of language to express. It was a word whose meaning was best expressed by leaving the word itself behind. Though it did continue to move through arcane academic discussions, its force was most fully felt

¹ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Adam Philips, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, 59.

in the traces it left as it traveled through literary texts and then into the realm of ideology and politics. To follow the word, then, means paying attention to it not as it represented a concept to be elucidated, but rather in artistic forms and patterns that evoked what the word designated: affective aesthetic moments evoking what lies beyond cognitive understanding. To follow the movement of the sublime, then, means following it as a style of thought and representation, embodied in forms that move, and that have, in Henri Focillon's words, "a mobile life in a changing world."³

By style, I mean the movement of forms that have left their meanings behind as they move across time and space. The sublime is one such style, which is why, in the 1890s, it did not need to be translated into Japanese as anything other than *saburaimu*, a word whose semantic value may have been opaque to its first readers but whose affective force certainly enchanted them. In his famous essay on translation, Walter Benjamin wrote that translation must not merely replicate what comes to it from another language, nor even strive for beauty, but shock the reader, by the confrontation of incommensurable languages, into an awareness of a "true language" that lies beyond all languages and is always unattainable.⁴ Translation, in this sense, produces the thought of a sublime language. We might consider that "sublime" evoked such a "pure" language as it passed through its form as *saburaimu* and then left its semantic content behind, moving readers not through that part of language that describes a reality but through the rhythms of prose working out its subject matter. The sublime, that is, must be traced through literary texts

² Gary Shapiro, "From the Sublime to the Political," in *New Literary History* 16:2 (1985) 214-221.

³ See *The Life of Forms in Art*, New York: Zone Books, [1934] 1992, 69.

⁴ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hanna Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken Books, 1968, 77. Also see Shapiro, 230.

that perform their meanings, because it is the stylistic features of texts, as much as their tendentious content, that determine our emotional involvement with them.

What kind of word is sublime? It is a word whose force is released when it itself disappears and whose power depends on its very invisibility. Unnamed, it creates a spell; once named, its spell is broken. When we speak of the sublime we show that we are outside its orbit. Our possession of the word guarantees that we will be bystanders to the workings of sublimity. To follow the word, then, requires that we first follow its traces back to its absent origin.

Mori Ōgai and the Sublime Return from Germany

In the Japan of the 1880s and 1890s the word sublime and the sublime epiphany were happily, even voraciously consumed by Japanese poets and intellectuals who were fairly drunk with new possibilities of poetic and existential exploration. At least as far back as 1869 the word's definition was also being settled on in dictionaries.⁵ In his 1894 essay, "What Does it Mean to Traverse Life?" the poet Kitamura Tōkoku, a reader of Coleridge, was explicit about the sublime. The *saburaimu*, he wrote, is reached not through form but through imagination. It is a place of "the absolute thing," of "annihilation" (he used the English word) beyond the capacity to see, arrived at by looking at "the great, great world of emptiness" bathed by the light of the moon. The searcher for the sublime is a hero flashing a sword, striking at the sky, reaching the stars.⁶

To the extent that they were consciously playing with the new term and idea, writers like Tōkoku were, like us, bystanders to the experience. Another of these bystanders

⁵*Wayaku-ei Jisho*, 1869. (University of California, Berkeley Library, East: 5840.9.0404).

⁶Kitamura Tōkoku, "Jinsei ni aiwataru to wa nan no wake zo," in *Nihon Kindai Bungaku Taikei* 9, Tokyo:

was Mori Ōgai (1862-1922), the Japanese intellectual in his time perhaps best read in the aesthetics of German and British Romanticism, and one of the central figures in Japan's intellectual, artistic, and political modernization. Ōgai described a white, "sublime" moment in his 1890 novella "The Dancing Girl" (Maihime), in which the main character has an epiphany when his mind and body become still as he freezes in snow. This was an experience unnamed but felt, an experience that moved the newly born modern self toward its final object of affective identification, the nation. His narration of sublimity erased the word but conjured it through literary language. He showed how the process of political identification is a matter of silent, emotional assent to the nation, and to one's emotion of devotion to it. In "The Dancing Girl" the word disappears beneath its evocation. Ōgai's tale asks us to consider what happens politically when the word sublime falls below the threshold of perception, when the sublime is sublimated.

The novella tells the story of a young Japanese intellectual sent to Germany by his government to further his studies and take his place among the most elite translators and brokers of European culture and thought, only to fall for a poor dancing girl and then suffer the great dilemma of becoming modern, having to choose between his heart and his intellect, his passion and his duty, his lover and his state. The story, written by a founding father of Japan's modernization, occupies a place in the imagination of Japanese identity akin to Huck Finn's in the imaginations of those educated in the United States: it is the first and most encapsulating story of the birth of modernity and of the modern self, of their triumphs and sorrows. Two sublime epiphanies structure the story, each showing our hero blacking out, yet each leading in a different direction: one towards passion and an intensely felt suffering self, the other towards a surrendering of the will to

the demands of the state. Together, they yield the modern subject: aware of an inner self that suffers but is socialized to the harmony of the state. The story does not “argue” this; it evokes it through its narrative hesitations (its narrators inability to narrate in a linear fashion), and its evocations of sublime moments that rely on the rhythm of language—on its ornaments--to do their affective work.

The story opens on a steamer carrying the protagonist, Ōta Toyotarō, back to Japan. He recalls that in his five years away he had written of his experiences of new sights and sounds for newspapers, but that his personal diary remains, to this moment, a blank slate, like his very spirit, which has lost its capacity to feel anything with intensity. Writing, it seems, cannot follow the heart. And writing gets stuck when it tries to narrate anguish. The reasons for his condition, he demurs, lie “elsewhere.” He knows that his self now is not the self he brought with him to Europe, but this too he is unable to record in words, and the reason for this, again, lies “elsewhere.”

Isolated by the silence that shrouds him, sublimely, “like a cloud” in his anguish from his fellow passengers, he eventually ends his demurrals and begins to narrate his past: his arrival in Berlin, his initial sensual openness to new stimuli—sights, sounds, and smells, his subsequent decision to cut himself off from the assaults of the outside world, to remain unmoved by beauty, and his fear of becoming a “mechanical man.” Gradually, his “true self” begins to emerge from beneath his dutifully political persona, and he is led to immerse himself in literature and the arts, but even more fatefully to fall into the arms of a poor young dancer, Elise. He becomes aware of his “true self” through the affective pull of Elise, by sensing, feeling, touching something inside him; and when he spots the

dancing girl he is drawn to her by the appeal of her sad, teary face, by her grief. Here, his narrative stoops to linger on the image of this girl, a figure out of the world of art.

Perhaps we have here the makings of a sublime, still moment. He speaks his sympathy to her; and following a brief exchange she runs away, leading him on the chase until they arrive in her small home. He enters her room; once again, the narrative stops, and we read: “She was an exceeding beauty” (47). He seems to have lost all will as he is drawn to her. Later she comes to his room, littered with books by Schopenhauer and Schiller. The couple becomes intimate, and he loses his job, for the intensity he feels for her draws him away from his civic responsibilities. He lives as a journalist, split between his passion and his intellect, a split dramatized by Elise’s pregnancy and by a letter he receives from his friend Aizawa urging him to return to Japan and his responsibilities.

Leaving Elise with a kiss, Ōta goes out into the snowy white cold—back toward the sublime, which he had begun to sense in his body. With a chill in his bones he goes to Aizawa, who convinces him to abandon Elise for Japan, making him feel “like a man who has lost his rudder in the seas” and as if “sighting the mountains in the distance” but unable to reach them as they remain “inside thick mists” (54). Making him feel, that is, the fear that accompanies the sublime. Before journeying there, he will first travel to Russia on official business, where, he tells us, “he was dropped above the clouds” into the court (155). Never while he is there does he forget Elise; never is he allowed to, for she writes him daily of her anguish.

Ōta returns to Berlin. It is a bitter cold day, the snow has frozen into the pavement and is shining brightly, glittering, sparkling as he approaches Elise’s home. Everything is white and bright. He sees that she has begun preparations for their baby. Soon he leaves,

called to the Count in whose official charge he serves, and he is asked to return to Japan. He agrees to go, but first he must return to tell Elise. He wanders in a daze, and collapses on a park bench, his mind on fire. The narrative, and his mind and body, freeze: “How long did I pass there like a corpse? When I awoke, aware of the intense cold penetrating my bones, it had become night and the snow was thickly falling, piling over my shoulders and atop my cap” (58-9). He recalls this only vaguely: he learns later that while attending his sickbed Elise heard of his plans to return home, and after that her mind and spirit ceased functioning, reducing her to a simple-minded child.

In the last lines of the story our hero tells us that it is rare to have a friend like Aizawa, but that he still curses him.

The standard reading of the story is that the hero sacrifices personal love for duty to the state. The affair with Elise was a brief fancy, a fairy tale whose quaint distance from reality was painted in Ōgai’s self-conscious use of archaic Japanese. But I think it is important to ask: If he had not collapsed, would he have changed his mind? A reader of Schopenhauer and Schiller, Ōgai certainly had on his mind questions of will and the giving over of the will to the sublime. If one pays attention to images in the story of mist-covered clouds in the distance, of frightening oceans, of whiteness, of the sensual power of feelings over the will, then perhaps the story can be read as a tale of the lures of sublimity: of being drawn to glittering white moments frozen within the linear narrative, moments associated with non-cognitive experiences of love, anguish, and physical intensity (the burning of passion, the freezing of joints in the snow). Even the “choice” to return to Japan is less a willed choice than a giving up of the will in a clouded moment to a force greater than one’s self. This too was perhaps a sublime moment, one not to be

captured by the “transparent” prose of realism that Ōgai mastered and rejected, but only glimpsed from between the cracks of his literary language, from within the rhythms of his language, which obscured access to the raw reality of the world it claimed to depict.

What happens in “The Dancing Girl” is that a young man is socialized by the sublime. The sublime resides in a visual moment sensed but not analyzed, created when language calls upon its ekphrastic, picture-making capacity.⁷ This still, epiphanic moment beckons to the protagonist—and the reader—by appealing to a non-cognitive, emotional experience. The epiphany, an aesthetic experience from the Christian tradition recaptured by modernists like James Joyce, is an atemporal moment or a space of sublime beauty, disturbing the linear flow of narrative. In Edward Hirsch’s words, the epiphany represents “a radical attempt to defy narrative form and dramatize an intense moment of change.” While the sublime moment is aesthetically constructed, it contains existential force, for it depicts a moment when the self is broken down and infused with a higher form of consciousness. “The everlasting splendor of dramatizing epiphanies,” writes Hirsch, “may well be the mystery of communicating moments when the self is both lost and reconceived.”⁸ Epiphanic moments thus disrupt unities, only to stitch them together aesthetically, through what Neil Hertz has called the “sublime turn,” which occurs at the moment of disintegration and signals a creative leap, a “figurative reconstitution.” These are moments when “the near-fatal stress of passion can be thought of as a turning into—as indistinguishable from—the energy that is constituting the poem.” With the turning

⁷ Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis: the illusion of the natural sign*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992, 1-3.

⁸ Edward Hirsch, “A Shadowy Exultation,” *The Sewanee Review* 57:2 (1999), 227.

away from near annihilation there is a “transfer of power ... from the threatening forces to the poetic activity itself.”⁹

Ōta loses his object of passion in a sublime interlude and awakens ready for work. He has been worked on by the ideology of the aesthetic. In times of political, social, and cultural rupture and crisis, the aesthetic experience can become a model for political and social wholeness fusing the individual with the whole of society and allowing him to find freedom in necessity. The aesthetic provides a sense of significance that cannot be analyzed or disputed because it is based on sensibility, which is ineffable. What we feel links us with society. And if ideology is a matter of feeling, then aesthetics can best shape it; and for Japan in the 1890s, the sublime aestheticizes best of all.

Interlude: The Sublime Binding of the People

By the 1930s, a native Japanese vocabulary of classical and medieval aesthetics had erased any trace of the word’s original form. Sublime was no longer *saburaimu*. In 1938, Ōnishi Yoshinori, in “Yūgen ron,” attempted to connect German notions of the sublime to the classical aesthetic term *yūgen*, which he found in the 18th-century poetry of Bashō and the eighth-century poetry of the Manyōshū. The same year Onishi published “Yūgen ron,” D. T. Suzuki published his *Zen and Japanese Culture*, in which he described *yūgen* as the quality in art that allows one to glimpse the eternal through the world of change. An object with *yūgen* “is not subject to dialectical analysis or to a clear-cut definition” (220-21). The experience of *yūgen* is a loosening of the intellect and a falling into a merging with nature.

⁹ Neil Hertz, *The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985, 14, 5, 6.

It was from classical and medieval Japanese aesthetics that intellectuals in the 1930s often drew their language of aesthetic moments when the individual merges with a larger whole through the mediation of an object.¹⁰ This sublime was harnessed as a cure through art for the ills of modernity.

For the Japanese state circa 1936, such a cure was to be offered through creations like *The Essence of the National Polity* (Kokutai no hongī), the most widely diffused piece of propaganda in wartime Japan, written by a committee of scholars and political hacks. The book aims to forge a community of all Japanese people bound through eternity by the power of the sublime. This community can overcome the West, offering the possibility of cultural triumph. The book is the product of the latecomer to modernity who feels himself to be small and weak and wishes to be aligned with something large and powerful, who feels himself to have been overwhelmed by influence and wishes to establish authenticity.

The Essence of the National Polity conveys sublimity in its language of excessive semantic proliferation, in the sheer variety of words evoking distances in time and space that cannot be contained by the imagination—similar to the language of superlatives and of the eternal that Victor Klemperer notices in the rhetoric of Nazism.¹¹ This multiplication of words referring to unimaginable distances bathes the declarations of imperial descent and national mission in an atmosphere of sublimity. The sublime cannot be named, but it can be riffed on, in a dizzying movement of vocabulary. It is, variously, “*eikyū*” (eternal), “*eien fūhen*” (eternal and unchanging), “*eien fudō*” (eternal and

¹⁰ For example, Zeami Motokiyo’s (1363-1443) poetics of the Nō theater. See Makoto Ueda, *Literary and Art Theories in Japan*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1992, 63- 66, 291-95.

¹¹ Victor Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich : LTI, Lingua Tertii Imperii : a philologist's notebook*, trans. Martin Brady, London ; Athlone Press, 2000, 110.

unmoving) “*yōjō shin-en*” (boundless and profound) “*kōdai shin-en*” (vast and deep), “*kodai muhen*” (vast and limitless), “*bandai fueki*” (everlasting and eternal), “*kagirinaku*” (without limits), “*okuchō kagirinaku*” (the millions, without limits), “*tenjō mukyū*” (heaven and earth infinite), “*mukyū*” (endless), “*mugen no hatten*” (limitless development), and “*yūdai*” (sublime).

The Postwar Sublime Turn To Politics

With the collapse of the Japanese state in 1945, and with it totalitarianism and fascism, sublimity may be supposed to have lost its binding power. But it resurfaced after the war in the non-cognitive language of what came to be known as “the literature of the flesh,” a language of mute physical suffering that stood in for an articulated language of postwar malaise and also offered a cure to that malaise through the sublime suffering of the victims of Hiroshima.

The mute language of malaise—the malaise of a disintegrating family in which human connection seems not merely impossible but also desperately suffocating—was powerfully evoked by Yasuoka Shōtarō (1920-) in his 1959 novel, *A View by the Sea* (*Umibe no kōkei*). The family Yasuoka describes belongs to a middle-class post-war generation poised, in 1959, to leap forward into a new world of dramatic economic growth and material well-being. The novel describes a young man’s tending to his ill mother in a seaside hospital. Much of it is set in her room, whose suffocating space is only made more oppressive by the glare coming through the window and by the sense of the sea waiting invitingly just beyond the hospital walls. There is a long tradition of the sea as an image of the sublime, and the novel takes part in that tradition. The sea is an

image of silence that contrasts with the incoherent babble that passes, among the family, for communication; the sea also offers the possibility of merging that is denied the son and his mother. Toward the end of the novel, the young man, Shintarō, increasingly experiences moments in which he senses his body opening itself up to the outside world and expanding to embrace it. This is an opening to and an expanding into his mother. But intimacy with his mother is not possible, and as his senses intensify, and time seems to slow down and then stop, Shintarō comes to feel his own breath merging with the sea and the sun. Shintarō shrinks from the outside world as he comes to sense only his body, but this is a preparation for a final expansion. In the final scene, he walks along the ocean, and even his senses seem to vanish as he merges with the scene before him, with the “view by the sea.” Shintarō’s turn to the sublime, his aesthetic experience, leads him away from society to the numbing comfort of quiescence.

The sublime turn toward the political occurs not within the confines of the novel but a few years later, in the work of Ōe Kenzaburo (1935-), a figure as central to the moral and literary map of postwar Japan as Mori Ōgai was to Meiji Japan. Ōe was the spokesman for the first generation of Japanese that came to maturity after the war, a novelist whose prose style effected a transformation in Japanese letters and whose ethical concerns made him the central literary spokesman of the angst of his generation and for anti-nuclear politics. For Ōe, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima—in particular its “transformation of natural human blood and cells”—represented an “eschatology” beyond our capacity to comprehend or represent in words: “The most terrifying monster

lurking in the darkness in Hiroshima is precisely the possibility that man might become no longer human.”¹²

The only hope of salvation from the demise of humanness lies with the physically scarred victims of the atomic bomb, who can transform their pain into an active political force:

Hiroshima as a whole must exert all its energy to articulate the essential intellectual grounds for abolishing all nuclear weapons in a way that all of the victims’ dehumanizing experiences—the misery, the shame and humiliation, the meanness and degradation—may be converted into things of worth so that the human dignity of the A-bomb victims may be restored. All people with keloids and all without keloids must together affirm this effort (106).

It is important to note here that for Ōe, words like “humiliation,” “shame,” and “dignity” are foreign to Japanese literature: “The sentence ‘That boy is full of dignity,’ for example, does not flow naturally in Japanese syntax. It sounds like a sentence translated from a foreign language” (104). For Ōe, the clash of two incongruous languages seems to produce the Benjaminian “pure language” of suffering, which for Ōe was a language of silence. Ōe “discovered dignity in Hiroshima” in the silent suffering of its victims: “Indeed, words do not suffice, for the reality of human suffering transcends language” (98). His “sublime turn” hinges on that suffering: “I regain courage when I encounter the thoroughly and fundamentally human sense of morality in the Hiroshima people ‘who do not kill themselves in spite of their misery’” (85).

Ōe’s dilemma, and the irony of his writing on Hiroshima, was that as a non-victim he was barred from the sublimity of suffering and its silent communication, and could

¹² *Hiroshima Notes*, trans. David L. Swain and Toshi Yonezawa, New York: Marion Boyars, 1995, 182. Page numbers for subsequent citations from this work will be noted in the body of the text.

only ventriloquize the victims' dignified silence with words. That he was lured by their sublimity makes one somewhat uncomfortable. That he turned it to humane political action somewhat assuages this discomfort. This turn required a resistance to the lure of sublime totalities.

If a person is so clear-eyed as to see a crisis in its totality, he cannot avoid falling into despair. Only the person with duller vision, who sees a crisis as part of ongoing life, can possibly cope with it. It is precisely the 'dullness,' the restricted vision, that permits one to act with reckless human courage in the face of crisis, without succumbing to despair. The lesser vision is backed by patience and, in fact, is capable of penetrating insight into the nature of a crisis. (125)

Following the sublime requires us to read with less attention to semantics than to the patterns and rhythms, and then the effects of artistic forms. Following the sublime asks us to keep in mind that however inchoate and indefinite the emotions revealed in our aesthetic expressions may be, they help us understand our ethical dispositions.

In each of the cases I have presented, the semantic weight of the sublime yielded to the evocation of sublimity. In each case a "sublime turn" was made from aesthetics to politics. In Ōgai's "The Dancing Girl," narrative hesitations led to sublime moments that effected the shift from love to politics. In *The Essence of the National Polity* words proliferated as they obscured meaning in order to forge a sublime, political bond among members of a linguistic and racial community. In *A View by the Sea* and in the essays of Ōe Kenzaburo the sublimity of silence and the mute language of the body spoke for malaise and offered a cure to malaise. Muteness grounded a politics of silent dignity.

In each of the three historical moments, the force of the sublime, marked by the word's very absence, created an affective experience with distinct political effects. In the 1880s and 1890s the foreign word "sublime" became the Japanese word *saburaimu*, retaining the strong mark of prestige of its origin. In the 1930s, that foreign origin was felt to be a taint, and a raft of native words was there to take its place. A government-sponsored tract (which was nevertheless literary in its manipulation of language, like Ogai's novella) seemed to open the word up to a diversity of meanings through a dizzying proliferation and repetition of words meant to circle around and evoke the sublime, but ironically it closed down complexity of meaning and demanded silent assent to a nation demanding not only the hearts and minds, but also the lives of its citizens. What was silenced here was any cognitive understanding of the self as a political actor with choices to make. In the 1960s, the sublime, not rendered as a word but evoked as a non-cognitive force, called citizens to work against the state.

In each of these historical moments the sublime released the energies of other words by not naming them. These words represented forms of attachment: in the 1880s and 1890s, it was "national identity," which the sublime helped set into place; in the 1930s, it was "fascism," which the sublime dissolved, displaced, and energized by hiding it; and in the 1960s, it was "the anti-nuclear left," which the sublime silently supported.