



## **Watsuji Tetsurō and Subject of Aesthetics**

A Dissertation submitted to the graduate division of the University of Hawai'i at  
Mānoa in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Philosophy

December 2012

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Keywords: Watsuji Tetsurō, Japanese philosophy, aesthetics, subjectivity,  
objectivity, beauty



Existing approaches to aesthetics are unsatisfying because they either assume an atomic self or an idealized communal self (the ideal observer). Both approaches are inadequate.

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#### **Problem of subjectivity and objectivity in aesthetic judgment**

The central question in the study of aesthetics is the question of subjectivity. To put the question in its popular form, we wish to know whether “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” before we answer all of the other questions that arise about art, meaning, representation, form, and so on. This question is central because it is the axis around which turns our practical engagement with aesthetics: we experience beauty personally, we share our experience of beauty with others, and we create new beautiful things. In doing so, we wonder whether this beauty is really something separate from ourselves or just a golden mirror of our own pleasant dispositions. Without knowing this, all of our other aesthetic questions will have at their basis something unsure. But evocative though it may be, the meaning of this question as phrased is yet unclear (what could it mean to be in the eye of a beholder?), hence we must make some attempt at clarifying it before an initial answer can be suggested and the topic directly pursued.

Suppose that aesthetic judgment is completely subjective, such that statements of the form “That is beautiful” may be interpreted without loss as meaning “I find that to be beautiful.” In that case, no discussion about whether or not something is beautiful ought to arise, since my saying “That is beautiful” and your saying “That is not beautiful” are no more contradictory than my saying “I like licorice” and your saying “I do not like licorice.” To have a basis for disagreement, individual feeling is insufficient. There needs to be some common object of our disagreement. I believe that the object has one quality and you believe it has another. Through dialogue, we are able to resolve our disagreements and come to a mutual understanding of the qualities of the object.

However, to posit that aesthetic judgment is completely objective is also quite problematic. First, despite no shortage of attempts, no one has been able to definitively specify the formal criteria of many of aesthetic predicates. While there have been many attempts to do so, none has gained consensus. This might not be so strange in itself (few things in the world have universally accepted definitions), but at the same time, individuals have no hesitation about expressing their personal feeling about whether a work does or does not exhibit the particular aesthetic predicates in some aesthetic judgment such as beauty or originality. We might attribute this social phenomenon to widespread ignorance or willingness to give an opinion without first obtaining a solid basis for rendering judgments, but we also have the experience of saying things like, "I understand why you think X is beautiful, but it just doesn't 'work' for me." In other words, we appeal to our feelings as individuals when discussing aesthetics though we just saw that individual feeling is an insufficient basis for discussion. Why should the public at large so persistently make such an elementary error in their reasoning about aesthetics? No one experiences the distance of the Sun from the Earth, but we all concur that it is around 93 million miles. The situation in aesthetics is almost completely reversed, with each individual experiencing the aesthetic predicate in question but none willing to accept a consensus viewpoint not directly experienced.

If we approach aesthetic judgment as a wholly subjective or individualistic matter, at least two problems result. First, as seen, without any common object shared by different participants in a discussion, it is not possible for any mutual discussion of aesthetics to take place. This is contradicted by our experience, in which aesthetics *is* fruitfully discussed, at least some of the time. Second, in the limit, there will be no ability for one to cultivate one's aesthetic judgment, since



there will be nothing outside of a momentary, subjective experience to appeal to in the cultivation of one's taste.

If, on the other hand, we take the acquisition of good taste in aesthetic judgment to be a matter of conforming to wholly objective or collectivistic aesthetic canons, we also encounter at least two problems. First, that no canon has been universally accepted (though there are of course many historically and regionally specific canons of taste). This may be a merely epistemological difficulty on our part or some other sort of ordinary failing in our pursuit of aesthetic objectivity, but such a difficulty points to a second problem, which is that a wholly objective canon will be formally disconnected from the experience of personal assent or appreciation. If our explanation of aesthetic judgments and taste does not ground out in aesthetic experience, then something crucial has been lost. It seems impossible that something could be objectively beautiful yet disagreeable to all possible perceivers of the object. However without some link from objective beauty to the subject's judgment of agreeability, such a possibility cannot be ruled out.

To shed light on this discussion of aesthetic judgment, let us take simple factual judgments like, "This apple is red" or "The table is square." Are these judgments objective or subjective? There are at least seven ways to interpret the question:

- (1) We might mean by "this apple is red" or "this table is square" that it *seems* that way to me right now. I am having a reddish experience of the apple or a squarish experience of the table.
- (2) We might mean that I have a habitual experience of the seeming redness of this apple or the seeming squareness of this table. As I repeatedly interact with the object, I repeatedly have similar experiences of how the object seems to me.
- (3) Suppose that one is looking a quadrangular table from such an angle that it *appears* as a square to one's vision center. Under ordinary conditions, one

would nevertheless perceive it aspectively as quadrangular, since the human vision process naturally corrects for angles of perspective and causes us to experience a square table *as* square even if it is seen from an angle that makes it seem non-square, and vice versa to see a non-square table as non-square even if it happens to form a square shape from one's perspective. Similarly, a green apple might appear as reddish under a reddish light, but one's vision will naturally correct for the apparent color of the apple so that it continues to be seen as green while appearing red.<sup>1</sup> (Normally, only artists are trained to notice the difference between how things seem aspectively and how they appear non-aspectively, but it can be noticed without any particular training.)

- (4) We might mean that the apple or table will seem red or square to any *suitable spectator*—that is, any time a “normal” human being with ordinary vision, stands a normal distance away under normal lighting conditions, etc., etc. that person will see these things as seeming red or square.
- (5) We might mean by red having a measurable *capacity* to reflect light of approximately 630 to 740 nanometers in wavelength when exposed to light of the ordinary spectrum at ordinary intensities at ordinary temperatures, etc. (An apple may still be red in a dark room.) We might mean by square having the tendency to be found square when measured by a normal observer under normal conditions.
- (6) We might mean by red *currently* emitting light of approximately 630 to 740 nanometers in wavelength or by square currently having an angle of ninety degrees at each of its four corners and sides of equal length, as measurable by some idealized rational observer.

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Adelson's checkerboard illusion in which two squares of the checker look like different colors though they are actually the same shade of gray: <[http://web.mit.edu/persci/people/adelson/checkershadow\\_illusion.html](http://web.mit.edu/persci/people/adelson/checkershadow_illusion.html)>.∞

- (7) The same meaning as (5) or (6) but *without regard* for whether anyone will or could experience these facts.

These seven interpretations have generally been arranged from those having more subjective involvement to those that are more objective, yet each is an equally acceptable as an interpretation of the natural language judgments in question. When considering whether aesthetic judgments are “subjective” or “objective,” it will be correspondingly difficult to answer in a univocal fashion. Let us try, for example, to examine corresponding interpretations of a judgment like, “Ice cream is delicious.”

- (1) We might mean by “ice cream is delicious” that the ice cream which I am eating now *seems* that way to me right now.
- (2) We might mean that I habitually find that I tend to have an experience of deliciousness when eating ice cream.
- (3) We might mean that although I am not currently consciously feeling the deliciousness of the ice cream due to some other factor (for example, my attention is distracted from the ice cream or there is another flavor in my mouth from some other food mingling with the ice cream’s taste), the feeling that I am having is one consistent with the sort of experience I would have in an experience of delicious ice cream were I to attend to it properly.
- (4) We might mean that most normal human beings (given some criteria of suitability) who eat ice cream will experience deliciousness.
- (5) We might mean that the ice cream under discussion possesses a capacity to induce experiences of deliciousness.
- (6) We might mean that ice cream has a molecular make up (sugars and fats and what not) that we may call scientifically delicious, because any food possessing such a make up will also tend to be experienced as delicious by typical human observers.

(7) The same meaning as (5) or (6) but *without regard* for whether anyone will or could experience these facts about the ice cream.

I chose to examine “Ice cream is delicious” here because it is ambiguous as to whether or not we would ordinarily consider it to be aesthetic judgment or a factual judgment. (∞KANT 52–53) Moreover, many of these different interpretations might be acceptable in certain circumstances. Imagine that I am picking out a desert for my own birthday party. In that case, I want something that suits me, so a meaning like (2) might hold or perhaps (1) if there is a free sample available at the grocery store. On the other hand, suppose I am picking out ice cream for someone else’s birthday party. In that case, I am guessing what sort of desert the celebrant will find pleasure from consuming. Interpretations (4), (5), or even (6) might apply in these cases.

Whether a more aesthetic judgment such as “this artwork is beautiful” is regarded as subjective or objective overall will depend in part on how we define those terms. Let us briefly run down the same seven possible interpretations:

- (1) We might mean by “this artwork is beautiful” that the work I am experiencing now *seems* beautiful to me at this moment.
- (2) We might mean that I habitually find that I tend to have an experience of beauty when experiencing this work.
- (3) We might mean that though I am not currently attending to beauty of the work, the work exists in my field of experience in such a way that I would experience beauty if I were to attend to it.
- (4) We might mean that any *suitable spectator* will have an experience of beauty when experiencing this object.
- (5) We might mean that the work under discussion possesses a *capacity* to induce experiences of beauty in suitable spectators.

(6) We might mean that the work has a form which would be identified by an ideal evaluator as one that is inherently beautiful (perhaps because of the balance of the elements or some other aspect of its form).

(7) The same meaning as (5) or (6) but *without regard* for whether anyone will or could experience these facts.

It seems initially clear that at least some degree of subjective involvement is prerequisite for our ordinary experience of aesthetic judgments, hence interpretation (7) can be ruled out. Even if we lay aside Kantian worries about whether facts without the possibility of experience are empty, it is clear enough that aesthetic judgment must be connected to at least some possibility of an aesthetic experience if it is to deserve the appellation "aesthetic." Whatever such experiences would be, to the extent that they lack a basis in at least possible experience, they would not be aesthetic.

On the other hand, if debate about aesthetic judgments is productive (and it appears to be), we must reject interpretations (1), (2), and (3) for being too personal. As previously mentioned, aesthetic discussion requires a common subject of debate. It is possible that these discussions are, contrary to appearances, entirely devoid of meaning, but this hypothesis is in conflict with everyday experience. It is possible for science or philosophy to drive us to affirm hypotheses that are in conflict with everyday experience, but only where a great balance of evidence can be brought to bear. (1), (2), and (3) ought only to be accepted in the case that it can be shown impossible or at least highly improbable that to have a true aesthetic dialogue.

Compared to interpretations (1), (2), (3), or (7), interpretation (6) seems much more promising. Indeed, many take it that the resolution of the question "is beauty in the eye of the beholder" turns on just this. If (6) is the correct interpretation, beauty is not just in the eye of the beholder, but if (6) is the wrong

interpretation, it is not. They often go on to propose a formal definition of beauty which an ideal evaluator must possess in order to judge rightly. In the concluding chapter of this dissertation, I shall argue that this interpretation of the meaning of the question of aesthetic subjectivity is incorrect. There is a way for beauty to be outside of the eye of the beholder without requiring the correctness of interpretation (6). For now, suffice it to argue instead that the balance of empirical evidence is against it. Although aesthetic discussion appears to exist and be productive, aesthetic consensus about forms and styles appears to be only temporary and local. For example, Western science has all but eliminated rival methods for the naturalistic description of the world, for better or worse. By comparison, even very popular styles of art, such as the Hollywood blockbuster, have only a narrow appeal. Not even all Americans enjoy Hollywood movies, and we often find that an art style's prestige among connoisseurs is uncorrelated or even inversely correlated with its popularity with the public at large. If interpretation (6) is correct, it is a curious fact in need of explanation that no science of aesthetics has yet emerged.

In that case, interpretations (4) and (5) remain as the most likely interpretations of the meaning of a typical aesthetic judgment. Under either of these interpretations, the next project in aesthetics will be describing what the characteristics are that make a suitable spectator and explaining what it is that makes the suitable spectator so suitable for spectating. In later chapters, I will take up just this challenge. (Although I will note that the word "spectator" is an inapt term to describe the suitable subject of aesthetic judgment.)

Whether a judgment interpreted in the manner of (4) or (5) should be classified as a "subjective" or "objective" judgment will turn on what we take to be its most relevant feature. Clearly, (4) is the more subjective of the pair and (5) is the more objective, but both are only relatively subjective or objective. If we say that what makes the suitable spectator suitable is her conformity to some sort of universal

standard, then we will accept interpretation (5) and classify aesthetic judgment as objective, since the object's ability to be seen as having the relevant aspect is logically prior to the suitability of the subject. On the other hand, if we emphasize that the suitability of the spectator is cultivated for a particular situation, then we will accept interpretation (4) and classify the judgment as subjective, since it is the structure of the subject which allowed the object to be seen in a particular way. In either case, our choice of nomenclature will be heavily dependent on our view of the nature of the human subject and the world around. As such, no firm answer to the question of whether aesthetic judgment is subjective or objective can be given until we have better described the subject, the object, and the division between them (if there is any).

### **Historical approaches to explaining the role of the subject and object in aesthetics**

If we take our starting point in aesthetics to be either the experience of a suitable spectator or the capacity of an object to induce such an experience, then questions about what makes a spectator suitable and how the spectator relates to the object of experience naturally follow. To begin our investigation, I wish to briefly examine how Plato and Kant would have resolved these questions in order to show that existing approaches to aesthetics have been hampered by an unnecessarily dualism of subject and object at the surface level, which must then be punctured at a transcendental level in order to accommodate our intuitive beliefs about aesthetics.

### **Plato, beauty, and the form of the good**

To speak of Plato's approach to aesthetics is peculiar in the sense that he rejects *aisthesis* (value neutral perception) as a means of grasping the form of beauty itself (*kalon*, a word that means both "beautiful" and "good"). Plato's aesthetics are large topic and my criticisms are somewhat tangential to the discussion that

follows, so here I will restrict myself to a relatively brief description of his explanation of beauty in *The Republic*.

Although the phrase “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” is a mutilated paraphrase of Plato,<sup>2</sup> his actual view was nearly the opposite. For Plato, the beauty of a work is measured by how well it participates in the form of beauty, not to the subjective capacity of perceivers to recognize this beauty.

In *The Republic*, the character Socrates use the sun as an analogy for the form of the good. Just as the sun is the brightest and most beautiful object in the sky, the form of the good is, he claims, the most compelling and beautiful form in the intelligible realm. An understanding of this is a prerequisite to making any reliable judgments, aesthetic or otherwise. Socrates explains

in the knowable realm, the last thing to be seen is the form of the good, and it is seen only with toil and trouble. Once one has seen it, however, one must infer that it is the cause of all that is correct and beautiful in anything, that in the visible realm it produces both light and its source, and that in the intelligible realm it controls and provides truth and understanding; and that anyone who is to act sensibly in private or public must see it. (517b–c)

Because of this priority of the forms over things, the beauty of a thing is always, in a sense, predetermined. Nevertheless, there is some slight space left in Plato’s thinking for a human role in the creation of beauty. The analogy being made here between the sun and the good is a little obscure from the perspective of modern thought. In modern physics and biology, we think of a beam of light as coming from the sun, being partially reflected by an object, and finally the remaining reflection is absorbed by the eye, which senses the light. Plato thought that light comes from the sun and is absorbed by the object, giving the object its color.

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<sup>2</sup> As translated by Nehamas and Woodruff, the original quote is “when he looks at Beauty in the only way that Beauty can be seen [viz. with the intellect]—only then will it become possible for him to give birth not to images of virtue (because he’s in touch with no images), but to true virtue (because he’s in touch with the true Beauty)” (*Symposium*, 212a). The point of the dialogue is that only when the externally real form of beauty enters into the beholder will that beholder be transformed into a truly virtuous person.



Separately, the eye gives off a ray of vision which then perceives the color that now inheres in the thing. In the same way, Plato is claiming that the form of the good gives off “rays” of truth that lend to forms their essence, just as light imparts color in a thing. The beauty of a thing, therefore, is merely derivative of its relationship to the form of the good, from which all goodness, truth, and beauty originate. Nevertheless, a ray of understanding must be produced from the mind of the human beholder if this form is to be grasped. It does not just passively reflect off of the form in order to enter the knower. This gives the knower some participation in the thing known, although it is only slight.

Throughout this discussion, Socrates emphasizes strongly that the beauty of the form of the good is independent of the beauty of particular goods or beautiful things. As he says,

what gives truth to the things known and the power to know to the knower is the form of the good. And as the cause of knowledge and truth, you must think of it as an object of knowledge. Both knowledge and truth are beautiful things. But if you are to think correctly, you must think of the good as other and more beautiful than they. (508e)

In Plato’s system, the power of the form of the good overflows itself and spills out onto the intellectual realm giving the forms their beauty. The good is, we may say, the form of the forms. Being good is what all the forms have in common, hence goodness is the form above all forms. Furthermore, all being shares at least partially in the good (to be is to be causally efficacious, and to be causally efficacious is to be able to do what it is your essential nature to do), hence goodness itself is beyond all questions of existence or non-existence. The good imparts being into things, rather than taking its being from the particulars that instantiate it as a universal:

The sun, I think you would say, not only gives visible things the power to be seen but also provides for their coming-to-be, growth, and nourishment—although it is not itself coming to be. [...] Therefore, you should say that not only do the objects of knowledge owe their being known to the good, but their existence and being are also due to it;

although the good is not being, but something yet beyond being, superior to it in rank and power. (509b)

As a corollary to this, in a certain sense everything in the world participates (if only partially) in the form of beauty because everything that exists does so in virtue of participation in the all beautiful form of the good. Disagreements about aesthetic judgments must therefore be rooted in disagreement about the degree to which a thing participates in beauty, and not whether it does at all. Everything is beautiful to the extent that it is what it is.

From this we may conclude that for Plato, beautiful works are themselves only means by which we recollect the beauty of the forms, which towers over all particulars in its abstract iridescence. The beauty of a thing is only important for Plato as a ladder by which we may ascend to a higher understanding of the form of beauty in itself. While it is true that in some cases not all subjects will be suitable to grasp the beauty of a particular thing, it is nevertheless the thing's relationship to the form of beauty which ought to be determinative of our aesthetic judgments. The role of the aesthetic subject is just to produce the "ray" of understanding needed to draw the truth in.

Nevertheless, although the beauty of a thing is an objective fact about the thing regarding its relationship to the form of the good, not all subjects are suitable to perceive or render judgments about it. Plato has much to say in *The Republic* about how a subject may become more suitable to grasp the forms, and a large part of the work is dedicated to a fairly practical discussion of pedagogy. Nevertheless, the relationship of the form and the thing is logically prior to the suitability or unsuitability of particular aesthetic subjects. As a result, education means the turning of the subject towards the aesthetic truth, rather than any contribution of the subject to that truth:

just as an eye cannot be turned around from darkness to light except by turning the whole body, so this instrument must be turned around from what-comes-to-be together with the whole soul, until it is able to bear to look at what is and at the brightest thing that is—the one we call the good. (518c)

Thus according to Plato, until we transform ourselves by moving up the ladder of understanding from particulars to universals and then coming back to the particulars with a full grasp of the form of the good, our aesthetic experiences will always be incomplete and our aesthetic judgments only tentative and hypothetical.

Plato's claim that only those who know the form of the good are qualified to speak of it culminates in Book X with the banishment of poets (that is, people who do *poieō*, makers or imitators) from the city that Socrates is proposing. The reason for their banishment is that they imitate particular things instead of directly imitating the universal forms. This puts them a third hand remove from the truth, since the things were made by craftspeople who only copy what they are told about the form by those who use their products. Here we see that Plato identifies art with representationalism, and at the same time, Plato condemns art because it is merely representing the actual world, instead of the ideal world.

Throughout his writings, Plato makes that the claim that really useful knowledge can only be possessed when we know the form, and this leads Socrates to ask,

if Homer had really been able to educate people and make them better, if he had been able, not to imitate such matters but to know about them, wouldn't he have had many companions who honored and loved him? (600c)

Socrates' comment is odd, and the irony that someone who was condemned to death by his fellow Athenians should make such a remark can scarcely have escaped Plato's notice. Clearly, *The Republic* itself qualifies as a work of "poetry" given the level of craftsmanship that went into its production. In this sense, Plato is perhaps suggesting that there is a future for the arts after all. Once they step

away from representationalism, will the artists be permitted to return to the city after all? *The Republic* itself does not say, but Plato may have intended this riddle to have a solution. What is clear in any event is that this solution will not overturn the basic pattern of aesthetics established above. True beauty comes from accord with the form of the good, and human subjects must align themselves with that goodness if they are to be just and virtuous. In that sense, the subject is superfluous to aesthetics, as true beauty is ideal, eternal, and otherworldly.

One final remark to be made about the aesthetics of *The Republic* is that because beauty can only be understood in terms of its source—the form of the good—there can ultimately be no separation between public political unity and private aesthetic bliss. Throughout *The Republic* Socrates and his interlocutors condemn any cultural artifact that they believe undermines the unity of the city. The philosopher who has a private experience of leaving the cave and seeing the sun is required to return to the cave and instruct his fellow prisoners about what it is like and change their artistic practices to match the pre-existing divine pattern. In that sense, the private aesthetic feelings of the individual have no real meaning apart from their proper positioning within the public totality, and the public totality can do little more than mirror its eternal counterpart in the realm of the forms.

### **Exposition and critique of Kant's universal subjective**

Having coined our modern usage of the terms “objective” and “subjective,” Kant was well aware of the difficulties of classifying aesthetic judgments, and he grapples with them at length in his *Critique of Judgment*. The conclusion he reaches is that judgments of the beautiful and sublime (what he calls “judgments of taste,” note that my usage of “taste” in chapter four is significantly different from Kant’s) “must involve a claim to subjective universality” (Ak. 212).

Kant claims that such judgments are ultimately subjective because they are based on our feelings of pleasure or displeasure as subjects. For Kant feelings of our personal feelings of pleasure and displeasure are the only sorts of presentations that cannot be cognized in an objective fashion:

But any reference of presentation, even of sensations, can be objective... excepted is a reference to the feeling of pleasure and displeasure—this reference designates nothing whatsoever in the object, but here the subject feels himself, (namely) how he is affected by the presentation. (Ak. 203–4)

This being so, if “this flower is beautiful” cashes out to meaning something like, “I take pleasure in looking at this flower,” then the judgment will be utterly subjective and not a topic for possible dispute. The agreeableness of the flower is to be found in our pleased reactions to it as subjects and not in the flower itself. For Kant, this is the key distinction between subjective and objective judgments:

The green color of meadows belongs to *objective* sensation, i.e., to the perception of an object of sense; but the color’s agreeableness belongs to *subjective* sensation, to feeling, through which the object is regarded as an object of our liking (which is not a cognition of it). (Ak. 206)

This being so, it would seem that, as argued above, aesthetic discussion would have to be impossible. As Kant says,

we cannot say that everyone has his own particular taste. That would amount to saying that there is no such thing as taste at all, no aesthetic judgment that could rightfully lay claim to everyone’s assent. (Ak. 213)

Furthermore, he adds,

It would be ridiculous if someone who prided himself on his taste tried to justify (it) by saying: This object... is beautiful *for me*. (Ak. 212)

Yet, if aesthetic judgments (“judgments of taste”) are subjective, what else can we say? Kant would appear to be stuck denying the existence of aesthetic discussion, but he finds a way out of the trap. Kant introduces the term “interest” (*Interesse*) to provide a means of explaining how we can talk about our aesthetic judgments

without presuming the existence of a basis in the object for our discussion. When we find an ordinary object agreeable, we have an interest in the continued existence of the object, so that our pleasure in it will continue. The gratification the object causes us results in our willing the object's continued existence. Aesthetic objects differ from this in that our concern with them is "disinterested." Simply put, to be disinterested in the object of an aesthetic judgment means to have no concern for whether the object exists or not. We merely "like" the object with no further compulsion. As Kant says, "to play the judge in matters of taste, we must not be in the least biased in favor of a thing's existence but must be wholly indifferent about it" (Ak. 205), since our indifference gives us a sense of "freedom" towards the object. The object can be or not be, and in either case, it is all the same to us.

The key that "disinterest" provides Kant to the trap of aesthetic subjectivism is this: if my liking of the object is disinterest—if it is apart from any benefit the object provides to me personally—there is no reason that I cannot expect that *you* will be able to find the same joy in the object. If I take pleasure in my wealth, I cannot expect that you will be pleased by my wealth, since my wealth provides pleasure for me and not for you. But if I am pleased by flower even though the flower does nothing to advance my goals in the world, I may hope that you too will share that pleasure, though of course the flower will be equally unable to advance your goals either.

Kant puts his case for the universalizing properties of disinterest well:

For if someone likes something and is conscious that he himself does so without any interest, then he cannot help judging that it must contain a basis for being liked that holds for everyone. He must believe that he is justified in requiring a similar liking from everyone because he cannot discover, underlying this liking, any private conditions, on which only he might be dependent, so he must regard it as based on what he can presuppose in everyone else as well. He cannot discover such private conditions because his liking is not based on any inclination he has (nor on any other considered interest whatever): rather, the judging person feels completely *free* as regards the liking he accords the

object. Hence he will talk about the beautiful as if beauty were a characteristic of the object and the judgment were logical (namely, a cognition of the object through concepts of it), even though in fact the judgment is only aesthetic and refers the object's presentation merely to the subject. (Ak. 211)

Although the final ground of our judgment of the beauty of the object is in fact subjective (the fact that I take pleasure in the object), because the disinterested nature of the judgment grants it a kind of universality, this allows me to conclude that you will take pleasure in it as well. From this starting point, we are apt for (falsely) suppose that the ground of the judgment is objective rather than subjective, since it appears as though the object is the source of my liking and yours:

That is why he says: The *thing* is beautiful, and does not count on other people to agree with his judgment of liking on the ground that he has repeatedly found them agreeing with him; rather, he *demand*s that they agree. He reproaches them if they judge differently, and denies that they have taste, which he nevertheless demands of them, as something they ought to have. (Ak. 212–3)

This is the ground of aesthetic dialogue for Kant. If I search myself and find that I am disinterested in the object (in other words, if I am a suitable spectator), then I can see no reason why your judgment should disagree with mine. This being so, just as I would be upset to find someone advancing a proposition that is *a priori* absurd like A and not A, so too I am upset to see someone disagreeing with my aesthetic judgment. In both cases, I transcendently presume that because I and the other are rational subjects, we ought to be able to come to consensus view.

As Kant says,

A judgment of taste requires everyone to assent; and whoever declares something to be beautiful holds that everyone *ought* to give his approval to the object at hand and that he too should declare it beautiful. [...] We solicit everyone's assent because we have a basis for it that is common to all. (Ak. 237)

But what is this common basis that causes all rational beings to have a liking for the object if we have no interest in it? The answer takes us somewhat afield of the question of subjectivity in Kant, so I do not wish to pursue it in its full depth, but

Kant argues that human beings share an indeterminate concept of “purposeless purposiveness” that causes us to take delight in beautiful objects. The pure play of freedom that this concept offers us is a source of pleasure for rational beings. Kant offers a parallel story about the role of rationality in the enjoyment of the sublime when we are able to comprehend in thought what goes beyond our ordinary reckoning.

Crucially for Kant, because these aesthetic concepts are indeterminate, we cannot make them into an objective basis for aesthetics. As he writes, “there neither is, nor can be, a science of the beautiful, and a judgment of taste cannot be determined by means of principles” (Ak. 355) because our indeterminate concepts are not truth-apt. This means that the pleasure that I feel as a subject continues to be the true basis of aesthetics, not the object or aesthetic concepts that give rise to that pleasure. Since these concepts lack determined boundaries, nothing can be said about the truth of such judgments in general, since absent any objectivity, there is no truth to be had. On the other hand, they are universals, since we are able to appreciate them together.

Summarizing his position, Kant writes,

A judgment of taste is based on a concept (the concept of a general basis of nature’s subjective purposiveness for our power judgment), but this concept does not allow us to cognize anything concerning the object because it is intrinsically indeterminable and inadequate for cognition; and yet this this same concept does make the judgment of taste valid for everyone, because (though each person’s judgment is singular and directly accompanies his intuition) the basis that determines the judgment lies, perhaps, in the concept of what may be considered the supersensible substrate of humanity. (Ak. 340)

Kant’s mention of this “supersensible substrate of humanity” in this passage may leads us to speculate that there is a common sense (*sensus communis*) lurking behind human aesthetic judgments. After all, over the course of historical time we do seem to see some convergences in aesthetic judgments, such that discussion of them is not entirely unfruitful. From this, Kant concludes that we do have a



“common sense,” but this common sense is a shared sense of taste, rather than a shared intellectual understanding proposed by some past philosophers (Ak. 295).

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The universal communicability of the sensation (of liking or disliking)—a universal communicability that is indeed not based on a concept—I say that the broadest possible agreement among all ages and peoples regarding this feeling that accompanies the presentation of certain objects is the empirical criterion for what is beautiful. This criterion, though weak and barely sufficient for a conjecture, does suggest that taste so much confirmed by examples stems from a deeply hidden basis, common to all human beings, underlying their agreeing in judging the forms under which objects are given. (Ak. 231–2)

Only in *society* is the beautiful of empirical interest. (Ak. 296)

we regard this feeling as common rather than as a private feeling. (Ak. 239)

The key insight of Kant’s “Copernican Revolution” in thinking about the relationship between our experiences and the world is that he creates a three tiered system with subjective, objective, and noumenal levels. On the subjective level are those judgments which are particular to the individual and incommunicable. On the noumenal level are the things in themselves as they are apart from all possible experience of them. What allows for communication is the objective level at which individual reasoners apply Universal Reason in order to grasp the ideal construction of the object. For example, suppose I see a chair. My subjective experience of the chair is private, and the thing in itself that has caused me to have that experience is unknowable, but I am able to communicate to you about the chair because I know that since we are both rational beings, we share the same universal Reason, which will construct the same objects of possible experience for either of us. The better I can describe the possible experiences that any rational being could have with the chair, the better I have described it as an object. In other words, conformity to pure reason is what defines the suitability of a subject to make a particular judgment.

## **Aesthetics beyond the atomic subject**

Existing approaches to aesthetics are unsatisfying because they start with an atomic self and then go on to replace that with an idealized communal self (the suitable spectator).

Plato's theory works backwards from universal forms to the isolated souls that recollect them.

The difficulty with Kant's approach is that it begins with the assumption of a basic separation of persons into atomic individuals and only then tries to find a way to unite the disparate experience of those different individuals into the experience of a single, unified world. For Kant, the key force that unifies the experience of disparate individuals is Reason in its theoretical, practical, and aesthetic forms.

In both cases, the picture of aesthetic judgment as subjective or objective is intimately tied to an overall view of the subject and object as dichotomously separated. However, if we overturn the assumption of the inviolate atomicity of the human being then we will be presented with a radically new way to understand the nature of aesthetic experience, which in turn will better clarify the position of aesthetic judgment.

## **Watsuji Tetsurō and the subject of aesthetics**

We find one such anthropology of the human being as fundamentally relational in the work of WATSUJI Tetsurō, and through it I will answer the following questions in aesthetics:

- What is distinctive about aesthetic experience as opposed to ordinary experience? (Chapter 3)
- Is aesthetic judgment subjective or objective? How is aesthetic agreement possible? Is there such a thing as compulsion in aesthetic judgment? Is aesthetic experience active (agentive) or passive (observed)? (Chapter 4)
- Why are there regional variations in aesthetics? Is there such a thing as progress in aesthetics? Why are there persistent aesthetic disagreements? (Chapter 5)

- What is genius? Is aesthetic goodness independent or is it subordinate to other societal concerns? (Chapter 6)

But before we answer these questions, we must first address questions about the nature of the human being and its method of study (Chapter 2).

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May 15, 2012

## Chapter 2. Anthropology and Methodology

### Contents:

#### Ethics as first philosophy

Having raised the question of subjectivity and objectivity in aesthetics, where should we begin our investigation? I will argue that WATSUJI Tetsurō was right to suggest that our first philosophy must be *ningen no gaku to shite no rinrigaku* 人間の学としての倫理学—“the study of ethics as the study of human beings”—and that this must be the basis of our theory of aesthetics. To understand the relationship between the subject and object of aesthetics, we must first understand who is having an aesthetic experience and why. Immanuel Kant famously concludes the *Critique of Pure Reason* with three questions—“What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope?”—to which he later adds a fourth—“What is a human being?”<sup>3</sup> Though the questions are hopelessly intertwined the fourth may be said to contain the other three. Through a philosophical anthropology, we learn what we as human beings may know, what we ought to do as the sort of beings which we are, and what aspirations are rational for us to have. Similarly, our understanding of how aesthetics is possible will be critically shaped by our philosophical anthropology.

In this chapter, I will use Watsuji’s philosophical anthropology to show that our understanding of aesthetics must begin from the proposition that human beings exist not as substantive individuals nor as mere organic parts of a substantive social whole, but in the emptiness between these two poles. The fundamental law of human beings is to dynamically negate these two moments of human exis-

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<sup>3</sup>. The three questions first appear in the *Critique of Pure Reason* on B 832–3. The fourth question is added in the *Logic* (Ak. IX, 25).

tence. Accordingly, our investigation of aesthetics must proceed on the grounds of a hermeneutic inquiry that restores, reconstructs, and deconstructs the moments of unity, division, and union in our existence. This opens the space in which an aesthetic of betweenness can be constructed.

Where Watsuji's approach differs from many of his Western forebears is the picture of the human being from which he begins. Watsuji suggests we understand humankind not only as "the rational animal" or "the political animal" but also as "the moral animal." Human beings must be understood both through their communities and through the individuals in those communities. As a result, accounts of human beings as the rational animal or the political animal are ultimately also accounts for human beings as the moral animal. As rational, we give accounts to one another, and the accounts we give are expected to be truthful ones because of our nature as moral and concerned with truth. As political, we live together in community, and what makes this life possible are the human virtues.<sup>4</sup> The advantage of an approach that begins with ethics is it can retain the practical dimension of aesthetics as a basis for judgment. Although WANG Yangming's (王陽明, 1472–1529) version of Confucianism never achieved the status of orthodoxy, his slogan—*zhixing heyi* 知行合一, "Unity of knowledge and practice"—is representative of a broader current of thinking throughout East Asian thought.<sup>5</sup> Living in the twentieth century, Watsuji culturally inherited this tendency of thought, and in his mature writings, he defends it explicitly and repeatedly. We engage in

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<sup>4</sup> See the appendix "Varieties of Virtue" (*Shosō no Toku* 諸相の徳) to *The Study of Ethics* in volume ten of *The Collected Works of Watsuji Tetsurō* (*Watsuji Tetsurō Zenshu* 和辻哲郎全集), 627–59 for an extended discussion by Watsuji of how ἀρετή, *virtus*, *de* 德, and "virtue" all function as the particular excellences which make a particular community possible. So, for example, the Platonic virtues of justice, moderation, courage, and wisdom were necessary for life in the Greek polis and the contemporary virtues of liberty, equality, and fraternity are necessary for a democratic polity.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. NISHIDA Kitarō, *An Inquiry Into the Good*, 90, "as in Wang Yangming's emphasis on the identity of knowledge and action, true knowledge is always accompanied by the performance of the will. To think in a certain way but not to desire in the same way means that one does not yet truly know."

aesthetic practices together for purposes both communal and individual—that is, we make both collective judgments as an art world while forming personal tastes as individuals. Our knowledge of aesthetics is borne out by our practices as individuals embedded in communities.

As Watsuji writes in his masterwork *The Study of Ethics* (*Rinrigaku* 倫理学), whatever topic we pursue will be in the end a topic of *human inquiry*:<sup>6</sup>

[S]cience (*gakumon* 学問) and inquiry (*toi* 問い) are both the behavior of humans, not isolated observers. Science is a persistent relationship (*aidagara* 間柄) of pursuit. The “thing” pursued subsists in common publicly within the relationships of human beings. That is, inquiry is fundamentally (*kompon-teki* 根本的) “human inquiry.” [...] A person could try to question a natural object in isolation from human connections alone in one’s study. However, should one do so, how could one escape the state of affairs that this is also in the final reckoning a human inquiry? When one discusses the question with another pursuer, one has already placed the inquiry into the human realm as a communal (*kyōdō* 共同) inquiry. (WTZ 10:32)

It should be clear how much more this applies in the case of aesthetics.

In spite of having made this brief argument for philosophical anthropology as first philosophy and human beings as communal, practical, and active, the reader should, I hope, retain a certain degree of skepticism about whether *any* approach to first philosophy can be ultimately satisfying. Perhaps even using the term “first philosophy” to explain the methodology in use here betrays too much of a foundationalist bias. Hence Watsuji’s insistence that our method in “the study of ethics as the study of human beings” be a hermeneutic one is quite appropriate. While our investigation of aesthetics must begin by studying human beings as communal and ethical beings, it is not enough to try set forth initial “unhypothetical” first principles and proceed from there. Rather, we must continually revisit and refine our understanding as our investigation becomes deeper.

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<sup>6</sup> Included in volume ten of *The Collected Works of Watsuji Tetsurō* (*Watsuji Tetsurō Zenshu* 和辻哲郎全集), abbreviated WTZ 10 hereafter. All translations of WTZ are mine, but the reader is invited to compare Yamamoto and Carter’s translation, *WATSUJI Tetsurō’s Rinrigaku: Ethics in Japan*.

## **Rinrigaku and “ethics”**

In order to posit “the study of ethics as the study of human beings” (*ningen no gaku to shite no rinrigaku* 人間の学としての倫理学) as first philosophy necessary for the study of aesthetics, we must first clarify what this means somewhat, although a full clarification may not be possible without a complete account. For Watsuji, the study of ethics is, as its name in Japanese (*rinrigaku* 倫理学) suggests, the study (*gaku* 学) of the patterns (*ri* 理) of human relations (*rin* 倫).

As he writes in his *Study of Ethics*,

The word “ethics” (*rinri* 倫理) is made from two parts: *rin* 倫 and *ri* 理. *Rin* means “fellows” (*nakama* なかま). “Fellows” means both the group as the relational system of specified persons and the individual persons who are prescribed by the group. [...] It follows that *rin* means “fellows” and also a specified form of linkages of conduct (*kōi-teki renkan* 行為的連関). As a result, *rin* comes to mean a “pattern,” “form,” or “order” in human existence. (WTZ 10:12–3)

According to Morohashi’s *Dai Kan-Wa Jiten*, the meaning of the character 倫 as “fellows” and derivatively their order can be seen even in the *Shuowen* dictionary of the Han Dynasty, where 倫 is defined the social classes of the human way. *Mencius* 3A.4 lists what came to be known in Japan as *gorin* 五倫, the five key relationships: parent to child, ruler to vassal, husband to wife, elder to younger, and friend to friend. These relationships are general patterns which we must flesh out with particular content and meaning for our lives.

The point of this etymological investigation for Watsuji is that ethics was originally a question of social relationships, and as such it should be explored today not only from a theoretical or *a priori* perspective, but from and through the patterns we see in the world around us. He writes,

So far, we have been able to clarify the concept of the study of ethics from the word *rinrigaku*. Of course, this word carries the history of ancient Chinese thought [...]. However, we are not trying to bring to life an ideology of human *rin* based on ancient Chinese social forms as they were. We are merely attempting to revive the significance of ethics as the path (*michi* 道) in human relations in order to emphasize that ethics is until the last a problem of the persistent relationships (*aidagara* 間柄) of person and person. (WTZ 10:14)

In the West, depending on the author, “ethics” and “morals” are sometimes treated as synonymous and sometimes differentiated (typically with “ethics” being more social and “morals” more individual). A similar contrast exists in Japanese between *rinri* (“ethics”) and *dōtoku* 道徳 (“morals”). Originally, *dōtoku* was the Japanese transliteration of what is *daode* in modern standard Mandarin, which is the same as the title of the *Daodejing* 道德經 attributed to Laozi. Much has been written about how best to translate this title into English, but roughly speaking, it concerns particular excellences or virtues (*de*) as they are situated within the broader ways or fields (*dao*) around them.<sup>7</sup> This too reflects the core concern with finding a pattern or ordering woven into the fabric of our existence. Hence, whether we concern ourselves with *rinrigaku* or *dōtokugaku* (“moral philosophy”), our procedure will be to begin from observation of social activity.

Though Watsuji grounds his explanation of “ethics” in the Japanese language, an etymologically analogous understanding can also be found in the West. Aristotle writes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*,

Virtue of character [i.e., of *ēthos*] results from habit [*ethos*]; hence its name ‘ethical,’ slightly varied from ‘ethos.’<sup>8</sup>

In other words, ethics is ultimately founded on the giving an account (λόγος) of the way of life (ethos) of the community. A similar story can be told about “morals” and their relationship to social “mores.”<sup>9</sup>

To be sure, moral philosophy as constructed by Aristotle is significantly different from Watsuji’s anthropology of *ningen*. However, they share an impor-

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<sup>7</sup> See Ames and Hall, *Dao De Jing “Making This Life Significant”: A Philosophical Translation*, pp. 13–5 for more on the interpretation of the title.

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. Terrence Irwin. Book II.1, 1103a15.

<sup>9</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* writes, “Classical Latin *mōrālis* was formed by Cicero (*De Fato* ii. i) as a rendering of ancient Greek ἠθικός (*mōrēs* being the accepted Latin equivalent of ἦθη).”



tant point of agreement in that whether we wish to study “ethics” or *rinrigaku*, “morals” or *dōtoku*, our investigation must start by bringing into focus the society around us.

It may be objected that the study of the patterns of human relation becomes no more than a mere sociology or physical anthropology if it does not go beyond what actually is. Surely ethics cannot rest at merely describing how a community happens to be in a given place and time. It must also describe how the community *ought* to be. Yet, the objection goes, so long as ethicists focus exclusively on the observable, they will never understand normativity. Worse still for our purposes, a theory of aesthetics that proceeds from a similar ground will be no more than a popularity contest and make merely sociological observations about the state of public taste.<sup>10</sup>

Watsuji himself acknowledges this problem, but sought to overcome it by emphasizing the dynamic aspect of ethics as a practice that both is and is not realized in our world:

[E]thics is none other than the order or path (*michi* 道) through which human communal existence is brought into being as itself. In other words, ethics is the law (*rihō* 理法) of social existence.

However, would this not mean that ethics has already been made real as the ought?  
Yes and no. (WTZ10:13–4)

Ethics *is* already realized because what ought to be is the authenticity of what already is, yet it *is not* yet realized, for that authenticity is still a limiting horizon rather than an actual reality. That we have formed associations with others around us is a mere fact, but whether or not we have achieved the true sense of community contained within these associations as a possibility is a normative question. As Watsuji puts it, “Our ultimate origin itself is none other than the

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<sup>10</sup> Compare Komar and Melamid’s (possibly satirical?) project *The People’s Choice* in which the “most wanted” and “least wanted” paintings and songs were created by polling people’s preferences via survey. The results are predictably awful.

ultimate destination to which we return. This is the meaning of ‘authenticity as futurity’ (*honraisei soku miraisei* 本来性即未来性)” (WTZ 10:195–6). The authentic is always on the horizon as a possible future relationship will realize, yet it is also the starting point of our existence. As such, understanding what is authentic must come from experience, not mere reflection. So too, it would be absurd to exclude observations of public taste as an informant of our understanding of aesthetics, just as it is absurd to elevate popularity to our sole criterion of aesthetic excellence.

Broadly speaking, if one may classify existential ethics as the tendency of thinkers to hang their metaethics on the principle that an action is right if and only if it is an authentic expression of one’s being, then Watsuji’s ultimate metaethics may be characterized as existential. However, while many existentialists position one’s individuality as the primary locus of authenticity, authenticity for Watsuji evolves within a broader historical, geographical, and social context while also shaping that context. As Hall and Ames write in *Thinking Through Confucius*,

The existentialist perspective can be adjusted toward classical Confucianism only to the extent that it recognizes the relativity of the individual with respect to the society that determines, as well as is determined by, him. (14)

As we shall see, this aptly describes the sort of modification that Watsuji has made to existentialism. He skillfully combines Confucian and Buddhist insights with existential thought in a way that will pave the way for a more productive understanding of aesthetics.

### **Twofold character of human existence**

The starting point of Watsuji’s anthropology is the recognition of the codetermination of the individual and society. Too often philosophers have taken society as no more than the aggregation of individuals, and so attempted to treat it as subordinate to our nature as individuals. As he begins his *Study of Ethics*:

The primary significance of the attempt to define ethics as the study of “human beings” (*ningen* 人間) is its getting away from the misunderstanding of the modern world which takes ethics as simply a problem of the individual consciousness. This misunderstanding is founded on the modern individualistic view of humanity. Our grasp of the individual, itself a product of the spirit of modernity, holds a great significance which we must never forget, but individualism tried to take the individual, which is one moment in human existence, and substitute it for the human totality. Its abstractness became the root of every kind of misunderstanding. The standpoint of the isolated ego taken as a starting point in modern philosophy is just one example of this. (WTZ 10:11)

As useful as the Cartesian doubt was as an impetus toward the subjective turn in philosophy, ultimately, it was mistaken. Even a recluse or a Robinson Crusoe has to have been a member of some society at one time in the past in order to develop into a self-sufficient individual adult; unlike other species, human infants are not self-sufficient. Making the individual the core unit of our analysis deliberate ignores important facts about how human beings survive as a species. Thus, according to Watsuji, although the modern subjective turn often begins with an examination of the limits of individual existence,

if a person is authentically a social animal, then things like our persistent relationships (*aidagara* 間柄) and society should not be separated from the person. It must be the case that persons are something that while capable of being individually is also capable of being socially. And what displays this twofold characteristic best is the word *ningen* 人間 (“human being”). (WTZ 10:16)

In other words, we cannot think of human beings as first isolated individuals who then somehow become entangled in relationships with one another. On the other hand, we should not think of society as a kind of super-organism of which the individual is a mere part. Instead we must think of these relationships as having equal priority to our individuality. Our relationships are just as authentic a part of us as our individuality and vice versa. This shows a basic twofold character of the human being as both individual and collective.

In Japanese, the English word “human being” is translated as *ningen* 人間. It is written with two characters. The first, *nin* 人, can also be read as *hito* and

means “person” or “someone.” The second, *gen* 間, can also be read as *aida*, *ma*, or *ken* and means a spatial or temporal interval. The term *ningen* gained currency in the Japanese language as a Buddhist term meaning the “human realm” as distinct from the other realms of rebirth, such as the animal world or the various hells and heavens.<sup>11</sup> Watsuji finds it telling that over time this term could change in its meaning from a realm to humans collectively to humans individually. One might think that this is merely an artifact of the fact that neither Japanese nor Chinese grammatically require a sharp distinction between singular and plural, but according to Watsuji, its significance is much greater. For him, the multiple usages of *ningen* are a linguistic expression of an underlying truth about humankind as both particular (人) and relational (間). We are both discrete (人) and continuous (間). A thread of thinking which argues that the particular and the universal are inseparably linked runs throughout East Asian thought. Such a usage could not have gained currency in the Japanese language if it did not reflect something of the truth about the human condition.

### **Etymology as a tool of philosophical analysis**

One might object (and this objection applies as well to our earlier examination of the origins of the words “ethics” and “morals”) that these sort of Heideggerian etymological investigations, however interesting, are ultimately a matter of merely historical curiosity, and no philosophical consequences can be drawn from them. Furthermore, Watsuji seems to invest in Japanese etymology a particular importance over and above that of other languages, claiming for instance that:

This inclination [to individualism] is, I suppose, thought to be based on how the words *anthrōpos*, *homo*, “man,” *Mensch*, etc. are only able to mean an individual person. From

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<sup>11</sup> The characters 人 and 間 (respectively *ren* and *jian* in modern standard Mandarin) are first attested as a compound during the Warring States or Han Dynasty period of Chinese history, where they meant something like “being among others in society.” Dating texts from that period can be fraught with controversy, so it is difficult to assign priority of usage, but the compound can be found in *Zhuangzi*, *Leizi*, *Shuo Yuan*, *Guanzi*, etc.

such a standpoint, things like the persistent relationships of person and person (*hito to hito to no aidagara* 人と人との間柄), communal existence, or society must be shown using words that distinguish from persons somehow. (WTZ 10:16)

We [Japanese] possess the word *ningen* which is deeply significant in this way. On the basis of its significance, we created a concept of the human being. Human beings are “in the world” (*yo no naka* 世の中) while they are also “persons” in that world. (WTZ 10:17)

In other words, Watsuji is showing a certain degree of nationalistic pride in the seeming uniqueness of the meaning of the word *ningen* vs. its western equivalents. However, in considering the general neglect of Japan by Western philosophers then and now, we should perhaps be somewhat understanding of a certain degree of patriotic self-congratulation even as we condemn the myth of Japanese uniqueness (so-called, *nihonjinron* 日本人論) and its political applications.

To be sure, etymology is not destiny; just because a word came from a certain source historically, that does not imply that the word will continue to have an equivalent meaning henceforth or that the original meaning of a word is its “true meaning” in exclusion of its later uses. Nevertheless, there are problems with pressing this objection too strongly. First, it presumes that the historical patterns by which language changes are haphazard and that no information is produced through their evolution. To the contrary, however, if we believe that language is a tool of human thought, we should expect that the development of this tool will be in a direction that tends to maximize its practicality for human purposes, just as other human tools tend to evolve in useful directions (though not necessarily always).

Second, this objection seems to draw on an implicit portrait of philosophy as an *a priori* endeavor. On this reading, etymology is hopelessly *a posteriori* and therefore has nothing to contribute to philosophy. My own tendency is to question the usefulness of the *a priori* / *a posteriori* distinction, but let us take its relevance at face value for now. Is it so clear that we must classify etymology as *a posteriori*? “All bachelors are unmarried” is analytic because of the meaning of the word

“bachelor,” but meanings are things that change historically. If “water is H<sub>2</sub>O” is anything like analytic (a topic of some debate), it has become so through a process of etymological evolution. As science has evolved, we have chosen to adopt the meaning “substance composed of (mostly) H<sub>2</sub>O” for “water,” in spite of the fact that the liquids we common call water also contain hydroxyl ions, free hydrogen, dissolved gasses, various minerals, microorganisms, etc., etc. and in preference to “less scientific” but more ordinarily useful definitions such as “a clear, drinkable liquid.”<sup>12</sup> It should be fairly uncontroversial that the evolution of the meaning of the word water has been towards something like a better understanding of what properties are essential for a substance to have if it is to be considered water *for our practical purposes*. Knowledge of the “essence” (the “what it is”) of a thing is gained through experience as well as ratiocination. The what-it-is of water has to be understood in reference to the what-it-is-for of water in practical experience. Through an understanding of etymology, we can see the sort of adaptations and uses that human beings have found appropriate for words, and in doing so we understand them better. Hence, by learning how ethics has evolved from ethos or *rinrigaku* from ordered relations, we learn something about how what sorts of meanings are contained in them. So too, the evolution of *ningen* as the Japanese word for human being conveys information that can be applied beyond a Japanese context.

Indeed, as Watsuji explains, words themselves have a structure that illustrates the twofold character of human beings as individuals and collective, *nin/gen*:

Incidentally, what we call words are one of the most uncanny things among what has been made by humans. Whatever person we should speak of, no person can be said to make words by oneself, and yet words are for each person one’s own words. This kind of character that words have is caused by their being the furnace through which the subjective

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<sup>12</sup> See Zemach, Eddy M., “Putnam’s Theory on the Reference of Substance Terms.” *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 73, No. 5 (Mar. 11, 1976), pp. 116-127, for a cogent criticism of Hillary Putnam on this point.

(*shutai-teki* 主体的) linkages of human beings are turned into noematic meanings. Said in other words, they are the making conscious of pre-conscious existence. (WTZ10:12)

On the one hand, words are a mechanism by which the “blooming buzzing confusion” of pre-conscious pure experience is converted into reflective consciousness. This is surely a paradigmatically individual moment in the process of experience. Yet at the same time what mediates this moment of individual experience are words which have come to the individual through the community. Words are for each of us our own words, yet our words are always the words of the others who gave them their beginnings of meaning in the distant etymological past.

### **Negating individuality and totality**

The double nature of words as individually and collectively possessed vividly illustrates Watsuji’s contention that,

Individual persons *do not subsist* in themselves. [...] *Neither does* a total agent *subsist* in itself. [...] It follows that individual persons subsist in a linkage with totality. [...] It follows that we must find that the total agent as well *subsists* in a linkage with the independence of individuals. (WTZ 10:106)

It may seem strange to assert that individual persons do not subsist in themselves. Common sense in the modern West tells us that individuals are ontologically prior to the communities which they choose to form through a social contract. However, in the chapter “Moments of Individualism in Human Existence” from *The Study of Ethics*, Watsuji searches for this ontologically prior individual without success. We may try to think of the human body as an independent physical substance, but this way of thinking clashes with our everyday experience. As Watsuji illustrates,

When we spot a friend waiting for us by a bronze statue, it’s not that we find as an immediately given fact a solid object with the same form as the statue. From the first, we *find our friend*. (WTZ 10:68)

We discover the person of our friend and not a mere object, yet this does not occur through some inferential process by which observe the object of our friend and then conclude that there must be an invisible soul animating her body. Rather, “the motion of the subjective body (*shutai* 主体) is the motion of the physical body, without the slightest gap between the subjective and physical bodies” (WTZ 10:68). As we push ahead in our investigation of the human body, we discover its existence as an acting subject, but as an acting subject, our bodies are linked in relationships. I see *my friend* by the statue. I greet *the driver* as I get on board the bus. I watch *a stranger* walk passed me on the sidewalk. As subjects, our bodies are already connected in a web of relationships and roles. I greet my friend with an embrace, my driver with a nod, and the stranger not at all. The more we continue investigating the acting subjects around us, the more we find our supposed independence from them vanishes:

To the degree that it is able to form relationships, the physical body is something connected to other physical bodies; to the degree that its connection to other bodies is exhaustively destroyed, it either returns to being *a solid object unable to form relationships* or it returns to *absolute emptiness*. (WTZ 10:71)

Hence our individuality as subjects cannot cash out in our independence as physical objects without either nihilistically cutting off our personhood or admitting the emptiness of individuality itself.

If this is so, perhaps we should look for our individuality in the mind rather than the body. However, there too our search fails. Language is a core aspect of thought, yet as we have already seen, the language *I* use is inevitably the language *we* use, because words are both individual and communal. Watsuji notes that according to Johann Gottlieb Fichte, the independence of consciousness

is like thinking of the self that sees the wall when one is alone in one’s study looking at a wall all by oneself. However, if in this case one is conscious of *the wall as a wall*, social consciousness has already infiltrated into it. (WTZ 10:77)



The aspectual nature of perception means that ordinary consciousness is far from independent. Rather, it utilizes the concepts and categories which it receives from others (in this case, “wall”). Clearly this will have implications for the purity of aesthetics experience which we must explore more in later chapters. Even in wordless feelings, my consciousness is connected with the consciousness of the other:

It cannot be that the consciousness of the *I* who feels the beauty of a picture and the consciousness of *Thou* towards the same picture are completely independent things. We are feeling the same beauty together. The difference in the way that two people feel can only be compared on the ground of this shared feeling. (WTZ 10:76)

If even my private feelings of aesthetic satisfaction or dissatisfaction are shared with others, what is left of my individuality? All we can say is that our individuality is a kind of limit that we reach when we take a contextual field of relationships and attempt to remove that context in order to focus more tightly on the central locus of those relationships. But, like the axis around which a top spins, there is nothing in that center point which can account for the motion swirling around it, and too close of a focus on it will only mislead us. Watsuji concludes, “It follows that individuality itself has no established existence; *its essence is negation and is emptiness*” (WTZ 10:85).

Having negated the individual as a substantial entity, one may then hypothesize that some sort of super-individual self is ontologically prior, and individual human beings are just parts of this communal or social whole. However, Watsuji also denies this supposition. In the chapter “Moments of Totality in Human Existence,” Watsuji finds that communal wholes are just as lacking in substantiality as the individual whole was. The difficulty is that there is no singular super-individual whole to which an individual belongs. The same person may be both a father *and* a son. One person can be both a wife *and* a citizen or a worker *and* a

student. The result of this multiplicity of non-overlapping identities is that for a family,

the way in which it reveals its whole is utterly different from the manner in which a hand as a part of the body is a hand through its revealing the whole. A hand is a hand and *cannot be anything else but a hand*. However, the members of a family are people *who could be something else* but are limited to this particular capacity. (WTZ 10:95)

My hand is a part of my body alone. It is not a part of my body and also a part of some other body. Individuals, however, do belong to multiple wholes from families and communities, up to nation states. A hand is just a part made of parts, but a human being plays many different parts in many different relationships. The possibility of being something other than what one is pervades each of the social roles we play. How can it be then that social wholes have truly substantial existence if they cannot even maintain exclusive possession of their constituent parts?<sup>13</sup>

As the result of his investigation of the various attempts to understand the totality of which the individual is supposedly just a part, Watsuji concludes that, “The real truth is that something like a total being which precedes the individual and prescribes it as an individual—‘a great totality’—does not subsist” (WTZ 10:106).

### **Persistent relationships of betweenness**

Since neither individuals nor “society” as a totality have truly independent existence, this means that they are both “empty” in the sense of lacking an independent substantiality not derived from a more fundamental relationality. In other words,

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<sup>13</sup> Incidentally, this is the reason it is strictly speaking inaccurate to classify Watsuji as a “totalitarian” as is sometimes done by his critics. While this is no defense of Watsuji’s overall political commitments, it should be noted that strictly speaking Watsuji does not believe that human beings only have meaning within a larger totality which is self-evidently meaningful.

If we take this to be so, then both the individual person and the totality are things *which do not subsist in themselves but merely subsist in their linkage with the other*. (WTZ 10:106)

At an ultimate level, to be an individual is to be a part of a larger whole, and to be a larger whole is to be made up of various individuals. Both the individual and the whole exist within a larger field of possible relationships, and, “Neither is able to be ‘prior’” (WTZ 10:107).

Watsuji explains the reason this search for substantiality failed is that it is only by putting “betweenness” or the persistent relationships (*aidagara* 間柄) of person and person first ontological that we can solve the nagging problem of subject and object relations. *Aidagara* is written using the same character, 間, as the *gen* in *ningen*, which, as mentioned above indicates a spatial or temporal interval, plus *gara*, which means a recurring pattern.<sup>14</sup> *Aidagara*, then, is a kind of field or space in which our persistent relationships with others repeatedly occur. It is the betweenness or *médiance*<sup>15</sup> of person and person. This field is what has ontological priority, not the objects thought to be contained within it. Shogakukan’s *Ruigo Jiten* Japanese thesaurus notes that unlike the word *kankei* 関係, which is also often translated as “relationship,” *aidagara* indicates an enduring relationship, hence one would not use it in expressions like, “lose one’s relationship” or “break off the relationship” as one would with *kankei*. *Aidagara* are persistent relationships—such as familial bonds—which cannot be severed merely through a change of attitude or circumstance. Recall the five relationships, or *gorin*, of Confucianism. In our lives, these relationships proceed our existence (one cannot exist as a child without some relation to a parent), but we also play a part in

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<sup>14</sup> *Gara* is often used to indicate patterns on clothing. For instance, a tiger striped shirt is *toragara* 虎柄 from *tora* “tiger” plus *gara*. Hence when combined with *aida*, it gives the sense of an interval that repeatedly unfolds according to persistent design.

<sup>15</sup> See Watsuji’s French translator, Augustin Berque.

creating, sustaining, and redefining these relationships (a parent cannot be a parent without having had a child).

Applying this at the level of ethics, Watsuji finds the “fundamental law of human existence” (*ningen sonzai no kompon rihō* 人間存在の根本理法) is that individuals must negate the totality to which they belong in order to individuate themselves but they must negate that negation in order to return to the totality. He writes,

Totality is said to be established in the negation of the individual, but it cannot come out of the negation of a single individual alone. Individuals are many, and by casting off their individuality, those many individuals become one, and thereby a totality is established as a communal existence. However, in no totality whatsoever can we say that individuality is completely extinguished. So soon as the negated individual becomes an individual once more by negating totality, the movement of negation repeats anew. Totality subsists *only in this movement*. (WTZ 10:27)

In other words, human existence is fundamentally a dynamic process in which we are never frozen into a static existence as self-defined individuals or socially constructed roles. When we act, we act in conformance to society or in opposition to society and through acting, we redefine ourselves and the roles society has for us. Neither totality nor individuality has substantial existence alone, but both become through dynamic opposition.

For Watsuji, this dynamic process of interplay between the self as individual and the self as communal is the source of human authenticity. To be a human being means being part of

an incessant movement which individuates through division from something communal and comes back to its authenticity (*honraisei* 本来性) through realizing community as the negation of something individuated. (WTZ 10:195)<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The word *honrai* 本来 is composed of characters meaning “coming from the root,” and it is also translated as “origin.” Hence *honraisei* 本来性 not only means “authenticity,” it also carries the suggestion that “authenticity” is a natural outgrowth of the root of our being. For this reason, Watsuji often refers to it as a “return.” Nevertheless, this return is not a mere reversion to an original state, but a creative return with difference as that root comes to grow in new and different ways.

As a result,

we are able to define the fundamental principle of the study of ethics in its most universal sense as “the movement in which absolute negativity returns to the self through negation.” (WTZ 10:125)

Goodness, according to Watsuji, is the circumstance in which our authentic aspect can reveal itself through the continuation of this process. Badness comes from a premature halting of the process of double negation. Either placing the individual over society or placing society over the individual is wrong insofar as it attempts to freeze a dynamic process in place and betrays its authentic nature as evolving. Ethical goodness is an efficacy or virtuosity of performance rather than a rigid conformance to a fixed disposition. In the coming chapters, we will see that aesthetic goodness has a similarly dynamic meaning.

### **Negation as emptiness**

Clearly, negation is the centerpiece of Watsuji’s philosophical anthropology, but what exactly is negation? As an ordinary example, one might think of the process by which one defines one’s identity by rebelling against external constraints. Think for instance of a toddler in the “Terrible Twos” or a teenage rebel. These are ordinary phases of personal development, and in a well-integrated personality, they eventually come to an end as one makes peace with one’s surroundings. We might say that one negates the other in rebellion to establish the self, but then eventually surrenders the self to the community as one makes peace with society. On the other hand, at a more metaphysical extreme, one might think of negation as a Hegelian process of dialectic. The individual self is first created as a thesis but eventually sublated with its communal antithesis into a novel synthesis as the dialectic moves forward historically.

Both of these senses capture something of what Watsuji means by negation: the mundane and the esoteric. However, negation must also be understood

through a specifically Japanese cultural lens. Watsuji clearly means for “negation” to be understood in the context of NISHIDA Kitarō’s “self-identity of absolute contradiction” (*zettai mujun-teki jiko dōitsu* 絶対矛盾の自己同一) and the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness. Watsuji writes, for instance, that, “in the extremity in which we seek the individual independence of the physical body, we break through to the disappearance of individual independence. In another field, this has also been expressed with the phrase ‘the dropping off of body-mind’” (WTZ 10:71). This refers to the teachings of Sōtō Zen monk Dōgen Kigen (道元希玄, 1200–1253), which Watsuji popularized in his monograph *Shamon Dōgen* (沙門道元, 1926). Watsuji is claiming that a truly penetrative insight into individuality, as is gained for instance in Zen meditation, leads one to a realization of the non-duality of the body and mind with the world around it. Watsuji also writes about *aidagara* that,

That is, already existing persistent relationships (*aidagara* 間柄) are ultimately the absolute totality of self-other non-duality. They are the *authentic countenance* before your mother and father were born. They are *authenticity* as the origin out of which we ultimately come. (WTZ 10:195)

In Zen Buddhism, one’s “authentic countenance” is the true self apart from the conceptual discriminations that obscure it. The absolute totality consists of non-discrimination between self and other. This non-discrimination is on the one hand an accomplishment made through dedicated practice, but at the same time, non-discrimination is a return to what it is authentic and original for the human being: the matrix of relationships out of which one emerged as a putative individual. We treat the self and other as two separate things, but fundamentally they are non-dual. Their apparent duality is only the middle phase of a larger process which begins and ends with non-differentiation.

We may say then that both human beings and the communities to which they belong are “empty” of inherent existence. Emptiness, or in Japanese *kū* 空,

means in Buddhism that things lack the substantiality that we seek in them, and as a result, life is unsatisfactory. Negation in its ultimate meaning cannot be just negation of individual or negation of the community, because for either sort of negation to be final, the thing negated would have to have its own ontological priority. Watsuji writes, “the individual is one who becomes an individual as the negation of *emptiness from which the self originates* (that is, authentic emptiness)” (WTZ 10:124). That is, the fundamental law of human beings is ultimately the negation of emptiness itself. In the process of double negation, emptiness is our source and our destination.

### **Emptiness vs. reductionism**

In *Translation and Subjectivity*, Naoki Sakai criticizes Watsuji’s invocation of emptiness, on the grounds that it makes him “reductionist” about persons. On Sakai’s reading, Watsuji’s person is no more than the social construction that makes him or her up. However, he writes, this will not do because,

Not only am I an other to myself (Watsuji was fully aware of this sort of otherness, which can easily be contained by the scheme of *shutai* or subjectivity), but I am also other to the dual structure of subjectivity; that is, my relation to myself always bears a surplus value that is irreducible to the dual structure of the whole and the individual. Thus, I am never reduced to an identity, an individual who identifies with the whole. I am not a unity fashioned after the unicity of the whole. In short, I am not an *individuum*. (98)

Sakai’s criticism of Watsuji echoes contemporary critiques launched by MIKI Kiyoshi (三木清, 1897–1945), a leftist philosopher eventually imprisoned by the wartime authorities for his writings. Miki explains,

First, even if one were to decide on “the study of human beings” as a satisfactory definition for philosophical anthropology, the object of study to which the term itself points cannot in fact be defined like other things. [...] The fact that real human beings can never simply be defined in such a way provides the *raison d’être* for a different way to study the human being.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> MIKI Kiyoshi, “The Study of the Human,” 702–3. See Chiaro Brivio’s dissertation *The Human Being: When Philosophy Meets History; Miki Kiyoshi, Watsuji Tetsurō and their Quest for a New Ningen* (2009) for Leiden University for a more thorough comparison of the two thinkers.

Miki raises a key point, namely that the human being should not be considered a mere object of scientific inquiry, but Sakai's reading of Watsuji misses a crucial aspect of emptiness. Recall that we previously quoted Watsuji that, "in no totality whatsoever can we say that individuality is completely extinguished" (WTZ 10:27). This is because "emptiness" in the East Asian tradition is not merely a void but a plenum of creative possibility. *Kū* 空 is a form of "openness" as much as it is a sheer "void." In the famous words of the Heart Sutra, "Form is not different than emptiness; emptiness is not different than form. Form *just is* emptiness; emptiness *just is* form" (色不異空、空不異色、色即是空、空即是色). In other words, not only does form lack substance, this lack of substance is what gives rise to form. To give another famous Buddhist slogan, *śūnyatā* (Sanskrit, "emptiness") is equivalent to universal *pratītyasamutpāda* ("dependent co-arising"): no phenomena stands on its own, but through their confluence, new phenomena arise. Emptiness does not just mean that society defines the individual such that the individual is reducible to its social construction. The individual also constructs society, so that society is, in a certain sense, reducible to the individuals that make it up. Watsuji explains that

relational existence is already grasped from two points of view in the standpoint of common sense. One is that *relationships are formed in the "betweenness" (aida, 間) or "fellowship" (naka, 仲) of particular persons*. From this direction, there must be the particular members who preceded the relation. The other is that *the members who made the relationship are limited as members from the relation itself*. Seen from this direction, there must be the relation that preceded the particular members and defined them. These two relations contradict each other. Yet these contradictory relations are recognized as commonsense facts. (WTZ 10:61)

Put differently, there are two "directions" of emptying. The existence of these two directions of emptiness produces the creative contradiction leading to the "surplus value" that they rightly insist we preserve in our anthropology. From the top down perspective, we can attempt to define individuals in terms of those



larger entities that mold them. From a Marxist perspective, we might talk about how the individual is a pawn in the struggle between classes; or, from a nationalist perspective, we might talk about how individuals are mere instantiations of some larger national or ethnic character. On the other hand, from a bottom up perspective, we can attempt to define individuals in terms of those smaller entities that constitute them. From a biological perspective, we contain certain cell structures; or from a chemical perspective, we are made of collections of particular molecules. Buddhist emptiness is non-reductive because it denies the finality of either top down or bottom up reductions. It charts a “Middle Way” between nihilism and substantivism by turning these two directions of reduction against one another.

It is true that we are molded by larger social structures. It is from the top down perspective that we can talk about the subject as having a “mind” which is studied by psychology. From this perspective, society is an observable outer reality, and mind is a hidden inner reality. It is also true that we are constituted by smaller physical entities. It is from the bottom up perspective that we can talk about the subject as having a “body” which is studied by the natural sciences. From this perspective, the body is an observable outer reality, and sub-atomic particles are a hidden inner reality. The tension between these two perspectives is not unilaterally resolvable. Both are ultimately lacking in substance when explored in sufficient depth, and this non-dual emptiness leads to the overflow of value that is celebrated by Miki and Sakai and is the focal point of aesthetics. Emptiness itself is irreducibly reducible without thereby being univocally and statically determined. Rather, it expresses itself as the novel dynamism of the interplay of the two directions of possible reduction. The importance of this for aesthetics is that it means our experiences will not merely be a collection of decomposable parts nor unitary, given wholes. Experience can exhibit creativity through its lack of substance. Hence the outcome of Watsuji’s emptying of the subject is not to reduce

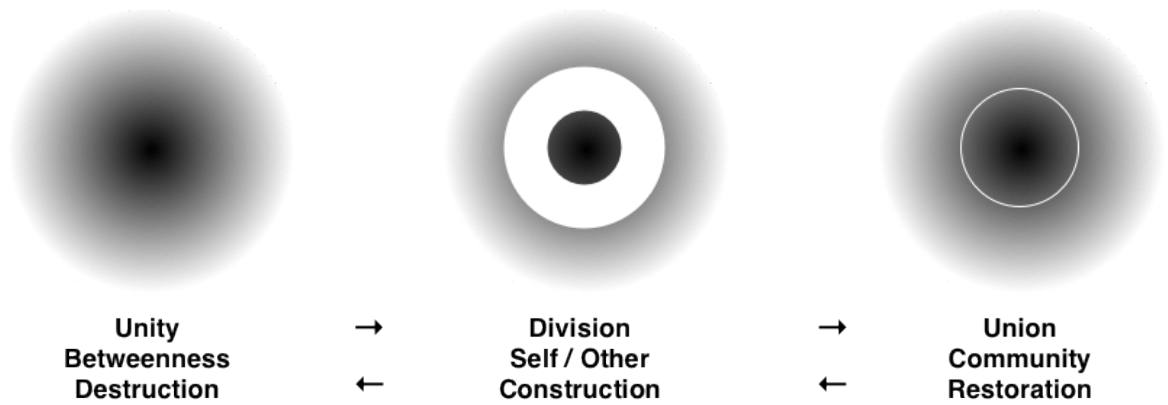
the self to society, but to allow it to fill itself out as relations are fleshed out existentially.

### **Methodology of cleavage in everyday existence**

The pattern of double negation in human existence can be subsumed under a more general pattern of hermeneutic “cleavage”: first there is an undifferentiated whole, then its division, and finally the reunion of the parts without a reversion to the origin. Watsuji states that “human existence itself is a movement that realizes its authentic unity in the linkage of unity-division-union (*tōitsu/bunri/ketsugō* 統一・分離・結合)” (WTZ 10:40). Because this pattern underlies human existence, the only way to come to understand the structure of the human being—and hence the grounds for aesthetics as a discipline—is through “the hermeneutic method of restoration/construction/destruction (*kangen/kōsei/hakai* 還元・構成・破壊)” (WTZ 10:49)<sup>18</sup> which reverses this process. We restore when we return to the moment of non-conscious union of self and other as we feel it in everyday experience. We construct a subject by isolating a focus from the field which surrounds it and calling that abstracted focus the self. Finally, we destroy or deconstruct when we reintegrate the focus into the field and recognize their primordial unity.

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<sup>18</sup> *Kangen* is also translated as “reduction.” For example, see Carter and Yamamoto, 45. However, as explained in the last section, this translation creates a misleading understanding of Watsuji’s project. Taken literally, the characters 還元 mean a “return to the origin,” or as Watsuji writes about *kangen*, “from expressions, it goes back to what was expressed, that is, back to human existence” (WTZ 10:48). The point is not to “reduce” human existence to expressions or vice-versa but to restore by means of expressions our ability to focus attention on lived human existence.



**Figure 1.**

As illustrated by figure one, unity/division/union and destruction/construction/restoration are parallel to the pattern of double negation at work in human existence. As human beings, we come from a place of betweenness where there are no defined boundaries between self and other. There is a difference between our core and those around us (as symbolized by the gradient from black to white), but this difference is a vague one with no bright line of discontinuity, only opposing poles. This is the first phase, unity. Then in negation we carve out a space between our self and our surroundings. We oppose those around us and so define ourselves. We abstract the content from its context and separate the focus from its field. This is the second phase, division. In the third phase, we bring self and other together in a union to form a community. As individuals, we reconcile ourselves to society. Notice, however, that the marks of cleavage remain even after this reunion. After this, the cycle continues again from unity as we continually define and redefine through action our relations with others and objects.

Because of this, our investigation of aesthetics must begin with a “restoration” (*kangen* 還元, a return to the union of self and other in ordinary life) in which we grasp everyday experiences as expressions of our existence. These expressions

show us just how the union of self and other is accomplished around us. As Watsuji says,

there is no mine so rich as what is called the everyday experience of human beings. Walking through town, a variety of goods are displayed on shelves. Common sense already *knows from its gut* what kind they are, what they are used for, how to buy them, and so on. Yet there is not a one of these goods which is not somehow an expression of human existence. (WTZ 10:42)

In other words, in what we call “everyday life,” each variety of thing as an expression furnishes a passageway to human existence. Thus we can start from the “facts” in the most commonsensical and naïve sense. (WTZ 10:43)

To be sure, as mentioned previously, should we merely observe the patterns of everyday existence without going any deeper, then aesthetics would be the mere study of public opinion—this kind of art is popular, this kind of is unpopular, some people like this, others do not, and so forth. We go beyond merely sociologically describing cultural patterns in aesthetics when we start to see how everyday experiences are expressions of a deeper structure of humanity and grasp that structure. Restoration is crucial to the understanding, but since human existence is a positive, dynamic interplay between individuality and sociality, we cannot get a complete grasp of human existence through negative, restorative reflection alone. We cannot, so to speak, understand aesthetics only from the armchair; a purely theoretical aesthetics would rapidly become disconnected from life as it is. We must also live these expressions *constructively* while detaching ourselves from them if they are to go beyond static understanding into dynamic realization in space and time.

Finally, through this preparation we are able to deconstruct our experiences and grasp the structure of unity in human existence in its most general form. In this final step of the hermeneutic process, we attempt to “return what it is that is transmitted in everyday expressions to the spring which created them” (WTZ

10:49). Though there is a danger that our understanding will still be limited by the particularities of the cultural data through which we attempt to understand them, “self-awareness (*jikaku* 自覚) of particularity is the only path (*michi* 道) by which to go beyond particularities” (WTZ 10:49).

To give a few analogies, in mathematics, there are axioms, facts, and a logic which allows us to draw new facts out of our axioms. To make mathematical progress, we must begin by returning our attention to those axioms that are given to us in intuition in such a way that they seem indispensable, work out the facts that are constructed as implications of those axioms, and only then may we remark at the highest level of abstraction about the logic which has been invisibly supporting this structure all along, before returning to begin the hermeneutic cycle of understanding anew. In linguistics, we all have an intuitive sense of which sentences “sound right” and which do not, we refine these intuitions into sets of rules for particular languages (grammars), and finally, we go beyond the boundaries of particular languages in an effort to understand the universal grammar of human languages. In ethics, we begin by observing seemingly self-evident moral intuitions in practice in ordinary life, we work out the theoretical implications of our moral intuitions as applied to new situations, and finally we begin to understanding something of the nature of practical reason as it gives itself to us in appearance. At the most general level, we are faced with practice, theory, and reason as three interlocking and inseparable areas of concern that must be understood in an on-going hermeneutic circle.

The fundamental method of aesthetics must be the same. Accordingly in chapter three (“Aesthetic Experience as Distancing, Dissolution, and Disinterest”) I will attempt to restore our focus aesthetic experience, in chapters four (“The Subject and Object of Aesthetic Judgment”) and five (“Art, History, and Milieu”), I will attempt to construct again a framework for understanding aesthetic judgment

and artistic communities, and in chapter six (“Beyond the Bounds of Aesthetics: Criticism, Genius, and Culture”), I will attempt to go beyond a culturally particular understanding to uncover some of the universal aspects of aesthetics.

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May 15, 2012

### **Chapter 3. Aesthetic Experience as Distancing, Dissolution, and Disinterest**

#### **Contents:**

#### **Defining aesthetics**

Before describing the nature of aesthetic experience, I wish to explore the meaning of the word “aesthetics” itself. Although ancient Greek word αἰσθητά is the source of the contemporary word “aesthetics,” the meanings of the two are quite different. Αἰσθητά, the sensible, came from the root αἰσθάνομαι (“I perceive”) and was opposed to νοητά, the intelligible, and not directly connected to the perception of beauty or other “aesthetic” feelings.<sup>19</sup> “Aesthetics” was only given its current meaning in eighteenth century by Baumgarten in his *Aesthetica* (1750), which attempts to create a science of beauty by connecting it to our perception. Kant, however, sought to restore the ancient Greek meaning to the word. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he objects that Baumgarten’s use of the term “aesthetic” to refer to “the critique of taste” is misguided, since the endeavor to place “our critical judging of the beautiful under rational principles” is “futile” because “those rules or criteria are merely empirical” and not “determinate a priori laws” (A 21.n). Nevertheless, Kant appears to have somewhat revised his views by the time of the *Critique of Judgment*.

In “The Esthetic Object,” Stephen Pepper distinguishes three different areas of inquiry in aesthetics. The most “subjective” area is “the esthetic value of a particular immediate experience.” This area is individually felt and “is transitory, private, or, at least, relatively private” (477). Next, there is “the judgment of

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<sup>19</sup> For Plato, Beauty is the lure of the Good and resides in the realm of the intelligible and outside the realm of the sensible.

esthetic taste.” According to Pepper, “It is not, strictly speaking, a judgment of esthetic value at all, but a judgment about certain judgments of esthetic value” (477). In other words, a judgment of taste is a judgment about the person: does this person have good taste? Is this person able to judge correctly what is aesthetically valuable? This is less individually felt than one’s immediate experience, but still less “objective” than his third category, “the judgment of the esthetic value of a work of art or of a thing of nature.” This area concerns “something external to the individual, or, at least, more comprehensive than the experience of any one individual and is consequently generally called objective” (477). For the remainder of this work, I will take up Pepper’s distinction and refer to the three as “aesthetic experience,” “aesthetic judgment,” and “theories of art” respectively.

The distinction between these three ways of talking about aesthetics is registered linguistically in Japanese. One translation of aesthetics into Japanese is as *kansei* 感性, which might also be rendered into English as “sensibility.” This translation is closer to the usage of Kant and the ancient Greeks. Unlike the neutral “sense” or “perception,” however, the *kan* part of *kansei* strongly implies the feeling of emotion or value, not merely valueless sense data.<sup>20</sup> This is what I am going to call “aesthetic experience” and investigate in this chapter. Another translation of aesthetics, *bigaku* 美学, is a Sino-Japanese compound meaning literally “the study of the beautiful.”<sup>21</sup> This translation relates exclusively to the contemporary meaning of aesthetics, what I will be calling “aesthetic judgment.” A key question to be answered is how it is possible for something like *kansei*, our

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<sup>20</sup> The Japanese dictionary *Daijisen* 大辞泉 gives “one’s heart-mind moving from contact with something external; the moving of the heart-mind” (“外部の物に触れて心が動く。心の動き。”) as its primary definition for *kan* 感.

<sup>21</sup> For an account of the emergence of *bigaku* as the standard translation of “aesthetics,” see the introduction to Michael Marra, *A History of Modern Japanese Aesthetics*, 1–22. In ancient Chinese thought, 美 (Ch. *mei*) had a somewhat wider application than “beauty” does in English. For example, at *Analects* 20.2 Confucius speaks of the five “beauties” that lead to good governance and the five “uglies” that lead to bad governance.



individual value feelings, to be the basis of *bigaku*, our ability to judge what is beautiful as such. If we identify *kansei* with particular experience and *bigaku* with shared experience, we will see that Watsuji's anthropology of *ningen*, which connects the individual to the collective in a double negation, plays a vital role in explaining their connection. Aesthetic judgment will be explored in greater depth in chapter four. Finally, "theories of art" in Japanese are *geijutsuron* 芸術論. When we focus on the historical and factual dimensions of art, it seems that these theories are more objective than aesthetic experiences or judgments, but it is also quite apparent that theories of art have varied wildly from place to place and era to era. I will explain the reasons for this in chapter five.

Traditional definitions are given by a genus and a specific difference. Clearly, the genus for aesthetic experience is experience. But what is the specific difference between aesthetic experience and other experiences? What are the conditions for having an aesthetic experience and what is the outcome of aesthetic experience? In what follows, I will first attempt a basic description of the nature of ordinary experience. Then I will show that a pre-condition of aesthetic experience is a sense of *psychic distance* between the ordinary self and the aesthetic object. The outcome of aesthetic experience is feeling of *intoxicated dissolution* or ecstatic unity with the object of experience. Aesthetic experience as a whole may be characterized as a process of *disinterested enjoyment* of the object's existence. In making this argument, I will take some basic elements from Watsuji's thought but use these elements to construct a framework for understanding aesthetic experience that goes beyond any of the particular accounts of aesthetics he gave.

### **Perception in everyday experience**

To understand aesthetic experience, we must first have a basic grasp of ordinary experience, in order to form a contrast between the two. For the most part, in

ordinary experience we do not distinctly perceive the objects around us, but we unselfconsciously treat them as tools for manipulating our environment. As Heidegger explains in his famous example of the hammer from *Being and Time*, we treat objects that are ready-to-hand around us as having an in-order-to structure, and it is only when something occurs to make them unusable that they become conspicuous and obtrusive as present-at-hand.<sup>22</sup> When one hammers at a nail expertly, one does not think of the hammer or the nail. Rather, they melt into the background of experience. But when something happens to break the union of self and tool, say the head of the hammer becomes loose or the hammer is not there when one reaches for it, suddenly these background elements in experience are sharply foregrounded because they have frustrated one's desires.

In terms of Watsuji's philosophy as explained in the last chapter, we can describe these two main modes of ordinary experience as the union and division of subject and object in everyday experience. Perception in general can be said to be "aspectival" in that we do not merely see what things are around us, but we see them according to its aspect *as* something or another. Watsuji illustrates aspectival perception with an example from the life of a philosopher:

The consciousness that we have in everydayness is certainly not a simple assemblage of sensations. For example, even when we are shut up alone in a study, we are conscious of the wall as a wall, the desk as a desk, the notebook as a notebook. It is not that we proceed by first having the sensation of color or a sense of touch, unify them, and then end up with a specific thing. When we are looking for the notebook, we are already looking for a specific thing before perceiving it, and when we find it, we already see a thing for writing letters on. That is, from the start we deal with it as a tool without any more primitive consciousness. (WTZ 10:77–8)

In Wittgenstein's famous duck-rabbit example, we see the ambiguous image *as* a duck or *as* a rabbit, or as one and then as the other in rapid succession. As Watsuji says, our most primitive form of consciousness is not just an assemblage of raw

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<sup>22</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Division One, Part III, A.

sensations. It is only with the patience of an artist that we can allow our eye to see the duck-rabbit *as* just lines on paper or *as* just visual stimuli.

As a result of this aspectival perception, under ordinary circumstances, we only weakly distinguish between ourselves and our environment. The boundary of the self and the world is marked by the gradual diminishment of our ability to interactively control what happens around us. As described in the last chapter, human existence is a constant movement of negation in which the self establishes its boundaries by creating and reconciling oppositions. We discover ourselves by finding parts of the world objecting to us. This happens on a social scale, but also on the more intimate scale of the body. Merleau-Ponty gives the example of a blind man using a stick to “see” the space around him in *Phenomenology of Perception*:

The blind man’s stick has ceased to be an object for him, and is no longer perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch, and providing a parallel to sight. In the exploration of things, the length of the stick does not enter expressly as a middle term: the blind man is rather aware of it through the position of objects than of the position of objects through it. (165)

The same can be said of driving a car or riding a bicycle. When an experienced driver goes over a pothole, the driver does not have the sensation that his or her physical body is moving in such-and-such a manner but *feels* the tire dip into the pothole in such a way that it is as if the feeling were happening in the tire, as though the tire itself were a part of driver’s body or connected to the driver’s nervous system.

Another side of aspectival perception is the fact that we identify different perceptions as corresponding to the same object over time and even across sense modalities. For example, one might see a table at time A then again at time B and identify it as the same object without any conscious reflection (perhaps incorrectly, but that is not relevant at this stage of our analysis). One might see a guitar

and hear music and identify the source of the sight and the source of the sound as one identical object. One might even see a pie at time A and taste a flavor at time B and identify the same object as being behind these different modes of sense at different times. Even something as basic to our perceptual experience as three-dimensional vision requires the correlation of sense data. The right and left eyes see slightly different scenes, but in experience we are presented with a single, three dimensional space instead of two separate two-dimensional images.

What are the implications of our weaving different sensations and senses into a unified experience? In “I Touch What I Saw,” Arindam Chakrabarti argues that “Realisms about the self and about the external world entail each other” (103). He writes,

Our actual—if you like, *naïve*—conception of a bit of experience with a structured content involves at least two types of items *outside* the experience, at its two opposite extremities, as it were. On the one hand, it requires a single experiencer capable of retaining its felt identity over a series of successive experiences. On the other hand, it depends upon an object with some features or a constellation of objects and features in terms of which its content is to be cashed. This dual individuation-dependence makes recognitive perceptual judgements at once evidences of the same I who touches and sees as well as of the same object which is touched and seen. It also conceptually requires that we distinguish the I from the touching and seeing as well as the object from the texture and color. (113–4)

In other words, the synesthetic re-identification of objects of experience over time and across sensory modalities that is the basis of external realism requires an internal realism as well. External realism is true if and only if internal realism is true. How might a Buddhist-influenced philosopher like Watsuji deal with this contention? I believe he would accept the biconditional offered by Chakrabarti: subjects and objects are equally real—and equally unreal. As was explained in the last chapter, the individual subject is not strictly substantive for Watsuji. At the same time, however, it would be wrong to call Watsuji a nihilist about individuals. Individual existence is one moment in the on-going movement of human existence between the social pole and the individual pole of relational space. By

the same token, if individual subjects subsist as moments in the process of double negation, objects of perception must also be created through a process of negation. They are marked apart from the self as things that are not the self, but they are also things perceived and as perceived they are *the self's* perceptions.

To conclude, in ordinary perception, our interest in things around us that we cannot control plucks them out of the background of subject-object unity and renders them as objects outside of us. We perceive them *as*, according to some concept or another, and we identify them across time and sense modalities. In doing so, we must also construct a sense of ourselves as opposed to these objects. As Fichte claimed, an object (*Gegenstand*) is a form of opposition (*Widerstand*) to the subject. In English, we might say an object is that which objects. Things we can control, however, are incorporated into the self and felt as a part of the self until they disappear into the background of perception. This is a union of subject and object, which is unlike the initial subject-object unity because it is moulded exclusively by aspects and interests brought to bear by the ordinary self.

### **Disinterested enjoyment and the aesthetic attitude**

In his *Study of Ethics*, Watsuji claims, “when a flower is said to be beautiful, the flower’s ‘being beautiful’ is based on a specific way of existing for the human beings who found the flower” (WTZ 10:141). What is this way of existing? To perceive something as beautiful, it is necessary that we first take a certain stance or attitude towards that object. It is this attitude that marks aesthetic experience apart from the ordinary experience just described. In this section, I will advance a theory of aesthetic experience as disinterested enjoyment. Disinterested enjoyment has two parts, disinterest and enjoyment, which appear at first to be in tension with one another. As explained in chapter one, the concept of “disinterest” can be traced back at least as far as Kant, who writes in the *Critique of Judgment* that

the beautiful is the “object of a liking devoid of all interest” (Ak. 211). “Disinterested” must not be confused with “uninterested.” As I use the term, disinterested enjoyment is not form of boredom, but a separation from the world of practical concern where the subject and object become entangled in the environment around them, as described in the last section. Insofar as we are having an aesthetic experience of some object, we are without any practical concern for the object. The object is not a tool by which we can resolve some other desire. On the other hand, disinterested enjoyment is not a mere aloofness from objects of experience. The object of an aesthetic experience does produce a kind of enjoyment. We take what may be called a sort of pleasure in its existence as we experience it. (Note that I distinguish myself here from Kant, who implausibly suggests that disinterest means having no concern for the existence of the object. I propose instead that while we have a deep and abiding concern for the object of aesthetic experience, this interest is not a practical interest of the ordinary self.) If disinterested enjoyment is to be differentiated from ordinary pleasure, then the pleasure we get from the existence object must be apart from the concerns of the practical self. Hence it must stem from a return to a prior subject-object unity, not a new combination of subject and object as happens in ordinary experience.

A good illustration of the twofold nature of disinterested enjoyment is found in the poem “Comfort in Tears” by Goethe:

The stars not coveted by us  
Delight us with their splendor.<sup>23</sup>

What makes the stars aesthetic objects *par excellence* is their very remoteness from us. Since ordinarily we cannot possibly hope to make use of the stars,<sup>24</sup> we most

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<sup>23</sup> In German, the poem is *Trost in Tränen*: “Die Sterne, die begehrt man nicht,/ Man freut sich ihrer Pracht.” Cited in Steve Odin, *Artistic Detachment in Japan and the West: Psychic Distance in Comparative Aesthetics*, 30.

often just ignore them entirely. It is only from time to time that we become aware of them as aesthetic objects, and in doing so, we take delight in the splendor of the stars as the things that they are, outside of us and outside of our concerns. Again, Kant is wrong to say that being disinterested means we have no concern for the existence of the object. We certainly wish for the beauty of the moon and stars to continue forever. However, it does our ordinary selves no practical good to make this wish.

The twofold nature of disinterested enjoyment can be explained by characterizing it as the fruit of a process of psychic distancing and intoxicated dissolution. Psychic distancing is the clear separating of the object from the practical concerns of the subject. Intoxicated dissolution is a movement whereby the self ecstatically goes beyond itself to inhabit the object without giving up the ordinary self. Both movements are necessary for a true aesthetic experience to take place. The moment of epiphanic aesthetic experience takes place against a heightened background of distance but with a uniquely focused intoxicating intensity at its focus.

Aesthetic experience requires a sense of otherness between the self and the object of aesthetic experience first be created. This is psychic distancing. So long as the would-be experience does not create some initial boundary between a subject and its object, aesthetic experience is not possible. Otherness is felt due to the non-instrumentality of the object. The object is not what the subject wants nor is it an extension of the subject by which it can get what it wants. Without a sense of otherness, the object would be just another thing in use by the self. We do not have aesthetic experience *of* our eyes but *through* our eyes because our eyes are so tightly identified with the self that distancing is virtually impossible.

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<sup>24</sup> Notice that when navigators do make use of the stars, they cease to be objects of aesthetic experience and become mere tools of navigation.

Normally, an object that is neither the locus of the self nor an object of desire would fade into the background of experience. It is impossible for everything around us to be given full and equal attention, so attention focuses on what in the field of experience seems to have the most salience. Aesthetic experience, however, breaks this ordinary pattern. An object of disinterest nevertheless becomes the focal point of experience.

In aesthetic experience, the cleavage of the object from the subject established in distancing becomes an occasion for a movement of the subject away from the practical self and towards the object. This is intoxicated dissolution. In this phase of aesthetic experience, there is a certain kind of withdrawal that allows us to take up the interests of the object without making those interests a simple part of the self. The self is aware of itself as over here and the object as over there, but it is also aware of the perspective that the object has as it is over there. Having distanced ourselves from our ordinary concerns for and about the object, we now relate to the object on its own terms rather than our own. We step outside of ourselves, hence the feeling of ecstasy or “ek-stasis” that comes from intoxication with the object. This gives us a sense of enjoyment as we begin to experience the wholeness of the object from its perspective rather than our own. At the same time, because the ordinary self has been distanced without being erased, we are able to recognize the “as-if” structure of the aesthetic experience. We recognize that the actors on the stage are not really their characters and that we are not really identified with those characters, but we are able to see things *as if* we were the characters without entirely forgetting our ordinary selves. This means that aesthetic experience able to be a value feeling without receiving their value from the needs of the ordinary self.

To be sure, not all purposeless experiences can be counted as being aesthetic experiences. Idly stroking one’s cat as one’s mind wanders has no particular in-



order-to structure (cats are too willful and fickle to be counted on as “a thing for petting”), but at the same time, it does not typically achieve the status of aesthetic experience. One pets the cat absentmindedly without making the cat the object of one’s attention; rather, one’s thoughts flit about. To the extent that one does pay attention, it is to the sensation of petting or the feel of the cat’s purring, rather than the cat itself. In this case, dissolution has been achieved without first distancing the subject and object, hence the final result does not deserve the appellation “disinterested enjoyment.”

An example that clearly illustrates the phenomenon of psychic distance as the backbone of disinterested enjoyment is the nude. For a heterosexual male, a beautiful nude woman is an object of lust. In pornography, such objects are offered to the viewer in order to inflame sexual desire. Such images have a very clear in-order-to structure. The ecstasy provoked by such pictures leaves no sense of distance between the viewer and the viewed, hence it has no “as-if” structure. It is seen “as” aspectively and not “as-if” aesthetically. However, an artistic nude has no such obvious in-order-to structure. We see the value of the nude from the perspective of the picture without forgetting its valuelessness for the satisfaction of the desires in our ordinary lives. If we wish to assign a practical interest to the nude, we must do so at something of a remove from the phenomenological experience of the object itself by talking about, for example, the cultural capital that accumulates from appearing sophisticated by appreciating the “high” arts. Such explanations of the purpose of art objects can be valuable and will be pursued in greater depth in chapter five, but for now, let us focus on the experience of seeing the nude rather than the phenomena that cause us to see the nude. In a short essay called “On Nude Pictures,”<sup>25</sup> Watsuji writes,

A living human body as it is is not beautiful in the same sense as a work of art. There is a difficult to cross boundary in the space between an actual physical body that can be the

object of sexual desire and a work of art that reveals the beauty of life purely. If one should however have a heart that can retain its moral interest before a nude body, it is possible to discover a beauty that is eternally fresh and mysterious. (WTZ 17:375)

What Watsuji is claiming is that it is only when we can take delight in the nude body as a body rather than as a potential object of conquest that we can begin to experience its aesthetic depths. In my formulation, we must first be aware of the nude as something separate from us, then give ourselves over to its purposes, rather than invest it with our own interests. Only then can we maintain the distance that gives the work an “as-if” structure while still dissolving into the work in intoxication.

While Watsuji was an important cultural historian and critic in his lifetime, he never created a truly unified system of aesthetics as I am attempting to do here. Nevertheless, he did create some unfinished notes on art theory that were collected and published posthumously.<sup>26</sup> While these cannot be taken as a definitive statement of his aesthetic theory because they were not finished, he does explain that

the aesthetic attitude is “an attitude.” And so it is a peculiar *Genießen* (German, “enjoyment”) in which the body is purely entrusted to its impressions. What it identifies as the characteristic of the aesthetic may be said to be a certain spiritual attitude that only appreciates the *expressive value* of the impressions it receives. Although this is, of course, the state of a subject (*shukan* 主観), nevertheless *it is led by the aesthetic object* and will not follow any “motive” (English in original) that does not exist within the object. In that sense, it follows the inherent expressive value of the object and for the sake of the object itself takes up an aesthetic attitude. (WTZ B1:143–4)

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<sup>25</sup> “On Nude Pictures” is *Rataiga ni Tsuite* 裸体画について (WTZ 17:374–6). It was first published around 1919, then included in the essay collection *Mask and Person* (*Men to Perusona* 面とペルソナ, 1937).

<sup>26</sup> Published as *Notes on Art Theory* (“*Geijutsuron*” *Nōto* 「芸術論」ノート) in 1992 as a part of *Supplemental Volume 1 to Watsuji’s Complete Works* (*Watsuji Tetsurō Zenshū Bekkan 1* 和辻哲郎全集〈別巻 1〉), hereafter WTZ B1. Apparently, the notebooks were written in the 1920s, perhaps to help Watsuji give lectures on aesthetics at the universities where he was teaching at the time. The notes are full of untranslated German terms, which indicates they were probably meant more as a mnemonic than a public record.

When we follow aesthetic experience, we give ourselves over to our object, disregarding ourselves as subjects in relation to it. Having previously given up our interests in the division of the subject and object, we are now free to pursue the “motives” within the object as a substitute for our interests. In doing so, we have an attitude of “disinterest” towards the object. When we are disinterested, we are free to turn ourselves over to the object without regard for our own purposes for the object in an act of intoxicated dissolution:

In this sense, the aesthetic appreciator can be said to be an appreciator who “contemplates the fullness (German, *Fülle*) of the object without interest (German, *uninteressiert*)” as Moritz Geiger (1880–1937) says. (WTZ B1:145)

Psychic distancing and intoxicated dissolution are what allow us to appreciate the fullness of the object as a value feeling without thereby committing our ordinary self to an interest in it.

The concept of disinterested enjoyment is also present in the work of NISHIDA Kitarō (西田幾多郎, 1870–1945), who had a profound effect on Watsuji’s philosophy. In “An Explanation of Beauty,”<sup>27</sup> Nishida connects the feeling of beauty to the Buddhist concept of *muga* 無我. *Muga* is written with characters that literally mean “without” and “I,” and it was used as a translation of the Sanskrit term *anātman* or “no self.” According to Nishida, beauty is the particular form of enjoyment we feel when we achieve a state of selfless ecstasy:

If I may summarize what has been said above, the feeling of beauty is the feeling of *muga*. Beauty that evokes this feeling of *muga* is intuitive truth that transcends intellectual discrimination. This is why beauty is sublime. As regards this point, beauty can be explained as the discarding of the world of discrimination and the being one with the Great Way of *muga*; it therefore is really of the same kind as religion. (217)

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<sup>27</sup>. “An Explanation of Beauty” is *Bi no Setsumei* 美の説明. Translations are by Steve Odin.

Intellectual discrimination means the calculation of the interests of the ordinary self. When we reach a state of selflessness we go beyond the ordinary self and a feeling of ecstasy towards all the world expands out of us:

Even if a man is an artist of outstanding genius, no one who is mean of heart has ever become a great master. In contrast, however, when we are not in the least restricted by thought of self, not only does pleasure give rise to a sense of beauty, but everything that was originally unpleasant under goes a complete change and provides aesthetic pleasure.  
(216)

*Muga* is a state in which we divest ourselves of our ordinary self and its interest in the object. We ecstatically take up the interests of the objects around us and even what is counter to our ordinary interest can now be the cause of disinterested enjoyment.

### **Aesthetic experience as double negation**

Using the language of the last chapter, we may take the “double negation” that Watsuji used to describe the ethical realm and extend that description beyond ethics to the preceding description of aesthetic experience. Ethical double negation moves between individual and communal poles of self-other experience. Aesthetic double negation moves between isolated and integrated poles of subject-object experience. In the first negation, we create a psychic distance between the subject and object. This negation establishes the independence of subject and object, hence it is necessary for the achievement of disinterest. However, if the process stopped there, it would leave us cold and aloof and would not constitute an aesthetic experience. This individuating negation is a precondition for the second negation in which we negate this initial negation and begin to “dissolve” the distance between the self and object in ecstatic intoxication. We expand the self to encompass both the ordinary self and the object from a next perspective. In a moment of epiphany, we “lose ourselves” in the beauty of the object—that is, the ordinary self created by the first negation has been negated.

It is not that in this moment we truly cease to exist, but we do through aesthetic experience go beyond the union with the object felt in everyday experience to grasp the prior unity that made the union possible—the unity of possibility in absolute emptiness that the first negation had taken away. In doing so, we do not experience the object as a part of our lived world of practical concerns, but, just the reverse, we experience ourselves as part of the world of the object. This is what allows aesthetic perception to have an “as-if” structure rather the “as” structure of ordinary experience. We have a value feeling as if the object were of interest to the self although it is in fact seen as valueless for the ordinary self.

It must be emphasized that neither distancing nor dissolution is sufficient to form an aesthetic experience on its own. Just as we would not be able to have aesthetic experience if we remained frozen in disinterest, so we could not have an aesthetic experience if we dissolved all boundaries between the self and object. In order to have an aesthetic experience, there must be a subject and object to come into contact with one another, hence the complete dissolution of the self would result in the loss of the possibility of aesthetic experience. As in the ethical double negation, which does not end when one returns to the community out of which one originated, the aesthetic double negation must be an incessant cycle if it is to maintain itself. To be sure, the double negation of aesthetic experience is not necessarily a temporally ordered sequence, but it is one in which both moments are required for growth of the aesthetic good. For Watsuji, the ethical good is the continual growth and development of the cycle of double negation; the aesthetic good is also a kind of growth and development of a harmony. Aesthetic good is different from ethical good just in that it is directed at other objects rather than other human beings, hence it takes place between the negation of distancing from the object and the negation of dissolution into the object rather than movement between the individual and social poles of existence. Aesthetic experience is a

kind of approaching of the limit, whereby we return to the primordial unity of the subject and object without quite erasing the distinction between them. The subject and object experience a higher unity without thereby erasing the line of cleavage differentiating them.

My theory of aesthetic experience can be clarified by differentiating it from Edward Bullough's theory of aesthetics as "psychical distance." In "'Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and an Æsthetic Principle" (1912), Bullough illustrates his meaning with the example of a ship in a fog. To a sailor or passenger aboard a ship, fog is a deadly and frightening menace. However, occasionally when trapped in a fog we may "distance" ourselves from the situation, and suddenly "our practical interest snaps like a wire from sheer over-tension, and we watch the consummation of some impending catastrophe with the marveling unconcern of a mere spectator" (94). The trick of art and aesthetics for Bullough is prevent either under-distancing or over-distancing. When under-distancing, we treat the aesthetic situation as a matter of practical concern. When over-distancing, we are entirely aloof from the situation. A properly aesthetic experience is one in which we come as close as possible without identifying our interests within the spectacle.

Three critiques of Bullough spring directly from what has been explained so far. First, while Bullough demonstrates in his essay that he understands the difference between psychic distancing and its ecstatic payoff, he does an inadequate job of differentiating these two phases of experience and explaining how the second emerges from the first. Rather, his terminology tends to confuse them both under the title of "psychical distance."

Second, Bullough writes that the "antinomy of distance" in aesthetic experience requires "the *utmost decrease of Distance without its disappearance*" (100).<sup>28</sup> This shows that Bullough's terminology is almost the opposite of mine, since in

my theory it is critical that distance be created and maintained even as the self attempts to dissolve into background of its object. Nevertheless, if we interpret him according to his own terminology, Bullough is correct as far as it goes. For Bullough, “distance” refers to the distance of the self from the object; for me, it refers to distance from the ordinary self. Bullough’s image of distance pictures two things—the self and the object, which become close without touching; mine pictures three things—the ordinary self, the object, and the ecstatic self of aesthetic experience. What I wish to emphasize is that what allows for this utmost decrease without disappearance of distance from the object is the dynamic nature of aesthetic experience. In aesthetic experience, it is not that the subject passively regards its object from a certain distance. Rather, the subject and the object are both carved out of a more primordial flux of proto-experiences according to a procedure that takes shape as time. The relation of the sailor to the fog is normally one of horror, but by navigating with their relational space, the sailor can reach a new position from which to appreciate the fog’s other qualities: its beauty, its stillness, its remoteness, its deceptiveness, etc. The idea of “distance” can be compared to *aida* 間 (a spatio-temporal interval) or *aidagara* 間柄 (a persistent relationship) from the last chapter. Aesthetic experience attempts to preserve the contours of the relational space between the subject and object (their distance) by preventing their complete union while nevertheless allowing their underlying unity to be felt as a dynamic ecstasy within an enlarged self.

Third, Bullough focuses on the psychological pre-conditions for aesthetic experience rather than any particular qualities in the object that are able to be appreciated. This gives his theory a slight overemphasis on the “subjective” side of the experience at the cost of the “objective” side of the experience. It matters not only

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<sup>28</sup> Emphasis in all quotations belongs to the original author except as noted.

how the sailor relates to the fog, but also that it is fog to which the sailor is relating. Because aesthetic experience is a movement of the self away from itself, it matters what it is the self is moving into. A different object of experience will not only require different psychological preparations in order to be felt, but it will also produce a different sort of experience as its outcome according to the harmony or fullness in the object.

### **Self-other unity and subject-object unity**

In thinking about aesthetic experience, the unity of the subject and *object* must be clearly distinguished from the unity of the self and *other*. Terminologically, we may call the first an aesthetic movement and the second an ethical movement. In practice, however, these two movements cannot be cleanly separated (a point emphasized by Nishida). The ethical movement is philosophically prior to the aesthetic movement and must exist beforehand in order to make the aesthetic movement possible. In the last chapter, we saw that the aspectival nature of consciousness is always given to us in our persistent relationships with others. As Watsuji writes in *Study of Ethics*, whenever one is “conscious of *the wall as a wall*, social consciousness has already infiltrated into it” (WTZ 10:77). Language is a central feature of human consciousness, and language is always transpersonal. Psychic distancing depends on others to give us the categories into which to place the aesthetic object such that we can see it *as* valueless, and intoxicated dissolution depends on to others to allow us to see the aesthetic object *as if* valuable. Still, the aesthetic movement, while philosophically posterior to the ethical movement, creates new possibilities for future ethical moments to explore and can lead to radical shifts in how the ethical movement is actualized. As a result, the two movements must be treated as interrelated, since the one so often becomes a starting point for the other.



While aesthetic experience gets us back to the subject-object unity that persisted before its division into subject and object, the ways of seeing the aesthetic object that allow us to return to unity are given to us by others, hence social context plays a key role in our private aesthetic experiences. The subject enters into an object in part by putting its self into the place of an other. We may, for example, see something beautiful and appreciate its beauty in itself without being told how to do so by anyone else. We may even feel that we could not explain the experience to anyone else because of its direct, personal immediacy. This is because the movement of psychic distancing is a movement of individualization that gives the aesthetic experience a sense of deeply personal immediacy. At the same time, by speaking with others in a community we are able to sharpen our appreciation of aesthetic objects and come to feel into them more deeply than we were able to do on our own. Aesthetic experience contains within it the possibility of sharing with others—the possibility of becoming an aesthetic judgment. This is because the movement of intoxicated dissolution allows us to inhabit not only the object but the other as well.

Previous answers to the question of status of aesthetics as subjective or objective were unsatisfying because the aesthetic moment cannot be the product of either subject or object, self or other singly. Whether we describe it as a neutral subject receiving the value of the object or the aesthetically-minded subject projecting value feelings onto a neutral object, we have separated the subject and object in a way that is unreflective of intertwining in aesthetic experience. At the same time, we cannot completely abolish the difference between the subject and object, since to do so would preclude the possibility of the aesthetic moment. Rather, we must preserve aesthetic experience as a possibility that expresses the underlying unity of subject and object through their division and union.

If an aesthetic experience is properly crafted, we find ourselves coming together with the artist or artists, with those other members of the audience with whom we share the experience, and with the object of that experience. Though my feelings and the feelings of those others can be distinguished, in the aesthetic experience, they share a common root in the ecstatic unity underlying the moment. Hence it is improper to think of aesthetic experience as a “subjective” phenomenon in the sense of simply being an individual experience. Aesthetic experience is precisely the sort of experience in which the subjective gives itself over to the object and a wider range of subjects.

When we examine closely the phenomena of everyday experience, we begin to find numerous examples in which the supposedly individual and atomic self seems to merge with others in aesthetic experience as a part of the aesthetic grasping of the object. Even beyond the world of aesthetics, there are many moments in which the ego of the individual can be felt melting into the crowd as the crowd grasps the world before it. We experience such moments when we watch our home team score a crucial goal before the end of the game or when take part in any number of civic and religious functions from a Fourth of July parade to a wedding ceremony. The standpoint of traditional anthropology is to try to explain these events as deriving from individual drives and desires or the group’s need for unity and survival, but such explanations fail to connect the level of individual experience to the group imperative: they fail to explain how these drives can be expressions of authenticity for both the group and the self. But if the subject is something that is fundamentally connected to others then shared aesthetic experience is possible, and we will be able to bridge the gap between *kansei* 感性 (a particular sensibility) and *bigaku* 美学 (a shared feeling of value). My *kansei* is possible because as individual I set myself apart from others, hence our *bigaku* will be possible when I return to the group.

### **Bringing forth the between in theater**

To bring concrete focus to this discussion, I will next examine the theater, which is an art Watsuji analyzed several times throughout his career. Greek tragedy and Japanese Noh are closely related aesthetic forms that exhibit very clearly the pattern of psychic distancing and reintegration I described. Both are masked dramas that illustrate “the poetic crystallization of a privileged moment in the life of a hero, detached from its spatiotemporal context and projected into a dream universe.”<sup>29</sup> Both invite the audience to put themselves in the shoes of that hero while also observing at a distance the logical and aesthetic unity of the drama as a whole. They allow audiences to feel into the characters of the drama without entirely forgetting their ordinary identities and the as-if structure of the performance.

### **Aristotle on the role of catharsis**

No discussion of the aesthetic experience of the theater is complete without at least a mention of Aristotle’s theory of catharsis. For Aristotle, achieving catharsis is the goal or τέλος of tragedy. In his *Poetics*, he defines tragedy as,

a representation of an action that is heroic and complete and of a certain magnitude [...] through pity and fear it effects relief to these and similar emotions. (§6.II, 1449b)

Here “effecting relief” is a translation of κάθαρσις (“cleansing” or “purging”). Some speculate that Aristotle means this as a defense of theater from Plato’s charge in Book X of the *Republic* that because poets have no specialized knowledge, they also lack a distinctive function, hence there is no role for the imitative arts in a just society. The theory of catharsis shows us the importance of arts like the theater for the good life. In the *Politics*, Aristotle explains that aesthetic catharsis is equivalent to medical catharsis (a purgative), except that it flushes out

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<sup>29</sup> Said of Noh by René Sieffert as quoted in Leonard Pronko, *Theater East and West*, 75. I believe this applies equally to Greek tragedy.

the emotions rather than the body. The result of a catharsis of the emotions is “a pleasant feeling of relief” and “harmless delight to people” (Book VIII, 1342a). In other words, for Aristotle, we enjoy the theater because it builds up emotions appropriate to the work and relieves them through their exercise. Accordingly, much of Aristotle’s commentary on tragedy concerns the particular forms of plot and character that are most appropriate for such an emotional climax. To use Bullough’s terminology, both “over-distancing” and “under-distancing” are to be avoided. If we see an evil character succeed or a good character fail, we will react too negatively. If we see a good character succeed or an evil character punished, we will react too positively. Aristotle concludes that tragedy requires a character who is neither better nor worse than the audience but who makes a tragic mistake that leads to a crisis and its eventual resolution.

The phenomenon of catharsis can be explained within my theory as the result of distancing from the ordinary self and subsequently dissolving into the tragic character with the actor and one’s fellow members of the audience. The enjoyment of catharsis is a kind of disinterested enjoyment in which ordinary life is left behind and we enter the perspective of the protagonist through the lead actor and the perspective of the community through the chorus. The interplay of the actors and the chorus allows us to exercise both aspects of our twofold character as human beings. As social beings, we identify with the chorus and as individuals, we identify with the particular actors. The interworking of the chorus and the actors provides us a means to identify fully with the play and so experience a total catharsis as we feel with them the sentiments of the play.

## Nietzsche and theater

In *A Study of Nietzsche*,<sup>30</sup> Watsuji follows Nietzsche's lead in describing the Dionysian intoxication of the audience of Greek tragedy,

The inner life of the Dionysian audience enjoys the *same* intoxication as that of the people who personally dance and sing; instead of expressing this joy with their entire bodies, however, they do so through the satyrs on the stage. There are no individuals there; the ego disappears and everyone melts into the root of nature. Accordingly, the distinction between the choral round dancers and the spectators exists solely as a fact of cognition and is by no means something that restricts inward fact. (636–7)

Here Watsuji is not only relaying Nietzsche's views but also advancing his own interpretation of the meaning of theater. For Nietzsche, there were two aspects of tragedy, the Apollonian and the Dionysian. The Greek god Apollo was associated with the sun, beauty, and rationality, whereas Dionysus was the god of the festival, wine, and madness. Nietzsche emphasized that both the Apollonian and Dionysian aspects of the tragedy were essential to its creative tension, but he tended to stress the Dionysian as an antidote to what he took to be a one-sided Apollonian emphasis in German culture. Both the Apollonian and Dionysian aspects of the drama ultimately served to conceal the fundamental truth of the unsatisfactoriness of reality, but through different methods. The Apollonian concealed the inherent pathos of reality in semblances of dreams, but Dionysian does so through intoxication. Where the Apollonian emphasizes the importance of individuality (dreams are uniquely private), in the Dionysian the individual is lost to the frenzy of the crowd. Again, the individual and communal aspects of the play allow our aesthetic experience to become a form of complete identification without separation between audience, chorus, and actors. Notice also that in this passage, the dissolution described is not merely a dissolution of subject and object, but primarily a dissolution of the bounds of individuality for the dancers

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<sup>30</sup> *A Study of Nietzsche* is *Niiche Kenkyū* ニイチェ研究 (1913) in WTZ Vol. 1. Translations of *A Study of Nietzsche* are from David Gordon's *Self-Overcoming as the Overcoming of Modernity*.

and spectators. The artistry of the dancers reveals itself to the audience as the difference between audience and artist begins to weaken. From the perspective of the later Watsuji, this means that the aesthetic moment of appreciation for the dance cannot be grasped apart from the ethical moment of solidarity between the dancers and the spectators. As Watsuji reads Nietzsche, in such events the flow of life becomes powerfully concentrated, such that the will to power of the artist begins to overflow and wash over the crowd. In the intoxication of the aesthetic moment, we feel an epiphany. The fabrication that “I” am a substantive soul is exposed as a falsehood and the truth that life concentrates where it will is revealed.

### **Watsuji’s “Mask and Persona”**

In the essay “Mask and Persona,”<sup>31</sup> Watsuji further explores the relation of Japanese aesthetics to philosophical anthropology by studying the paradoxical nature of the Noh mask. Noh is an indigenous Japanese theater form that is performed by a masked actor with a chorus, which makes it quite similar to ancient Greek theater. Noh emerged in the fourteenth century, and typical plots concern the intersection of the otherworldly with ordinary or historical personages. A skilled actor is able to cause his (traditionally, all Noh actors are male) mask to take on a variety of expressions by changing its angle and thus the shadows on its otherwise emotionally blank face. (See figure two below.) The five major categories of Noh masks are men, women, the elderly, spirits, and gods/demons, but there are many other subdivisions. The more overtly emotional the mask, the more difficult it is to show a variety of emotions. Thus, often a demon mask may only be employed at the climactic end of a play, whereas the mask of a

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<sup>31</sup>. “Mask and Persona” is *Men to Perusona* 面とペルソナ, included in WTZ 17:289–95. The essay was first published in 1935, and then used as the title essay for a collection of essays published by Watsuji in 1937.

ordinary woman might be employed throughout. The masks of Noh derive from Gigaku 伎楽, an ancient form of masked dance that is now largely extinct. Both were preceded by Kagura 神楽, the divine dances of the Shinto religion, the roots of which are recorded in the *Kojiki* (古事記, 712) and *Nihonshoki* (日本書紀, 720) as the mythological dances performed to lure the Sun Goddess Amaterasu out of her cave and restore light to the world.

On the one hand, typical Noh masks are completely blank and “washed clean” of all specific facial features. On the other hand, when employed dynamically by a skillful actor, these masks are able to come to life in a way not possible for other, more ostensibly realistic masks. From this Watsuji concludes that,

A mask is just the facial surface that remained when the body and head were stripped away from the original physical person, but that mask acquires a body once again. To express a person, it can be cut down to just a facial surface, but this cut down surface has the power to freely restore itself to a body. Seen this way, the facial surface has a core significance for the existence of a person (*hito no sonzai* 人の存在). It is not simply one part of the physical body, but it is none other than the seat of the subjective (*shutai-teki naru mono no za* 主体的なるものの座) that subdues the physical body for itself, that is, the seat of personality (*jinkaku* 人格). (WTZ 17:293)

For Watsuji, there is a fundamental “mysteriousness” to the surface of the face that is neither reducible to a hidden face nor eliminable by Occam’s razor. This is the subject (*shutai* 主体) that reveals itself as a personality (*jinkaku* 人格, used as a translation for the Kantian *Persönlichkeit*, that which makes a person) through its expression (*hyōgen* 表現, German *Darstellung*) in the world. The personality is a hybrid of the transcendental and phenomenal self made possible by the emptiness of all things. Thus it is perfectly symbolized by the Noh mask, which though perfectly static and blank freely takes on whatever expression it needs to take on. In aesthetic experience the personality itself becomes an object of possible experience as the living surface of a mask. Paradoxically, it is the very inhumanity and immobility of the Noh mask that makes it such an excellent tool of

art, because only such a radically decontextualized facial surface is able to lay bear the mechanism of emptiness by which the subject constructs itself in phenomena. Accordingly, a sort of threefold displacement takes place in Noh theater, in which the audience ecstatically place themselves in the personality of the actor, the actor places himself in the personality of the role he portrays, and, at the climactic high of the play, the character places him or herself in the grip of possession by a spirit or ghost.

Watsuji does not limit himself to an explanation of Japanese culture in this essay but also begins to explore the role of the mask in the West. The English word “person” derives from the Latin *persona*, which is thought to have originally signified the mask worn by an actor in a drama:

What we have thought about so far cannot but naturally bring to mind the *persona*. This word first meant the mask used in a drama. This meaning shifted, and since it meant the various roles in the drama, it became a word indicating the characters in the drama. This is the “*dramatis personae*.” [...] However, persons each have their own roles and duties in society. Behaving according to one’s own persona is how one gets done what must be done. Therefore, in the case that one acts in another’s stead to get what must be done, one has become employed as the persona of the other. This being so, the persona must mean “personality” as the subject (*shutai* 主体) of acts and the subject of rights. Thus, “mask” has become “personality.”

Now, the most vitally important point about the reason for this turnabout in meaning is that first “mask” had come to mean “role.” If masks were only seen as being merely a sculpted facial surface, such a meaning could not have arisen. It was rather because masks held the power to acquire living persons as their own bodies that they were able to be a role or to be a character. (WTZ 17:293–4)

In other words, the historical transformation of mask into the person shows first of all that human beings locate the seat of their subjectivities in the facial surface, that is in the active body. Second, because of this locating of the seat of subjectivity, it was possible for a mask to represent a particular role for a character to take or for a person to hold in society. Third, through the metonymy of such a role, we come to understand the personality as a whole. Again, if the person were wholly an individual, this process would be illogical. Similarly, if the person were merely



an aspect of the collective, it would not have been possible for the facial surface to come to play such a role in the aesthetics of the Noh drama. What has happened in this linguistic transformation requires both the individuation of persons through the facial surface and the negation of such individual persons as mere holders of particular roles.

Nietzsche for his part makes similar observations about the important role of the mask in *Birth of Tragedy*, but for Nietzsche that which lies behind the mask must be divine:

all the famous figures of the Greek stage, Prometheus, Oedipus etc., are merely masks of the original hero, Dionysos. The fact that there is a deity behind all these masks is one of the essential reasons for the 'ideal' quality of those famous figures which has prompted so much astonishment. (§10, 51)

For Watsuji, the ideal is not so much the “god” hidden behind the mask as the mask itself. The mask becomes the seat of the subjective by revealing the dipolar nature of the personality behind it. That personality is always located in the betweenness of person and person, and so the roles it inhabits become a part of what it is in itself. To be a particular person means to have a particular set of overlapping relationships with others. Masks work by highlighting a particular role the person inhabits and so become synonymous with the person as a whole.

As for Noh, it clearly reveals the structure of the aesthetic moment as the overcoming of union and division to reach back to the prior unity of subject-object. The motions of the actor are all tightly regulated and carefully prescribed, which creates a separation between the role and the actor who attempts to embody that role. The actor must detach himself from his ordinary concerns, as must the audience members who watch him. Having thus detached themselves, the Noh actor finds that he has taken on the self of the mask—not because of a Dionysian frenzy as in Greek drama but because of a more subtle form of intoxication. The ecstasy

of Noh is the result of studied selflessness (*muga*, 無我), in which the character is possessed by a spirit even as the actor completely embodies his role by dissolving beneath the surface of the mask and the audience completely identifies with the pathos of the actor because of the dynamic negativity of the mask that he wears.

### **SAKABE Megumi and Zeami**

The Japanese philosopher SAKABE Megumi (坂部恵, 1936–2009) was inspired by Watsuji's "Mask and Persona" and expanded on its themes in his own writing. In his essay "Mask and Shadow in Japanese Culture: Implicit Ontology in Japanese Thought," he attempts to explain that the boundary between self and other is especially ambiguous in Japanese culture. He notes that the word *omote* (which can variously be written as 面, おもて, or 表) "means the mask, the face, but at the same time it also means the surface" (245). He goes on to write,

What is surprising to me is that "*omote*," with the connotation of surface, does not mean in the Japanese language or thought "the appearance" as opposed to some ideal entity (as in the case of Platonism) or to some real substance (as in the case of Kant's "thing-in-itself"). (245–6)

What this shows is that the Japanese people did not make a sharp distinction between what is on the surface of a thing and its interior "reality." Instead they saw the reality as being real only insofar as it was a surface.

Sakabe sees this characteristic of Japanese language also exhibited by Noh theater, in which "there is nothing but the play of various surfaces or various reflections" (247). For example, an important part of any Noh theater is the *kagami-no-ma* 鏡の間 (Mirror Hall), a room in which the Noh actor prepares for his role by envisioning himself as his character and in so doing "transmogrifies into the ultra-human dimension of the spirit of the ancestors" (245). Exiting this space, "The actor enters the stage as a self transmogrified into an other, or as an other transmogrified into the self" (245). If self and other were truly opposed, then such a

transformation would be as impossible as A being not-A at the same time, since it would never be possible for the self to be other to itself. “Self” is by definition itself and not its other. But if Watsuji is correct that self is the negating of a more primordial unity that can be reconstructed in a union of persistent relationships then the inversion whereby self becomes other and other becomes self is comprehensible as a dynamic reconfiguration of the structure of the actor’s human existence. The actor places his self into his mask and lets the mask be his self. This is the state necessary for a great performance.

Sakabe quotes Zeami Motokiyo (世阿弥元清, c. 1363–c. 1443), considered the founder of modern Noh aesthetics, who claims in his treatise *Kakyō* 花鏡 (“Flower-Mirror”) that a great actor must see himself with the eyes of the audience:

To repeat again, an actor must come to have an ability to see himself as the spectators do, grasp the logic of this fact that the eyes cannot see themselves, and find the skill to grasp the whole—left and right, ahead and behind. If an actor can achieve this, his peerless appearance will be as elegant as that of a flower or a jewel and will serve as living proof of his understanding. (246–7)

Zeami refers to such seeing as *ri-ken no ken* 離見の見 or “the seeing of distant seeing.” This concept is very similar to the distinction between seeing *as* and seeing *as-if* I have been employing. The first step for a truly aesthetic experience is the creation of psychic distance. In this case, the psychic distancing allows the actor to individuate himself as object of his own gaze. The actor steps outside of himself and observes himself from the point of view of the audience, creating yet another displacement of self in addition to the multiple displacements of the audience. He sees himself as if from the perspective of the audience without entirely forgetting his original self.

In *Theater East and West*, Leonard Pronko writes that,

If the actor must know himself, he must also know his public; Zeami deemed it of the utmost importance that an actor be constantly aware of the needs of his audience, and that he must answer those needs. (81–2)

When the actor is aware of himself and his audience, he creates the distance that allows the audience and actor to return to their unity. When they come together in feeling, the audience become one with each other as their attention focuses on the artistry of the actor as the object of their experience, and the actor becomes one with them as he watches himself with the seeing of distant seeing. It is a coming together in which the psychic distance between audience, actor, and art is dynamically minimized without ever quite collapsing.

The core aesthetic value of Noh for Zeami and others is *yūgen* 幽玄, an untranslatable term of art. *Yūgen* suggests darkness, depth, profundity, and mystery. It can be seen in the delicate play of shadows in the emotional space between the mask and audience. It is beautiful blurring of the hazy border that separates the selves of the actor, character, and audience.

Pronko attempts to explain,

The difficult term *yūgen*, suggested by the stylized beauty of the mask and the spiritual reality behind it, has been translated many different ways; indeed it is difficult to pin down, for Zeami used it with different meanings over a period of thirty-six years. The primary meaning of *yūgen* is “the occult,” or as Waley translates it, “what lies beneath the surface.” [...] *Yūgen*, no doubt attempts to describe something it can only suggest. If its essence cannot be defined, its results can least be experienced by those with sufficient sensitivity and background. (86)

Pronko is an excellent student of Japanese theater, but if Sakabe is to be believed, Pronko was led astray here by his Western vocabulary. *Yūgen* can be translated as “the occult,” but this does not mean that what is being occulted is an essence hidden below the surface. *Yūgen* is rather the way that the depths of the character are constructed entirely on the surface as a surface. Through interaction, an aesthetic subject is constructed as the negation of absolute nothingness.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I followed the hermeneutic method specified in the last chapter by starting with an examination of the expressions of aesthetics in everyday expe-

rience. There are at least three different senses of the word “aesthetics,” and in this chapter, I explore aesthetics as a mode of individual perception. In particular, I began by contrasting aesthetic experience with ordinary experience. Ordinary experience is aspectival—that is, we see things *as* and have pre-specified uses for them in our lives. Aesthetic experience, on the hand, is a kind of seeing *as-if*, in which we see the value of things from their perspective rather than through the lens of our own interests. Aesthetic experience is a kind of disinterested enjoyment. The disinterest comes from psychic distancing—a process in which the object of aesthetic experience is distanced from the imperatives of the ordinary self. The enjoyment comes from intoxicated dissolution—an ecstatic experience in which the self grows to encompass the perspective of the object without totally losing sight of its original perspective. These two movements can be thought of in terms of Watsuji’s system of “double negation.” The first negation establishes a self, and the second returns to the unity that preceded the division of the subject from the object. Because the subject-object relationship of aesthetic experience is governed by the self-other relationship of ethics, our personally felt aesthetic experience always leaves open the possibility of aesthetic judgment with others, while remaining deeply personal and immediate.

To illustrate this theory of aesthetic experience, I used examples taken from the theater. Aristotle’s theory of catharsis can be understood in terms of the importance of psychic distance and the effect of intoxicated dissolution. Nietzsche’s theory of Apollonian rationality and Dionysian frenzy in Greek theater corresponds as well to the difference between psychic distancing on the one hand and intoxicated dissolution on the other. Two of the central concepts in Noh theater are *ri-ken no ken* 離見の見 (“the seeing of distant seeing”) and *yūgen* 幽玄 (“mysterious profundity”). *Ri-ken no ken* shows the importance of perspective taking to theater—the audience takes up the perspective of the actor, the actor takes up

the perspective of the character, and, at the height of many Noh plays, the character takes up the perspective of a spirit. *Yūgen* meanwhile shows the importance of expressing a hidden depth on the surface of things. Great Noh theater comes about when the actors and chorus are able to present clearly the inner quality of the object for inhabitation by the audience.

In the next chapter, I will show how it is that aesthetic judgments and tastes can be shared by exploring the nature of the subject-object division in greater detail.



**Figure 2.** Noh mask shown from three angles, showing three different emotions. Photo credit: Wikipedia.

Carl M. Johnson

#### **Chapter 4. The Subject and Object of Aesthetic Judgment and Taste From my feelings to our judgments**

In the last chapter, our hermeneutic inquiry into aesthetics began with an attempt to “restore” our understanding of aesthetic experience against the backdrop of everyday experience. An aesthetic experience is an experience of disinterested enjoyment through the dynamic interplay of distancing and dissolution. This experience goes beyond the ordinary self to the unity of no-self before the creation of subject-object duality.

Aesthetics, however, does not end with this experience. When an experience is through, we feel an urgent need to communicate the content of this experience to others and share the experience with them. This reintroduces the subject and object to aesthetics. On the basis of my aesthetic experience, I, the subject, judge the object to be beautiful or ugly, lovely or disgusting, sublime or mundane, and I hope to persuade you to judge likewise.

But what is it about *my* aesthetic experience that creates a basis for *our* judgment? Vice versa, how can the tastes of others be the basis for my own experiences? What is the source aesthetic agreement? How is it that there are such things as communities of taste? How can deference to the tastes of others possibly be an authentic expression of my subjectivity? Is there anything like normativity in aesthetic judgment or can we only describe our own aesthetic feelings without prescribing them for others? Is aesthetic judgment universal, relative, or something else?

To answer these questions, in this chapter I will go beyond just describing the experience of aesthetics as *kansei* 感性 or sensibility and begin to explain aesthetics as *bigaku* 美学—the study of beautiful things and our judgments about them.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Recall Stephen Pepper’s distinction between “particular immediate experience” and “the judgment of esthetic taste” mentioned in the last chapter (“The Esthetic Object,” 477).

*Bigaku* itself can be thought of as proceeding from two directions of inquiry. Going from the individual to the communal, we may ask how intensely personal and immediate aesthetic experiences can be basis for propositions to which we expect others to assent. Call this “the problem of aesthetic judgment.” Going from communal to individual, we may ask how the tastes of a community can be the basis for an individual experience. Call this “the problem of taste.” Resolving these problems requires us to follow the second step in the hermeneutic methodology outlined in the second chapter, namely construction. Because aesthetic judgment is a form of judgment, it can only be made within the context of a cleanly separated subject and object, unlike aesthetic experience, which aims to get back to the unity that precedes the split. A judgment takes an individual experience and makes it the basis for a group assent. We create a subject in order to look at the object from outside and evaluate it then we present that evaluation to others. Tastes, on the other hand, are a means by which a group comes to prescribe experiences for individuals to have toward certain objects, hence tastes also require the existence of a certain structure in the arrangement of subject and object.

In this chapter I will first examine more closely at the nature of subject and the nature of the object as they co-construct one another as experience. Then I will show how these natures allow for the creation of normativity in aesthetic judgment without requiring us to posit a universal, rational taste. Finally, I will present examples from traditional Japanese arts, particularly linked verse, that illustrate my contentions about the nature of the self, judgments, and taste. What we will find is that subjects are active and plural, objects are impermanent and insistent, judgments must be subjective yet normative, and tastes can be authentic though communal.



## Who is the subject ?

### Subject as agent

As mentioned in chapter two, Naoki Sakai is critical of what he feels is Watsuji's project of "reducing" the subject to a twofold structure of individual and community as *ningen* 人間 ("human beings"). While I feel that Sakai's criticisms are somewhat wide of the mark, he does do a service for readers who are primarily familiar with Watsuji in translation by drawing attention to aspects of Watsuji's philosophy that might otherwise be lost in translation. In *Translation and Subjectivity*, Sakai notes that the word "subject" has many renderings in Japanese:

*Shutai* [主体] was introduced into Japanese intellectual vocabulary as a neologism, as one of the translations for "subject," *sujet*, or *Subjekt*, other translations being *shugo* [主語] (propositional subject), *shukan* [主観] (epistemic subject), *shudai* [主題] (thematic subject), *shinmin* [臣民] (subject of the emperor), among others. (119)

While most of these ambiguities are fairly clear even to readers whose primary language is English (the subject of a sentence is plainly a different thing than the subject of a king), those who read Watsuji only in translation are apt to miss the distinction he makes between *shutai* 主体 and *shukan* 主観 and interpret him as having an inconsistent attitude towards subjectivity and subjectivism. In both words, the *shu* 主 represents the host or ruler as opposed to a "guest" (*kyaku* 客 from which comes "objectivity," *kyakkan-sei* 客観性). The *kan* of *shukan* means to look or to observe, hence *shukan* indicates the subject as one who passively receives sense data. The *tai* of *shutai*, on the other hand, means a physical body or the unit of a larger whole.<sup>33</sup> The suggestion of *shutai* as opposed to *shukan* is that of a body at work among other bodies instead of an isolated observer. *Shutai* indicates the subject as embodied agent who is a practical and active, hence Geoffrey Bownas sometimes renders *shutai* as "self-active body" and other times as just "subject."<sup>34</sup> Sakai writes,

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<sup>33</sup> In *Climate and Culture*, which is Bownas's translation of the work I refer to elsewhere as Watsuji's *Milieu*.

The term “subject” or *shutai* itself was thus posited as the central philosopheme around which topics related to praxis, on the one hand, and the determination of particular social relations, on the other, would be woven together in Watsuji’s study of the human being. (79)

When translating Western works on the nature of the subject into Japanese, those works that consider the subject to be ultimately a passive transcendental observer tend to be translated using *shukan*, but those under the influence from Marx, Nietzsche, and other sources in which the subject is regarded as an active embodied agent are translated using *shutai*. NISHIDA Kitarō’s theory of active intuition (*kōi-teki chokkan* 行為的直観) in particular was crucial in bringing out this aspect of the subject.<sup>35</sup> For our purposes, the critical aspect of *shutai* is that it shows the importance of the living body as the ground of the human being and the importance of active engagement as well as passive contemplation.

In *Study of Ethics* Watsuji makes it clear that seeing the subject as “‘one who observes objects,’ that is, the *shukan*” leads to philosophical difficulties in ethics because “the problem of human existence, the problem of linkages of conduct and practice have no connection to the aforementioned isolated *shukan*” (WTZ 10:11). That is, the most central philosophical puzzles to be resolved—those related to ethics, value, and meaning—stem primarily from the subject as *shutai* and not from the subject as *shukan*. While the view of the subject as observer has its place—certainly theorizing is a part of human existence—it is a *déformation professionnelle* to so valorize the arm chair that we give it priority over practical action in our understanding of human existence. As mentioned in chapter two, a common thread in East Asian thought is Wang Yangming’s slogan *zhixing heyi* 知行合

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<sup>34</sup>. The character for *tai* in *shutai* was written as 體 in the pre-war orthography, which reflects the close connection between the physical body and Confucian *li* 禮 (ritual propriety). In post-war Japanese orthography and mainland Chinese simplified characters, *tai* was standardized as 体, which had existed beforehand as a handwritten variant. This way of writing *tai* is meant to show that the body is the root (本) of the person (人).

<sup>35</sup>. Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity*, 213, n. 4 notes that the interest in *shutai* expressed by Watsuji and others can be traced to Nishida, especially *Nishida Kitarō Zenshū* 6:341–427.

—, “Unity of knowledge and practice.” Watsuji is similarly critical of Cartesian thinking in which one sits in one’s study and attempts to prove the existence of the other. The attempt shows its own superfluity in the writing:

*Writing “only the I is a certainty” is a self-contradiction because writing is the expression in letters of words, and words are something that develop only when one has a partner to live with and speak with. (WTZ 10:52)*

We forget that there’s no one out there who could read our disproof of solipsism without already disbelieving in solipsism because we neglect the importance of the body and its practical conduct in favor of a view of the subject as observer. In aesthetics as well, we must be careful not to elevate the observing subject over the agentive subject if we are to escape the pitfall of neglecting the importance of action to forming judgments.

One approach to talking about norms in aesthetic judgment has been to couch claims about what constitutes good and bad taste in terms of the reactions of a hypothetical “suitable spectator” or an “ideal observer.” In this framework, good taste is that judgment offered by an ideal observer. The “correct” judgment to render about an aesthetic question just is one that agrees with an ideal observer. Richard Wollheim, for example, claims in “On Pictorial Representation” that we can judge the success of representation in a picture on the basis of whether, “if a suitable spectator looks at the picture, he will, other things equal, have the appropriate experience” (396). However, from the perspective on the subject just mentioned it is clear that rather than thinking in terms of an ideal *observer* or suitable *spectator* (*shukan*), we should think in terms of ideal *embodied agents* or appropriate *actors* (*shutai*). When we think about ideal observers, we are left without a foothold by which to climb up to the ideal vantage point for observing the world. We search in vain for a formal explanation of the process of observation if we emphasize the subjective side of judgment or the formal properties of the

object if we emphasize the objective side of judgment. In neither case, however, are we able to come up with a satisfying explanation for why those formal properties and no others are the correct ones for this subject and this object. Focusing instead of the subject as an agent suggests a method for overcoming these difficulties: placing judgment within the wider context of the way of life of the subject. Aesthetic experience is disinterested, but aesthetic judgments are rendered from within larger life projects.

Receptive experience, though important to understand, is just one part of the larger set of embodied activities undertaken by the subject. We not only stumble into beauty accidentally, but we actively seek it out as artists and as audiences. We prepare our minds to receive beauty by undertaking actions that open us to the possibility of disinterested enjoyment. The physical activity of walking to the theater or signing one's name in the guestbook at the gallery should not be overlooked when analyzing the aesthetic experience, because these activities allow our bodies to help physically prepare the mindset of distancing and dissolution that will be needed. Even in a seemingly passive observer, the imagination races ahead and behind, painting the picture with the artist, singing the aria with the prima donna, composing the sonnet with the poet. Imaginative productivity accompanies any receptive aesthetic experience.

Because our ordinary experience is aspectival, the practical judgments we make about the world around us are already built in. We judge that the chair is for sitting and the body we see in the distance is a friend with whom we share a relationship. We see these things "as" having a certain in-order-to structure for us. Aesthetic experience, however, goes beyond the aspects given to us by the ordinary self to give new aspects to be seen "as if" from the perspective of the object. To be a "suitable spectator" for forming an aesthetic judgment therefore requires not only that we take up a certain cognitive stance, but that also that we engage in

certain behaviors and activities that will both cultivate and demonstrate our suitability for going beyond the ordinary and practical.<sup>36</sup>

### **Subject as plural**

Thinking of the subject of aesthetic as *shutai*—actively embodied—rather than *shukan*—passively contemplating—leads us to another aspect of the subject. Human existence is a constant dialectical movement of double negation between the individual and social moments in our persistent relationships. Accordingly, it is misleading to think of the subject of aesthetic judgment as a purely individual. In the book *Milieu*,<sup>37</sup> Watsuji explains that treating the mind and body non-dualistically as an embodied subject requires us to go beyond the study of individual persons to look at how persons come together to form communities. This is because,

The subjectivity of the physical body (*nikutai no shutai-sei* 肉体の主体性) depends on the spatiotemporal structure of human existence as its ground. It follows that a subjective physical body is not an isolated physical body. The subjective physical body has a dynamic structure as though it were coming together even when isolated and isolating itself in its coming together. (WTZ 8:17)

To be a physical human being means to be constantly cleaving apart from others and cleaving together with others. While our individual subjectivities are an important aspect of aesthetic judgment, so too are our social subjectivities. To paint a full picture of aesthetic judgment, we must see how both are constructed. As was just explained, the basis of this construction is that we are actively embodied subjects in addition to being passively contemplating subjects. From

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<sup>36</sup> Space restrictions do not permit the elaboration of the parallel here, but attentive readers will note the similarity between this and Wittgenstein's remarks concerning the importance of our "forms of life" to understanding one another. "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him" (*Philosophical Investigations*, 190). "What has to be accepted, the given, is—so one could say—*forms of life*" (192).

<sup>37</sup> *Milieu* is *Fūdo* 風土, 1935, WTZ 8:1–256. Geoffrey Bownas translated it into English under the title *Climate and Culture*. The position of this book within Watsuji's career will be discussed at greater length in chapter five.

the perspective of the passively contemplating subject, the problem of solipsism looms large, but the actively embodied subject dissolves the problem of solipsism just by writing about it. In writing, we engage with other human beings and so expand our cognition beyond ourselves. Language always extends beyond the individual through its roots in history.

In chapter two, I quoted from Watsuji's *Study of Ethics*:

It cannot be that the consciousness of the *I* who feels the beauty of a picture and the consciousness of Thou towards the same picture are completely independent things. We are feeling the same beauty together. The difference in the way that two people feel can only be compared on the ground of this shared feeling. (WTZ 10:76)

According to conventional philosophical anthropologies, my feelings are *mine* and therefore completely private. This leads to a crisis about how shared taste can even be possible. Watsuji's anthropology, however, denies the presupposition that the individual self is atomic and substantive. As a result, we should not be surprised to see Watsuji arguing that "the interpenetration of the consciousnesses of self and other is especially prominent in its emotional aspect" (WTZ 10:74) because,

In situations where the persistent relationship (*aidagara* 間柄) of self and other is extremely intimate and the communal existence is acutely realized, the *I* shares an identical emotion with the other. (WTZ 10:74)

Because the subject is not only individual but also communal, feelings can arise in the subject as communal and then be shared by subjects as individuals, and vice versa. In certain circumstances, these feelings are not just similar but the same. Watsuji gives the example of parents who lose a child. The sorrow they feel is not just similar, "the sorrow is for the parents a communal sorrow, thus they feel an *identical* sorrow together" (WTZ 10:74). Because the source of the sorrow is the shared in common, it is right to call it an identical emotion felt by two individual persons. The subject of this experience is the *we* who feel sorrow, not just the *I*.

Such sharing of intense feelings is what makes comparing aesthetic judgments and the subsequent creation of canons of taste in the art world possible. That such canons exist is an observable fact of everyday experience, but conventional anthropology makes them difficult to account for. If each individual is truly isolated, there is no sharing of feeling. If there is no sharing of feeling, how can there be agreement or disagreement? Disputation requires a common subject matter about which to dispute, hence there is no possibility of a judgment about felt experience unless feelings are somehow sharable.

On the other hand, everyday experience also shows us that very often aesthetic judgments fail to cohere. The saying *de gustibus non disputandum est* ("there's no arguing taste") is well established for a reason. The Watsuian anthropology being employed here is also well positioned to explain this phenomenon. Double negation requires a moment of individuation as well as a communal moment. We create our self-identities by both concurring with the group and dissenting from it. Initially, I take my background of tastes from those around me. I then make judgments that negate some of those tastes in order to create a unique self-identity. Finally, the separation of the individual from the group must be resolved through the change of my judgment or the group's taste if a new union is to be established and the cycle to continue. By dissenting from the group, we create the possibility of creative evolution in our shared taste. On the other hand, there must be a moment when we come back to the group if what is established is to go beyond an idiosyncratic preference. Only when both aspects of judgment exist together is there a productive synthesis of communal taste.

One clear illustration of the process by which communities of aesthetic taste emerge is *gustatory* taste. Watsuji writes,

*we divide food to taste it. The taste is on the tongue of each person. But can those tastes be separate tastes? In the case of dividing and tasting some sugar, do we not taste an identical*

*sweetness*? Should one person feel the sugar to be bitter, we will immediately treat that person as sick. That is, we will handle it as a case of one being temporarily deprived of the ability to taste an identical sweetness. [...] If bodily sensation were something that separated people from each other, such things could not be. (WTZ 10:80)

In the aesthetic experience of tasting delicious food, for instance, one nearly loses oneself in rapture to the flavorful sensation of the dish. However, this experience of partial self-dissolution is always made possible first by specific cultural structures. In *Milieu*, Watsuji puts the issue so:

It is not the case that human beings first desired either livestock or fish and then chose either stock farming or fishing. Rather, we came to desire either livestock or fish on the basis of stock farming or fishing being climatologically (*fūdo-teki* 風土的) determined. In the same way, the determinant of vegetarianism or carnivorousism also is not ideology, as it is seen by the vegetarians, but our milieu (*fūdo* 風土). So, our appetites are not aimed at something like food in general but are directed towards food created already in the manner of a specific cuisine that has been prepared since long ago. What we desire when we are hungry is bread or rice, beefsteak or sashimi, and so on. A form of cuisine expresses a people's longstanding climatological self-apprehension. (WTZ 8:13)<sup>38</sup>

Before we can experience a meeting of subject-object, there must be a coming together of individuals as a collective subject in a society. The food we eat is an instance of American food or French cuisine or Szechuan cooking, etc. or some fusion thereof. We grow up eating certain foods and develop our tastes and desires within a certain culinary horizon, even as that horizon expands through our later experiences. Hence the subject of aesthetic experience can never be limited to the individual alone but must also include the communal whole. As Watsuji writes in *Study of Ethics*,

The discrimination between approval and disapproval is itself from the first both individual and social, and it cannot be understood from outside the structure of human existence. (WTZ 10:135)

Hence when thinking of aesthetic judgment, the important contrast is not that between "objective" and "subjective" forms of judgment and taste but that

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<sup>38</sup> For a contemporary inquiry into the co-creation of desire and agriculture, see Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire*.



between the judgments arising from the subject as individual and tastes arising from the subject as communal, both of which must exist in on-going double negation.

### **What is an object ?**

Next, I will look more closely at the object of aesthetic judgment. In the last chapter, I suggested that an object is that which objects. Another way to look at the question of an object's being is suggested by the grammar of Japanese. Watsuji notes that Japanese distinguishes sharply between the existential verb (subject *ga aru* がある) and the predicative copula (subject predicate *dearu* である).<sup>39</sup> A. C. Graham explains in "'Being' in Western Philosophy Compared With *Shih/Fei* and *Yu/Wu* in Chinese Philosophy" that there has been a persistent tendency in Western philosophy to conflate the existential and predicative senses of "to be." This tendency is not seen in Chinese or Japanese thought, and fallacies that rest on this equivocation are difficult to translate convincingly.

The Sino-Japanese compound *sonzai* 存在, which also means "to exist," is instructive as a contrast to the Western pair of *essentia* and *existentia*. *Sonzai* is for the most part equivalent to *ga aru* just as the English "to exist" is equivalent to "there is." The value of *sonzai* for Japanese philosophy is that because it cannot be used to say that "A is B," the grammar of the language makes it clear for a thing to exist is not the same as it having certain predicates. Watsuji asks rhetorically in *Study of Ethics*, "Can *sonzai* be used as a copula or to show *essentia*? No, certainly not" (WTZ 10:23–4). Thus, the Japanese language resists the tendency towards essentialism and eternalism that is seen in some Western thinking. For a certain thing to "exist" need not require that the thing maintain certain properties. As with Watsuji's theory of anthropology, existence can be a dynamic interplay

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<sup>39</sup> Watsuji explains this in both *Study of Ethics*, WTZ 10:23f and "The Question of the Japanese Language and Philosophy," WTZ 4:547ff.

of negation and double negation rather than the maintenance of a simple static essence.

Watsuji also looks at the word *sonzai* in terms of its component characters 存 (Jp. *son*, Ch. *cun*) and 在 (Jp. *zai*, Ch. *zai*). In Chinese, where the compound was first used, *cun* meant to preserve over time and *zai* meant to be present in a particular place, hence as a compound the contemporary use of *sonzai* continues to suggest temporal and spatial persistence (WTZ 10:24). Where the various Western terms for “being” suggest that to continue to exist is the default state of things, *sonzai* suggests that objects may only temporarily attempt to resist their impermanence. An object exists in a certain place for a certain time in contradistinction to the background of the environment in which it arises. The object works to perpetuate itself while it can, but eventually it fails and is lost in the flux and flow of time.

On top of this, Watsuji further claims that our understanding of *sonzai* must be in terms of *human* existence, even when we speak of the existence of objects. For an object to exist is for it to exist in a certain place for a certain time, but if, as Watsuji argues (along with Kant and Heidegger), time and space are parts of the structure of human beings, then the existence of the object itself has to be understood in terms of its relation to the human subject:

If, as we said before, *son* is the self-apprehension of the subject (*shutai* 主体) and *zai* is being within human relations, then “existence” (*sonzai*) is simply the self-apprehension of the subject as a persistent relationship (*aidagara* 間柄). We may moreover say simply that “existence” is “the linkage of conduct of humans” (*ningen no kōi-teki renkan* 人間の行為的連関). Thus, in the strictest sense, existence is merely “human existence.” The existence of a thing is no more than an anthropomorphic way of speaking about “the being of a thing” (*mono no yū* 物の有) that springs from human existence. (WTZ 10:25)

How is the being of a thing connected to human existence? In “The Question of the Japanese Language and Philosophy,”<sup>40</sup> Watsuji looks at the existential *ga aru* and the predicate *dearu* and finds both of them rooted in human subjectivity as

an active embodied presence in the world. Like other existential thinkers, Watsuji gives precedence to the existential rather than essential dimension of being, but unlike many Western existentialists, Watsuji grants that the precedence of existence extends to objects as well as human beings. At the most basic level, we encounter objects then define them as predicates by negating or limiting them. Hence, the qualities with which we predicate the objects are secondary to the more primary existence of those objects in experience:

in general “there is something” (*mono ga aru* ものがある) may be said to mean a human being possesses (*motsu* 有つ) it. If this is so, it is because the way that a human being possesses it has been limited that *ga aru* becomes *dearu* through limitation. In the case of our saying, “There is a potted tree in the garden; it is a beautiful tree,” it is a form of limitation in which words show that a human being possesses the potted tree and its being possessed beautifully. That is, it is possessed in a way that is cherishing and admiring. Seen in this way, both *ga aru* and *dearu* belong to human existence, and *de aru* becomes an expression of the way of that existence (*sonzai*) is limited. (WTZ 4:549)

This provides a vital clue to the nature of objects as possessed by us but separated from us through negation. The basic level of being for a thing is wrapped up in our world of practical concern. Some things are available to us as possible possessions and other things are unavailable. Those possibilities that obtain are said to be or to exist, but possibilities that cannot be realized are said not to be.<sup>41</sup> Michael Marra comments on Watsuji’s essay in his own article, “On Japanese Things and Words,” and summarizes Watsuji’s theory so:

In other words, Being cannot stand aside from the particular entity and from the sphere of human action. Existence unfolds as Being [...], and this unfolding takes place on its own (*ari no mama*), without the intervention of any thought. [The Thing], then, is the Being of the possibility of unfolding. (561)

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<sup>40</sup>. “The Question of the Japanese Language and Philosophy” is *Nihongo to Tetsugaku no Mondai* 日本語と哲学の問題, WTZ 4:506–51, part of *Study of the History of the Japanese Spirit, Continued*, *Zoku Nihon Seishin-Shi Kenkyū* 続日本精神史研究 (1935).

<sup>41</sup>. A similar explanation can be made out of the modern standard Mandarin *you* 有, “to exist.” The earliest forms of the character 有 depict a hand holding meat, and the connection between existence and human possession has been maintained in latter usages.

Watsuji's *Milieu* provides another vivid illustration of the way that the objects of our judgments are embodied and shared. Think of standing outside in the cold with an acquaintance. What will you say? Almost certainly, "Whew, sure is cold, huh?" Is the cold that you are feeling the *same* as the cold that your acquaintance feels when you say this? Modern Western philosophers tended to treat the feeling of heat or coolness in objects as a secondary quality rather than a primary quality, which means that you are *not* feeling the same cold as another.<sup>42</sup> You feel only your own cold in your own mind, and on the basis of this feeling infer that a similar feeling may exist within the mind of your acquaintance. However, since you have never been your acquaintance, it is not clear how well rationally grounded this inferential process could be.

Watsuji sidesteps this difficulty by affirming what common sense tells us, namely that the cold I feel is the same cold that you feel:

just as there is no obstacle to our saying, "*we* feel the cold," it is we who bodily experience the cold and not just the *I*. *We feel the cold communally*. It is just because of this that we use a word that expresses this cold with one another as *an everyday greeting*. Even if amongst us the way of feeling of cold is different from person to person, this is possible on the ground of feeling the cold communally. Without this ground, knowledge of the bodily experience of cold in another *I* would be utterly impossible. (WTZ 8:10)

The basis of Watsuji's conclusion here is that,

An intentional object is not some kind of psychological content. It follows that coldness as the bodily experience of an independently existing objective cold air could not be the intentional object. When we *feel* the cold, we do not feel the "sensation" of cold, rather we directly *feel* the chill of the outside air, that is, the cold air. In other words, cold as "the thing felt" in intentional bodily experience is not "something subjective" (*shukan-teki na mono* 主観的なもの) but "something objective." Therefore, we may say that the intentional "relation" in itself of *feeling* the cold is already related to the chilliness of the outside air. (WTZ 8:9)

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<sup>42</sup> Whitehead's sarcastic rebuttal to the doctrine of secondary qualities in *Science and the Modern World* is close to definitive: "The poets are entirely mistaken. They should address their lyrics to themselves, and should turn them into odes of self-congratulation on the excellency of the human mind. Nature is a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colorless; merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly" (54). Everyday experience so thoroughly refutes this colorless view of nature that the doctrine of secondary qualities must either be somehow flawed or our everyday experience has no purchase on the world as it is.

Looking for the cold within the subject as observer (*shukan*) is a hopeless task. Such a cold is a private object inside of us individually, but the cold that we feel is an object we feel ourselves inside of that we share with others. We locate the object of our feeling cold outside of us:

When the cold is first discovered, we ourselves are already out in the cold. Therefore, that which is most primordially “being outside” is not a thing or object like the cold air, but we ourselves. “Going outside” is a fundamental prescript of our own structure, and intentionality as well is founded on nothing else. (WTZ 8:10)

Following Heidegger, Watsuji calls this state of existence in the world as a form of standing outside of oneself “ex-sistere.” This going outside of oneself is the basis of space and time, which are parts of the structure of human existence. Hence when we see an object in the world, we are at once seeing something foreign to ourselves—an object that is objecting—but also something that is a part of us. The object exists in a space at a time, and that space and time are part of the shared structure of the human subject. To discover the object is to discover the *I* opposed to the object and to discover the *we* who gather around the object.

An extended quote from *Study of Ethics* is illustrative of Watsuji’s point:

For example, when we *love* or *think fondly* of a row of ginkgo trees, we are treating the row of trees as a *Thou*. It follows that it is not the case that we first find ourselves surrounded by simple “things” and then infer the subsistence of a special species among those things, that is, one with another *I*, and then finally reach the phase of loving the trees by applying an analogy from my relation to the other *I* to my relation to the trees. When we find the trees, they are already trees with a character given by the ground of human existence, for instance as a row of ginkgo trees. The *we* who finds the row of trees is the *we* who already socially created things like rows of trees and not a *we* that must find these things inferentially. Whatever sort of a thing it is we find, we have already found that object before as a *Thou*. In this sense, the spatiality of the subject (*shutai*) acts as the means of finding objective things. In other words, generally speaking, the first moment in the establishment of an object is when a subject becomes a *Thou* or a *He/She* and opposes the *I*. (WTZ 10:188)

Our aesthetic appreciation of even natural objects like trees is mediated through the conceptual apparatus we possess as human beings in a community, and it is out of our communal humanity that these things emerge as potential objects of

appreciation. They are extensions of our being as active subjects (*shutai*), not mere observers (*shukan*).

If this is the case, can Watsuji be said to be a realist about the object? Is his object just an idealist's figment of the imagination? Is Watsuji's account of existence so anthropocentric that it drains the outside world of its reality? I will argue that neither realism nor idealism properly characterizes Watsuji's objects as I am describing them here. Instead he plots a Buddhist "Middle Way" between the two views.

In "I Touch What I Saw," Arindam Chakrabarti provides four tests for whether one is a realist about an apple:

- (A) The apple is distinct from just an experience or idea of an apple.
- (B) The apple is distinct from just its red-color, its coldish touch, smooth texture and sweet taste, and also from just a series or set of these qualities.
- (C) The apple that I now touch (or bite or smell) is the same as the apple that I saw a while ago.
- (D) The apple that I see is the same as the apple that you see. (105–6)

On the one hand, these tests can be answered by Watsuji in a realist fashion. (A) must be true if Watsuji's phenomenological account of *ex-sistere* is correct. An apple is distinct from the experience of an apple, because the apple is a thing outside of the mind that is intended in the experience of the apple. (B) must be true if the distinction between the predicative and existential uses of "being" is correct. For X to be an apple is not the same as saying that an apple is, so the apple is more than just a collection of predicates. (C) follows from the *son* aspect of *sonzai*: existence is a preservation against loss spread out over time. As for (D), it follows directly from our discussion of the subject as plural. You and I share a world, and on occasion we even share communal feelings. Of course, we may also share identical objects.

On the other hand, the tests can also be answered by Watsuji in an idealist fashion. Is the apple of test (A) “distinct” from experience? While the apple is an intentional object beyond the subject, it emerges as an object out of experience, so the distinction between the object and experience of the object is not sharp. By the same token, the distinction made in test (B) between the apple and its qualities is subjectively imposed rather than inherent. A recurring tendency in Japanese thought is the finding of essences within, not beyond, the phenomenal qualities of experience. (Recall the example of *yūgen* 幽玄, the “mysterious profundity” aimed at in Noh theater.) The constant flux of the world prevents the apple I touch now in test (C) from being the exact same apple I saw before. Finally, the apple that you and I experience in test (D) are causally linked, but to the extent that I define myself in negation from you, my apple is not yours.

The solution to this impasse between realism and idealism is a Buddhist “Middle Way” that affirms the existence of objects on the conventional level while denying their substantiality on the ultimate level. On the one hand, objects are always empty because causally constructed and non-substantive. On the other hand, because objects are reducible in both top-down and bottom-up directions, neither reduction is complete, hence objects are just as real a concretion of suchness in a particular place and time as the subjects experiencing them.

Returning then to the question of aesthetics, what is the object of aesthetic judgment? The object emerges from the active, plural subject understood as the space of persistent relationships, but it also stands outside of the subject drawing the subject away from itself. It is a particularity beyond the self that allows the self to find itself in new environs. There is a delicate interplay at work. Should the subject stay where it is and refuse ex-sistere, there can be no object, but on the other hand, should the subject expand too far, it will swallow the object up and there will be no ex-sistere because the self has merely come into itself. Accord-

ingly, I wish to emphasize the dynamic, dialectical nature of the movement of double negation. As the term *sonzai* implies, the subject-object complex has its existence as a temporary swelling in an ocean of impermanence. For a moment these waves roil through a field of relations, but always with the danger that a wave that grows too large becomes nothing more than the surface of the sea. What connects subjects and objects is that both spring from and return to emptiness itself.

### **Normativity in aesthetic judgment and taste**

Having reconsidered the nature of the subject and object of aesthetics, it is time to dig into the roots of the very possibility of aesthetic normativity. What makes aesthetic judgment possible? Why should the taste of the collective be binding for the individual? Why do individuals feel an urge to share their judgments with others?

Watsuji argues in *Study of Ethics* that although there is regional variation in morality—for example, one society may approve of human sacrifice while another condemns it—this does not undermine the universality of the basis of ethics. In all societies what is condemned are actions that undermine the trust basis of that society and what is praised are actions that reinforce the trust basis of that society. In this section I will make a parallel argument, namely that aesthetic normativity has similar relative and universal aspects. Aesthetic taste varies markedly from culture to culture, yet in all cultures what it valorizes are those relationships between subject and objects in which the harmonization of elements allows for the growth of a new and greater fullness.

### **Conscience and the internality of normativity**

I will begin by looking at a parallel phenomenon of felt normativity: the feeling of ethical conscience. Just as in an aesthetic judgment we may feel that an object



is “just right” or “all wrong,” in ethical conscience we may reflect on our own actions and instinctively feel them to be right or wrong. Of course, just as our conscience is not always correct in its assessment of the morality of an act, our aesthetic sensibilities do not always render correct aesthetic judgments. (Hence we must work diligently to cultivate our moral character in order to be ethical exemplars and cultivate our taste to be true connoisseurs. Interestingly, in the case of both conscience and aesthetic experience, it seems that insensitivity rather than hypersensitivity is the more common pitfall.) Yet in spite of its fallibility in particular cases, conscience and our moral intuitions are still the touchstone of any ethical investigation. All ethical theories must begin with certain fixed judgments of conscience, yet hope to rationalize and extend those judgments to new and less clear areas. In the same way, aesthetic experience must be the touchstone of any theory of aesthetic normativity.

How is it that we as individual members of society feel the call of conscience? If values are being imposed on us from without in order to preserve the fabric of society, then it is not clear why as individuals we should feel an *inner* impulse towards a morality made to preserve *outer* order. In that case, the moral law is given to us heteronomously rather than emerging autonomously. Moral education would be a kind of deformation of the person by which the individual is trained to ignore her authentic desires and interests and to produce within herself a feeling of subordination to the order outside of her. Could it be that our call of conscience is really the result of a super-ego that is essentially alien to us? Watsuji argues no. In the determination of guilt by a court of law, the one who accuses me stands in for society as whole, but in an affliction of conscience, the one who accuses me is the very emptiness at the heart of my self. In spite of the great degree of social determination that undoubtably goes into the formation of conscience,

when we truly feel the call of conscience it does not feel to us as something coming from without but it feels as though it was coming from our inmost personality.

The reason for this should already be clear from our reexamination of the subject. The subject is a product of the negation of the emptiness that stands prior to the individual or the community. As such, the call of conscience does not arise as an external voice speaking for society but as an internal voice speaking for the authentic source of the subject. Our persistent relationships (*aidagara* 間柄) are the root of our authenticity (*honraisei* 本来性). The moral law at work in conscience is created by the same process by which we create ourselves. Being authentic means allowing that original root of our betweenness with others to develop itself in the direction of flourishing. Watsuji is at heart an existentialist ethicist, but unlike the other existentialists, he argues that authenticity comes from a harmonious, virtuosic relationship with others, rather than from an insistence on the freedom and substantiality of the individual.<sup>43</sup>

Watsuji explicitly links his discussion of conscience to Mencius (WTZ 10:318), who coined the phrase 良心 (Ch. *liangxin*, Jp. *ryōshin*, in *Mencius* 6A.8) that eventually evolved into the term used to translate the Western concept of “conscience.” For Mencius, a well functioning (良) heart-mind (心) is one in which the capacity for moral development is not cut short but carefully cultivated. Such a heart-mind has the inclinations appropriate to the situation and acts on them. In the Warring States period, there was a debate about whether moral appropriateness (*yi* 義) was *nei* 內 (roughly speaking, “internal”) or *wai* 外 (“external”), part of which is preserved in *Mencius* 6A. There have been various interpretations of the

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<sup>43</sup> For what it’s worth, even in traditional existential ethics, the substantiality of the individual tends to dissolve in the face of some great whole, such as God in Christian existentialism or Nothingness/the Absurd for atheistic existentialism (cf. WTZ 10:85). Watsuji’s innovation is to see that if we insist on the vertical permeability of the self, there is no equally good reason not to allow for the horizontal permeability of the self.

exact meaning of this distinction, but we may on a loose reading take it that they wanted to know whether morality is in some ways dependent on the dispositions of the individual or if moral normativity can be imposed on the individual from without by completely impersonal formal considerations.<sup>44</sup> For his part, Mencius claims that our sense of the appropriate must be *nei* even as it responds to conditions in the world. I argue that what Mencius means by this is not that morality is “subjective” in the sense of being determined only by the individual, but that morality is *nei* in the sense that it originates in our most inner and authentic self even as it is importantly interpenetrated by our relationships with others—in other words, it is subjective in the sense of a *shutai* 主体 that I have been exploring here.

Mencius and his interlocutors agree that one can take gustatory taste—savoring a roast or wanting a drink of water—as paradigmatic example of *nei* (Mencius 6A.4 and 6A.5). Mencius points out that these tastes, while paradigmatically internal, are nevertheless respondent to external conditions. One of Mencius’ disciples asks rhetorically, “If on a winter day I drink hot water and on a summer day I drink cold water, then must my appetite and thirst also lie outside (*wai*)?”<sup>45</sup> Clearly the answer is no. My wanting a particular kind of drink on the basis of external circumstances is not the result of some coercive education in inauthenticity, and does not make my desire to drink any less subjective (in the sense of *shutai* 主体) and internal. As quoted above from Watsuji’s *Milieu*, our tastes are communal and shared although also intimately subjective; my desire for meat is culturally constructed but also personally felt. It is a product of the

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<sup>44</sup> Kwong-Loi Shun, *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought*, 94–112 is a good starting point for this and other debates surrounding the interpretation of the *Mencius*. Shun defends an interpretation “which takes the internality of *yi* [義] to be the claim that one’s recognition of what is *yi* derives from certain features of the heart/mind” (103–4).

<sup>45</sup> My translation of Mencius 6A.5, “冬日則飲湯，夏日則飲水，然則飲食亦在外也？”

subject as both communal and individual. If our hungers were not authentic—if the desire for food is not *nei*—then there are no authentic desires to be had. In the same way, argues Mencius, our sense of what is appropriate must respond to external circumstances (and should it fail to respond it would be an error, just as it is an error to desire salt water in a desert), but it nevertheless the internality of the sense of appropriateness that gives it jurisdiction with which to compel us.

In Watsuji's language, we may state this same idea somewhat differently. Legitimate compulsion of the individual can only arise from the source of the individual, that is, from the subject, but the subjective origin of this compulsion does not mean that it is only a matter of what one particular person feels, since the subject is not only individual. In our everyday experience, it is possible for social structures seemingly outside of the individual such as the family, community, or state to compel the individual, but this does not mean that they can exercise their authority insofar as they are external. They have authority only insofar as they are constitutive of one as a person. Watsuji explains in the *Study of Ethics*,

A family or a state is something able as a human ethical totality to demand obedience of individuals, but it is not from the standpoint of the family or state alone that this demand has the right to claim obedience. (WTZ 10:130)

If it is not as human ethical totalities that these institutions speak authoritatively, on whose behalf are they speaking? A human-ethical totality has the authority to compel an individual just to the degree that it authentically speaks for the betweenness out of which both it and the individual arise. That is, the individual and the totality must be woven together in a fabric of trust. Because the source of the individual and the social whole is the same, the one is on occasion able to speak for the other as the voice of its autonomous subject. This means both that the state is able to compel the citizen to follow its just laws and that the citizen is able compel the state to reform its unjust laws. The basis for both forms of compul-

sion is the mutual dependence of the two: the individual could not be who she is without her state, and the state could not exist without its individuals. At its best, the relationship of the citizen and the state is one of virtuosic mutual contribution and constitution.

### **Fashion and the cultural construction of aesthetic normativity**

Next, I wish to apply this understanding of the subjectivity of conscience to an example of a subjective aesthetic sensibility that nevertheless responds to external conditions: our fashion sense. In all known human societies there have been some modes of body adornment considered appropriate and some considered inappropriate. One may choose to wear a uniform or not, but no one living in a society can drop out of the fashion race (though many have tried). Whether one chooses to wear what is considered socially appropriate, chooses to rebel against it, or even chooses not to reflect much on fashion at all; in any event one is intimately wrapped up in fashion. Fashion is closely tied to our self-identities, and in particular it is closely tied to the cultural construction of gender and class differences. Written and especially *unwritten* sumptuary laws dictate the fashion choices and the internal fashion sensibilities of individuals. Fashion is, therefore, a prototypical illustration of what Watsuji calls “the linkages of conduct” (*kōi-teki renkan* 行為的連関). Through particular acts of fashion judgment by individuals, a culture-wide norm of fashion taste is created.

But if the fashion choices I make are imposed on me from outside—and they certainly are, otherwise it would not just so happen that men in the West wear shirts and pants, whereas men in other cultures have worn robes, etc., etc.—then why do I feel as though when I dress I put on clothes that reflect *my* taste in clothing? Has the outside force of fashion education deformed my internal, authentic sartorial feelings? Has my individual, “subjective” fashion sensibility been trampled by the collective, “objective” tastes of my society?

Watsuji argues to the contrary that our fashion sense is an everyday experience of a kind of communal consciousness:

The phenomenon of “fashion” shows this kind of communal consciousness in a particularly magnified form. It appears as a further narrowed *common taste* within forms of food, clothing, and shelter already specified nationally and historically. Even if particular individuals had not been conscious of them as their own authentic tastes at the start, they feel this common taste as their own taste. And then something that departs from this taste is felt to be maybe funny or perhaps ugly. (WTZ 10:79)

In other words, in fashion our aesthetic norms originate outside of the particular individual, but they are nevertheless felt as the subjective tastes of individuals because those individuals are ultimately expressions through negation of the prior betweenness. Society may help shape my taste in fashion, but it is still *my* taste. At the same time, however, by changing my aesthetic judgments about fashion, it is possible for me to change society’s taste in fashion. Personal aesthetic judgments and communally held tastes are mutually entailing and are ultimately expressions of the ways in which I as individual am made in part by the fashion of my society and my society is made in part by me. Neither individual nor collective fashion sense can exist in the complete absence of the other, hence both are empty of substantive existence. They are a mutually co-arising norm of conduct reflecting the twofold character of subject as individual and communal.

Hence there is a voice able to speak with authority about the kinds of taste experiences we “should” be having when we enter into an aesthetic experience. It is the voice of the society as it expresses itself as the source of the individual. Because this voice is trans-personal, it is possible for us as members of a community to discuss our tastes productively. It is not entirely “subjective” in the sense of being entirely individual-relative. On the other hand, since the voice is also the voice of the inmost source of the individual, this voice is “subjective” in the sense of being a part of the subject and able to, at times, command the assent

of the subject. These properties of the voice of aesthetic experience help explain why Kant felt that aesthetic judgment is universal but subjective—aesthetic judgment has a normativity that originates within the individual but extends beyond it—without thereby committing us to an implausibly universal coherence of tastes. The scope of normativity for an aesthetic judgment or taste is only as wide as the subject itself. It extends toward anyone with whom I can have an interactive dialogue but it is not yet already extended towards “any rational being” in the absence of prior lived engagement with such beings. I share my tastes with those around me in society because those who are around me in society are a part of my subject, and I am a part of theirs. Together we render sentiments of taste normative as an expression of our interactions. I owe deference to the tastes of my culture, because without my culture I would not have been able to develop the tastes I have. My culture owes deference to my tastes, because I make up a part of my culture. These two obligations work in double negation to evolve new norms of judgment dialectically.

### **Forming aesthetic judgments**

We have seen that the mutual emergence of the subject and object of judgment from emptiness is the basis of normativity in aesthetics, but the actual process of concretely rendering a judgment remains to be brought into sharper focus. Aesthetic experience is direct and immediate, but aesthetic judgment is reflective and shared. Instead of simply letting the experience stand on its own, we attempt to reduce it into a form that is communicable to others. As a result, aesthetic judgment can never fully capture the richness of experience. Furthermore, because it is communicated, aesthetic judgment requires the backdrop of an established aesthetic taste against which to make its distinctions. At the same time, however, taste is something that emerges out of the consensus of previous aesthetic judgments. Aesthetic judgment and taste are mutually dependent and must co-arise

within the interactions of an agentive, plural subject. Only by understanding human existence as the movement in which the individual and communal moments are double negated can we explain this co-arising. Aesthetic judgment is a form of individual limitation that shapes and is shaped by the aesthetic community in which it is given.

In the last chapter, I introduced this quotation from Watsuji's unfinished notes on art theory:

In this sense, the aesthetic appreciator can be said to be an appreciator who "contemplates the fullness (German, *Fülle*) of the object without interest (German, *uninteressiert*)" as Moritz Geiger says. (WTZ B1:145)

The notion of the "fullness" of the object needs to be explored in further depth. How can we judge the fullness of an object? The object just as much as the subject emerges from emptiness to exist for a short time. As the word *sonzai* 存在 implies, this existence is a struggle against impermanence rooted in space and time. Therefore, the voice that speaks to me as the source of my being also has authority to speak to the object as the source of its being. Ethical good is the continual growth and development of the cycle of double negation between persons, and aesthetic good is the growth and development of a fullness between the subject and object in distancing and dissolution. We are able to judge an aesthetic object as good insofar as it is able to participate in the development of such fullness. In the case of art objects, Watsuji mentions two recurring criteria for assessing fullness that are given by German theories of aesthetics:

*art works are made by human beings*. Hence the artist's *Wollen* (German, "will") and *Können* ("ability") are in them. To the extent that artists are human beings, it could not be the case, whoever they are, that their *Wollen* and *Können* are so deep as to be absolutely beyond our grasp. (WTZ B1:153–4)

Positing *Wollen* and *Können* as the ground of fullness in art objects leads us towards a relatively straightforward method for forming an aesthetic judgment.



As I see it, the method would roughly be as follows: Before beginning, one should have adopted an attitude of empathy towards the art and the artist allowing openness towards the work. Then on the basis of knowledge about the circumstances of the production of the work to be evaluated, one infers what sort of active spectator would be suitable to view the work in question according to the original intention (*Wollen*) of the artist beyond the basic requirement of an empathetic one. (For example, one may need familiarity with prior works in a field in order to understand a particular piece.) Second, one does what is necessary to become such a active spectator. (This may involve developing one's senses, becoming familiar with a canon, engaging with many similar works, prompting oneself in a certain way, or, in extreme cases, changing one's style of life or values, etc.) Third, one experiences the work from the vantage point of the suitable spectator and see what sort of aesthetic experiences can be produced on the basis of the work as an object. Fourth, one evaluates the execution of the artist (*Können*) according to how well the work was able to achieve the aims set beforehand. Finally, it may be necessary on the basis of what is revealed by the prior evaluation of the work to revise one's view of suitable spectator for the work by returning to the first step, reevaluating the life of the artist, reengaging in the cultivation of suitability as spectator, and iteratively continuing the process of evaluation indefinitely in a hermeneutic circle. Hence the judgment, "this is beautiful," can be taken to mean something like, "this will be seen as beautiful should one approach it in a manner prescribed by the work." The fullness of an art object in this case consists of its ability to live up to the intentions that caused it to come into being.

Laying aside the various challenges that have been made to the notion of an artist's intention, the basic difficulty with this approach, as Watsuji points out in the same set of notes, is that not all aesthetic experiences are had in relation to works of art. We also have aesthetic experiences of nature and natural objects.

However, judging those experiences is difficult because nature lacks something as straightforward as an artist's intention in light of which to evaluate it. Watsuji remarks, "towards nature any *Einstellung* (German, attitude) is permitted" (WTZ B1:154), hence settling on a suitable manner from which to approach the object (beyond the basic level of empathic openness) is significantly more complicated. This in turn complicates the identification and assessment of the fullness of the object. On the other hand, Watsuji remarks that "nature is an unfathomably infinite fountain. As our eyes deepen, so deepens nature" (WTZ B1:153). That is, the more refined our understanding of nature becomes, the more nature presents for us to understand. So long as we begin with an attitude of empathetic identification with nature, we are sure to find some path to follow to a higher understanding in our interactions with the environment. The more we attune ourselves to the beauty of nature, the more beauty there is to uncover. That natural objects possess fullness is *prima facie* evident. Making an assessment is difficult, but since natural objects emerge from the same emptiness as manmade objects, there must be some ground on which to form appropriate judgments of them.

In *Study of Ethics*, Watsuji writes that, "The highest value is an absolute totality, and an 'aspiration' (an upward impulse or fervent wish) for it is 'good' (*zen* 善)" (WTZ 10:142).<sup>46</sup> That is, in an ontological sense the highest *value* may be a totality, but ethical *goodness* comes about through striving for this highest value, not through its static possession. Indeed, Watsuji goes on to argue that ethical badness is only bad insofar it brings to a halt the cycle of double negation, whether

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<sup>46</sup>. "Aspiration" is English in the original, but Bernard Bernier speculates Watsuji uses it as "the English rendition of *Nachhängen*, a word used by Heidegger in the sense of 'projection from inside toward' something" (*National Communion*, 100, n. 10). On the other hand, compare *Book of Changes*, Xici 5, "The unifying of *yin* and unifying of *yang* is called *dao* and the continuity thereof is good" (一陰一陽之謂道，繼之者善也). Whether Watsuji had this particular passage in mind or not, this passage and others make clear that Watsuji's ethical vision shares with *Book of Changes* the world-view that goodness resides in the development of novelty, not the achievement of a particular final state.

this comes about through atomic individualization or through falling victim to the crowd (WTZ 10:143). Movement itself is the ultimate good which gives retrospective meaning to the discords experienced along the way. The importance of dynamism for goodness applies as much to natural objects as manmade. An object is aesthetically good if it is an ultimately harmonious expression of the movement that created it. In Japanese, this harmonious expression is called *wa* 和 (Ch. *he*).<sup>47</sup> The interrelation of part and whole in a good aesthetic object crystalizes the suchness of the environment as a creative outpouring of emptiness. The dynamism of the thing finds a reverberating expression that gives meaning to the faults and failures that came before, and a note that would be ugly on its own becomes beautiful within a greater concord.

Emptiness allows objects to overflow any attempt to reductively capture them from a top-down or a bottom-up direction, and this is the source of their aesthetic value. The emptiness of objects allows us to approach them in two ways. Objects can, on the one hand, be a source of dissatisfaction because we attempt to fix them in place; however, conversely objects are able, on the other hand, to be a source of satisfaction, when we are able to approach them in such a way that we allow them to be what they will be. The ability to let things be depends on the psychic distancing phase of aesthetic experience; the ability to feel into objects as they are depends on intoxicated dissolution.

Aesthetic judgment is a process by which we assess the fullness of objects by taking our immediate aesthetic experiences and rendering them in a form that is communicable to others who may not share them. In the art world, we assess

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<sup>47</sup> Whitehead writes in *Adventures of Ideas*, “the perfection of Beauty is defined as being the perfection of Harmony; and the perfection of Harmony is defined in terms of perfection of Subjective Form in detail and in final synthesis” (252–3). A full comparison to Whitehead cannot be made here, but this coincides with the core of my argument. The highest fullness arises when each element is arranged in a form that gives greater meaning and depth to the whole without thereby giving up its individuality as an element.

this fullness against the background of ongoing projects in particular historical milieux. In the natural world, we assess this fullness by becoming sensitive to the “motives” of the things themselves (though of course, the social construction of the subject plays an important role in how capable we are of mustering such sensitivity). We enter into the world of objects without either assimilating them to ourselves or entirely surrendering our own selves to them. Instead we ecstatically experience the fullness of things in the mode of ex-sistere by stepping out of ourselves and into the alien.

That having been said, this discussion of the mechanics of aesthetic judgment is still somewhat more abstract than one might like. However, more concrete specification of aesthetic judgment cannot be made in the absence of consideration of the context of the subject who will be making the judgment. In the language of Arthur Danto, we need to specify the “art world” that will be judging the object and the “aesthetic predicates” that are significant within that art world. A more detailed account of this process will be made in the next chapter; however, the importance of context to aesthetic judgment does not render it completely relative. Aesthetic judgment, whatever environmentally and historically specified form it takes, always involves an ecstatic assessment of the fullness of things through the structure of human existence.

## **Taste and judgment in Japanese art and literature**

### **Traditional Japanese art forms**

Next, let us examine some specific examples against a specific cultural background in order to illustrate some of claims made in the preceding discussion of aesthetic judgment. In *Milieu*, Watsuji observes that the coming together of “vital energy” (Jp. *ki* 気, Ch. *chi* 氣, the hylozoistic, processual “stuff” making up the world in Chinese cosmology) is central to many of the traditional Japanese arts. In other words, aesthetic excellence requires a dynamic process in which the double

negation that usually makes up the self takes a different, more ecstatic form. While I wish to contend that the coming together of vital energy is central to all forms of aesthetic judgment, not just those in the traditional arts of Japan, nevertheless, these arts provide a particularly vivid demonstration of the dynamic structure I have been arguing for.

One such example is the traditional Japanese garden. Unlike English gardens, which prize artificiality and symmetry, Japanese gardens strive for an asymmetry mimicking the spontaneity nature. Watsuji writes,

It is unified not according to geometrical proportions but according to a balance of forces that appeals to emotions, as it were, in a coming together of vital energy (*ki ai* 気合い).<sup>48</sup> In precisely the same way that “vital energy comes together” (*ki ga au* 気が合う) between person and person (*hito to hito to no aida ni* 人と人との間に), the “vital energy” (*ki* 気) comes together between moss and stone or between stone and stone. One may see it as taking every effort to avoid a prescribed regularity in order to bring their “vital energy” together. (WTZ 8:190)

The aesthetic judgment of a Japanese garden rests on the feeling that every element has a harmonious place within the totality of the effect. Each stone is placed in relation to every other stone, yet without imposing a rigidly geometrical concept of order, just as in a good human society each person has a role that harmonizes with others without reducing them to uniformity. As Confucius says in *Analects* 13.23 harmony, (*he* 和) is preferable to mere uniformity (*tong* 同). True fullness cannot be achieved without preserving the individual identity of the elements within the whole.

Traditional Japanese ink paintings (called *sumi-e* 墨絵 or *suiboku* 水墨 in Japanese) also favor asymmetry over symmetry, yet the tonality of the whole must be very delicately balanced to allow the elements to form a greater harmony:

In the composition of such pictures, one finds nothing that can be called in any sense symmetry, and yet one feels a *balance* in it without the slightest fissure. The blank space with nothing painted in it balances off the dark shadow of the sparrow as a deep and wide

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<sup>48</sup> *Ki ai* is also a term used in martial arts meaning roughly focusing one's fighting spirit.

space, and the power held by the sparrow echoes together with the power of the few dark bamboo leaves that stand out amidst the other lighter ones. In this way, the various things occupy necessary positions from which they cannot be moved. Through the relation of balance as the coming together of vital energy, we come to feel that even in a canvas like this in which the objects are just painted in the one corner there is a richness to the arrangement of things. (WTZ 8:191–2)

The rich feeling of the painting comes from the way that the viewer can imaginatively relive the creativity, spontaneity, and vital energy of the artist's brush just by looking. The mind's eye repaints the canvas and in so doing inhabits the mind of the artist who originally painted it. Each stroke is present and perfectly positioned, yet no simple, mechanical rule underlies their placement:

it is clear just in a glance *just how good* this all is, but we are unable to prescribe any sort of basic rule for how good it is. It is merely grasped intuitively as “a coming together of vital energy” without even an inch of room to move. (WTZ 8:192)

Examples of the coming together of vital energy in traditional Japanese arts may be further multiplied since as Watsuji writes, “this kind of characteristic can be found variously in Noh, tea ceremony, and Kabuki as arts in which the vital energy comes together” (WTZ 8:195). This is to be expected if, as I have argued in this chapter, aesthetic judgment requires the coming together of collective and individual subjects in order to assess the fullness of the object as they all emerge together out of emptiness.

### **Asymmetry and emptiness**

One feature that connects the Japanese arts just mentioned is asymmetry. Unlike many Western forms of art, which tend to find their source of unity in a simple rule that connects the elements and gives them a place within the whole, Watsuji finds it noteworthy that these Japanese forms of art just mentioned are unified only by the sense of vital energy running through them. But how does asymmetry show the need for a coming together of vital energy in aesthetics? A naïve reading is that the blank spaces in one's garden, painting, and so forth straightforwardly

present us with “emptiness.” William Lafleur considers this interpretation in “Buddhist Emptiness in the Ethics and Aesthetics of Watsuji Tetsurō” and rejects it:

we may not identify emptiness with some kind of non-being which has been reified and now has managed to be mirrored by and through blank spaces on an artist’s canvas. Such an interpretation would not only involve a facile mimeticism but would also involve a fundamental misunderstanding of the meaning of emptiness. For Watsuji’s point about the void on the canvas is not that it makes palpable and concrete something metaphysical called ‘non-being’ but that it operates to make possible a series of relationships and reciprocities. (247)

The more sophisticated view that Watsuji is trying to express is, according to Lafleur, about the dynamic relationality of emptiness:

But then why does the art so conspicuously avoid and reject any representation through symmetry? The reason is, I think, that in Watsuji’s view co-dependence is dynamic and multiple rather than static and single. In formal symmetry the balance and reciprocity is limited to the single and exact counterpart of a line, angle, or whatever. The observer can always designate the formal counterpart. But in the notion of emptiness there is reciprocity between forms and entities which are in no way mirror-images of each other. The mutuality is total even between rocks and moss, what is vast and what is minuscule. This mutuality is also open-ended and multiple. Surely it is one for which the formalized and objectified balance achieved in ‘symmetry’ is inadequate. (248)

Hence, Lafleur argues, the real meaning of rejecting symmetry lies in the non-symmetric mutuality of relations with others.

A parent and child, for example, cannot come into being without one another, but the relationship between parent and child is not symmetrical, because parents and children play importantly different roles in their relationship. So too, black ink of a bamboo shoot in an ink painting harmonizes with the whitespace around it through their mutual co-arising—the bamboo would not be recognizable without a clear background and the background would be destroyed if the bamboo took up the whole canvas—yet the positions of the two cannot be mirrored, since each gains its dynamic existence against the potential for loss (*sonzai* 存在) in a unique manner.

We previously saw Sakai's criticism that Watsuji's emptiness is "reductive" of the subject, but these examples show that the meaning of emptiness is just the opposite of reduction. Emptiness overflows in value, filling the canvas with activity, the garden with life, and the tea hut with feeling. Nevertheless, Sakai further charges that Watsuji's concept of persistent relationships (*aidagara* 間柄) is overly symmetrical:

Assuming this predetermined harmony expressed by his concept of *aidagara*, one could easily understand why Watsuji defines the being-between of the human being as the trans-ferential and mutual penetration of consciousnesses and as the symmetrical reciprocity of you and me. Of course, such a reciprocity cannot be attained in an ordinary situation, but the predetermined harmony of totality and the individual suggests the possibility of symmetrical reciprocity, pure sympathy, and eventually "communion" as the presence of national totality. (113-4)

This interpretation of Watsuji is not wholly without grounding. Watsuji does suggest the possibility of reciprocity, sympathy, and even national totality; however, it is a mistake to refer to this as a "predetermined harmony" rather than a dynamic and evolving harmony, and Watsuji's notion of relationality is, we have seen, anything but symmetrical.<sup>49</sup> Rather, he emphasized the ability of non-symmetrical relationships to nevertheless find a common ground in the coming together of vital energy. The movement of double negation in human existence

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<sup>49</sup> Graham Mayeda also criticizes Watsuji's supposed symmetry in *Time, Space, and Ethics*, 93-7. Frankly, I am unsure why Mayeda takes Watsuji's concept of relationality to be symmetric, and I believe he crucially misreads Watsuji's example of the relation between a writer and reader (WTZ 10:53-5). Watsuji's emphasis is on co-arising out of an asymmetric relationship. A writer is not a reader, but a writer would not write without the potential for a reader (in the limiting case, his or her future self). A reader is not a writer, but a reader could not exist without a writer. Neither readers nor writers could exist without the institution of literacy, but the collective institution of literacy is composed of individually literate persons. Hence the relationship between writers, readers, and literacy is thoroughly asymmetric but mutually entailing. Reading this relationship as intended to be not just mutually limiting but *symmetrical* requires us to attribute an uncharitably gross error to Watsuji while ignoring his valorization of asymmetry elsewhere in his writings. Watsuji's emphasis on the importance of temporal development, for example, cannot be understood unless we see time as asymmetrical with goodness located in the aspiration for futurity.



is cyclic, but it is not a simple circle; it repeats the pattern of individuation and communal integration, but it does not merely return to the place where it began.

### Interconnection of subjects in linked verse

Japanese linked verse, called *renga* 連歌 or *renku* 連句, is another excellent example of the role of the coming together of vital energy in forming aesthetic judgments and taste, one worthy of an extended examination. Linked verse is by its nature a collaborative process governed by the chances product of many imaginations rather than the singular vision of a lead poet. In it, each poet contributes a verse that connects to the verse immediately before it, but not necessarily in continuity with the poem before that. In this way, a group of poets would spend the evening creating an aesthetic performance in which the perspective of each poem shifts radically when read in juxtaposition with the poem after it rather than before it.

R. H. Blyth provides an example of linked verse in the first volume of his *Haiku*. It was composed in 1690 by Bashō (芭蕉, 1644–1694),<sup>50</sup> Kyorai, Bonchō, and Shihō and recorded in *The Monkey's Straw Coat* (*Saru Mino* 猿蓑, 1691). For brevity, I will excerpt only the first three verses of the thirty-six verse sequence:

去来：鳶の羽も刷ぬはつしぐれ  
芭蕉：一ふき風の木の葉しづまる  
凡兆：股引の朝からぬるゝ川こえて

Kyorai: *Tobi no ha mo / kai-tsukuroinu / hatsu shigure*

Bashō: *Hito fuki kaze no / ki no ha shizumaru*

Bonchō: *Momo hiki no / asa kara nururu / kawa koete*

Kyorai: Its feathers / The kite has preened / In the first winter rain.

Bashō: A gust of wind blows the leaves; / They are quiet.

Bonchō: The breeches wet / From morning, / Crossing the river.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Bashō is now often referred to as a haiku poet (including by Blyth below), but readers should bear in mind that this designation is anachronistic. In Bashō's time, the initial verse of a linked verse sequence was referred to as a *hokku* 発句. The term *haiku* 俳句 was coined by Masaoka Shiki (正岡 子規, 1867–1902) to refer to *hokku* that exist independently from a linked verse sequence. While Bashō certainly wrote what we would now call haiku, to properly understand his career it is important to recall that he considered himself a master of *renga*, not merely isolated verse. Makoto Ueda comments in *Matsuo Bashō*, "It can be argued that he poured more energy into *renku* than into haiku" (70).

Notice that the verses tell a story in pairs (Kyorai's and Bashō's; Bashō's and Bonchō's) but not all together. Put together, Kyorai's verse and Bashō's verse paint a coherent picture of the first winter rain drizzling down on soggy leaves that stir noiselessly. Bashō's and Bonchō's tell a story in which one's breeches are wet from crossing the river on a gusty morning. In the second story, it cannot be raining or else one's coat would be soaked as well, hence the second story actively contradicts the first.

As we see, linked verse vividly demonstrates the importance of context to the object. No verse by itself has a particular meaning. Rather, its meaning depends crucially on what comes before and after it. On the other hand, linked verse also shows the way that such contextually dependent objects can begin to possess a life of their own that we ecstatically inhabit. In spite of the kaleidoscopic recontextualization of the particular verses, over the course of the linked verse sequence as a whole, a unity pervades. As Watsuji writes in *Milieu*,

In linked verse, each verse has its own independent world, and yet between them there is a subtle *connection*, so that one world expands into another, and it possesses an arrangement as a totality. (WTZ 8:194)

A whole set of linked verses shows the unity of authors as a collective subject while also showing their particular individuality; it shows the unity of the verses while also demonstrating a diversity of topics, seasons, and moods. Toward this end, numerous literary convention were employed in order to keep up the unity of the verse concerning permissible imagery, words, transitions, etc. Makoto Ueda explains in *Matsuo Bashō*,

renku writing has its dangers, and the most obvious is that a poem will fall apart if the poets fail to unite their efforts. To safeguard against this hazard a number of rules have been laid down. [...] These and many other rules of composition are imposed upon each renku poet, making his task not at all an easy one; he has to be an individual and part of a team at the same time. Too original a verse is not commendable since it does not fit well

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<sup>51</sup>. Translation taken from Blyth, *Haiku*, 127.

with the rest of the verses, while too conforming a verse makes the poem monotonous.  
(69–70)

Blyth further remarks:

At all events, we have here a kind of communistic poetry, and in it we may see the poetic life being lived by four old Japanese poets, both individually and in communion. Part of its worth lies precisely where we cannot grasp it, in the overlapping, in the interpenetration of one scene with another, of man with nature. [...] Every haiku [...] has a kind of fluidity which is different from vagueness. This fluidity makes it less static, less circumscribed; we see things in their manifold relations, at the same time as we see them as solitary objects.  
(138)

This double vision of the co-arising suchness of persons and objects is precisely what has been posited in this chapter as the heart of aesthetics as double negation.

How is this possible? Watsuji asks,

And yet how is “randomness” able to create an artistic unity? Here as well the answer is the coming together of vital energy, albeit vital energy with personality. The excellent arrangement of linked verse cannot be had without the coming together of the vital energy of all the participants. While leaving their individual particularity intact, they bring their vital energy together in their creation and express the lived experience of each in the echoing reverberation of each other’s hearts. (WTZ 8:194)

The three verses given above are clearly telling two different stories, but unlike the Surrealist “exquisite corpse” parlor game, we do not get the sense of sheer nihilistic randomness from the careening shifts of the verses. It is the coming together of vital energy that draws the verses together. The aesthetic judgment of the participants clearly requires a certain frame of mind to unite them in spite of their differences, and that this frame of mind can exist at all reveals to us the twofold nature of the human subject as both individual and collective.

When the participants achieve the coming together of vital energy, a greater whole is created out of which aesthetic judgment comes to have a normative force. Because the human being is both individual and collective, a linked verse is able to show both the individual and collective aspects of the personality of its collaborators without having to eliminate one for the sake of the other. The structure

of a linked verse meeting provides the authors with detachment from their ordinary concerns but their appreciation for their mutually crafted verses allows them to express their hearts openly in an “echoing reverberation” of merging perspectives.

### **Linked verse and aesthetic authority**

One incident in the life of Bashō illustrates the nature of authority in aesthetic judgment. Blyth relates a dispute that arose about the proper interpretation of a poem by Bashō’s disciple Kyorai. The poem is:

岩鼻やここにもひとり月の客

*Iwa hana ya / koko nimo hitori / tsuki no kyaku*

On the edge of this rock, / Here is one more / Moon-viewer. (343)

Blyth translates the debate from *The Records of Kyorai* (*Kyorai Shō* 去来抄, 1704):

Kyorai said, “Shadō asserted that this must be a monkey, but what I intend is another person.” Bashō retorted, “A monkey! What does he mean? What were you thinking when you composed the poem?” Kyorai answered, “As I was walking over the fields and mountains, singing under the light of the full moon, I found, on the edge of a rock, another man filled with poetical excitement.” Bashō said, “In the phrase, ‘There is one more person,’ you announce yourself; in this there is poetry.” [...] My poetical taste is below the highest, but in Bashō’s interpretation, there is something fantastic, I think. (343)

About this incident, Blyth remarks, “we have here the entertaining picture of Bashō telling Kyorai, not what he ought to have said, but what he ought to have meant by what he said” (343). Why is Bashō’s interpretation preferred over Kyorai’s? What is the source of his authority? Ought not Kyorai as the author of the poem have a deeper insight into its authentic meaning? As Kyorai’s master, Bashō is in a position to offer a more authoritative interpretation of Kyorai’s work. Through a lifetime of training, Bashō has made himself able to instantly size up the merits of a haiku. He is able to speak for the poetic betweenness in which they both operate. One of the reasons that it is Bashō and not someone else (for

example, Shadō) who is in that position is that Kyorai as the author had always intended for the poem to be evaluated by someone with the degree of insight that he considered his master to have. Kyorai trusts Bashō's taste. Thus, as an author, Kyorai has the authority in his intention to invest Bashō with a claim to the authoritative interpretation. Bashō may be called an "ideal observer" or "suitable spectator" for the poem because he has cultivated his taste to its utmost. But notice that the judgment that Bashō achieved came not through passive observation or spectating but through a lifetime of embodied engagement in the poetic arts. He traveled from town to town participating in poetry meetings until it killed him.<sup>52</sup> Thus, it is better to describe Bashō as an "authoritative agent" rather than an "ideal observer." The connoisseur must be in some sense an accomplished creator (even if only a creator of criticism) who enacts his or her artistry as an expression of the betweenness out of which the artistic community emerges.

Notice also Bashō's interpretation of the poem: "In the phrase, 'There is one more person,' you announce yourself" (343). This poem has a crucial ambiguity. It could mean that here is *one more* moon viewer, making two moon-viewers in total, counting the poet. Or it could mean *here is* one more moon viewer, the poet himself being the one and only moon-viewer in evidence. Bashō suggests that the latter interpretation is preferable because it puts the poet into the work yet also creates a distance between the poet and the poem. The experience of this verse also fits within the structure of *ri-ken no ken* 離見の見 or "the seeing of distant seeing." "On the edge of this rock" introduces the scene with detachment or psychic distance. From a distance, the poet is observing a far off mountain peak. Then the poet writes, "There is one more." If we remained in a detached perspec-

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<sup>52</sup> Famously, Bashō died while traveling. His final poem is 旅に病で夢は枯野をかけ廻る, *tabi ni yande / yume wa kareno wo / kake-meguru*, "Sick on a journey / my dreams meander / in withered fields."

tive, this would merely introduce another object of contemplation. But as Bashō recognizes, the detached perspective must now gain greater depth through its reflexivity. If there is one more on the mountain, then I am on the mountain, too. This leads inexorably to the moment of aesthetic experience in which the difference between the poet's self and the other on the peak are felt in a broader context through intoxicated dissolution. They are all moon-viewers: the poet, the listener, even the edge of the rock and the moon. In the moment of the aesthetic judgment, the subject moves ecstatically to see the ordinary self from outside as just another moon-viewer. The normative authority to speak for that subject is invested by the aesthetic community of taste in one who has cultivated the ability actively crystallize such moments.

### **Normativity in linked verse**

A central axis around which the preceding debate turned was the question of *hon'i* 本意 or "root implications" of the situation. Poets in that period of Japanese history placed a great emphasis on creating verses that convey the root implications of a situation instead of merely private implications (*shii* 私意). In other words, these poets took it that there was a certain quality inherent in certain situations and poets have a normative duty to capture this in their work. On the other hand, what these poets took to be the root implications of a situation was not something we today would identify as a scientific or "objective" description. Rather, they began to associate certain natural conditions with certain human emotions. For example, the autumn dusk was commonly depicted as forlorn.

Kōji KAWAMOTO explains the emergence of these aesthetic norms in *The Poetics of Japanese Verse*. He writes,

*Hon'i* is usually explained as the essential qualities inherent in an object and the emotional response deemed appropriate. However, [...] the actual qualities of the phenomenon itself were second to the conceptual qualities acquired through literary precedent. To give a twist to Oscar Wilde's famous remark [...], there may have been autumn dusks for

centuries in Japan, but no one saw them until the age of the *Shinkokinshū* (ca. 1210), when the theme of autumn evening began to attract markedly strong interest.<sup>53</sup>

Hence the poetic norm of associating autumn dusk with loneliness was one that developed historically in certain community as a way of looking at the world. Certain poets first hit upon the idea of associating this emotional quality with a certain natural state, and later poets ratified that association by reinforcing it and treating it as a norm.

It was against this tradition of writing about lonely autumn dusks that Bashō added his own poem:

この道や行く人なしに秋のくれ

*Kono michi ya / yuku hito nashi ni / aki no kure*

Autumn dusk / on this path / without a traveller.<sup>54</sup>

In this verse, Bashō is doing several things simultaneously. Concretely, he observes the lonesome emptiness of the road he walks. Abstractly, he complains that few follow the way or *dao* 道 to which he has dedicated his life. Literarily, he connects himself into a long tradition of poetry about the lonesomeness of the evening in autumn. The overall effect of the verse comes from the interpenetration of these aspects in a single moment of time.

Yosa Buson (與謝 蕪村, 1716–1783) further continued the poetic tradition of forlorn dusks but tweaks it a bit:

さびしさのうれしくもあり秋の暮れ

*Sabishisa no / ureshiku mo ari / aki no kure*

The loneliness of / the autumn dusk / also has its joys.

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<sup>53</sup> Kawamoto, 61. Oscar Wilde's famous remark is "There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did not exist till Art had invented them" (Kawamoto, 10 and Wilde, 41). For further discussion of this quotation, see chapter six.

<sup>54</sup> My translation here and below.

What these examples illustrate is an aesthetic community advancing into novel fullness through the individuating negations of its members. An individual proposes that a certain situation has a certain emotional resonance or *hon'i* intrinsically contained within it, and then (if successful) this judgment is taken up and made a part of the taste of that community. Over the centuries, the root implications of a certain situation are thoroughly explored and refined through the continual interpenetration of personal experience and literary allusion. When Bashō emphasizes the loneliness of a situation a bit too strongly, Buson pipes up to remind us that there is joy also in loneliness.

For Bashō and other Japanese poets, the aim of poetry is the kind of naturalness that arises when things are able to express themselves as they are, including emotionally. The autumn evening will reveal its lonesomeness to us only if we are open to it. Hattori Dohō (服部 土芳, 1657–1730), one of Bashō's students, records in *Sanzōshi* 三冊子 one of his master's teachings that illustrates the importance of this openness to experience:

“Learn of the pine from the pine; learn of the bamboo from the bamboo.” These words of our Master mean to distance oneself from private implications (*shii* 私意). Learning that leaves one as one is is not in the end learning. He says, “learn,” because what makes a verse is entering into things and feeling the delicate emotions that appear. For example, even if you put into words that something is, should there be no feeling coming from the thing itself naturally, the thing and the *I* will remain two, and sincere truth of feeling will not be achieved. It will be an idea constructed from one's private implications.<sup>55</sup>

In other words, when Bashō writes emotionally charged poems about the world, he takes it that these poems are not drawing from any private or individually subjective emotional associations with things in the world (*shii*), but from a proper understanding of the emotionality embedded in the world as a matrix of natural and social co-construction of the subject (*hon'i*). The *hon'i* come from putting the self into the object and letting the object express its own feeling of fullness natu-

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<sup>55</sup> My translation. Original in NOSE Asaji, *Sanzōshi hyōshaku*, 97–8. Cf. Kawamoto, 64.



rally. The normativity of these root implications comes about not only because of Bashō's feelings, but because he grasps how someone of his cultural background must feel in these circumstances.

Another example of the root implications of a situation comes from Bashō's *The Narrow Path to the Interior* (*Oku no Hosomichi* 奥の細道, 1702):

行春や鳥啼魚の目は泪

*Yuku haru ya / tori naki uo no / me wa namida*

Passing spring: / the birds cry and the fish / have eyes full of tears.

Formally speaking, the poem consists of two parts divided by the cutting word *ya*. In the first, the poet invokes the passing spring. Earlier Japanese poets had created an association between grief over the changing of the seasons and the crying of birds (Kawamoto, 84–5). One source of this association is the poem “Spring Prospects” (*Chun Wang* 春望) by Du Fu (杜甫, 712–770), which reads in part:

國破山河在，城春草木深。感時花濺淚，恨別鳥驚心。

The nation shattered, mountains and rivers remain;  
city in spring, grass and trees burgeoning.  
Feeling the times, blossoms draw tears;  
hating separation, birds alarm the heart.<sup>56</sup>

Here we can see the core elements that Bashō's poem has refashioned to capture his experience: spring, tears, separation, and birds. The only missing element are the fish. (In general, Bashō's writing often skillfully refashioned ancient Chinese and Japanese sources to give them a personal twist.) In the second part of the poem, we are given a concrete image of spring's passing that relies on this association. In Japanese, both the singing of birds and the mourning of humans are called *naki* (crying), and Bashō has played up this ambiguity by writing *naki* with the character 啼, which can have either meaning, rather than using 泣, which

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<sup>56</sup> Translation from Watson, *The Selected Poems of Du Fu*, 30.

specifically means mourning, or 鳴, which specifically means birdsong. Within the narrative context of *The Narrow Path to the Interior*, we form a mental picture of Bashō as he and his disciple leave to begin their long journey. Bashō explains: “I set out after composing this verse, the first of my journey, but I could barely keeping going ahead, for when I looked back I saw my friends standing in a row, no doubt to watch until we were lost to sight.”<sup>57</sup>

Reading this, some critics might suggest that the concreteness of the poem’s imagery is undercut by Bashō’s strong emotional response. Is this really an emotional implication within the situation or is it only an expression of Bashō’s sentimentality? As Japanese literature critic Haruo Shirane notes in *Traces of Dreams*, the birds and fish seem to “mourn the passing of the spring, and by implication the departure of the traveler” (247). Yet, a critic might claim, this is surely impossible for birds and fish. Moreover, some commentators take the poem as perhaps representing travelers by the passing spring or allegorically identifying the disciples left behind with the fish and the departing Bashō and Sora with the birds (Shirane, 247). Other scholars interpret the image of the fish’s tears more literally by seeing them as beads of water on fish in a fishmonger’s shop (Kawamoto, 85). In any event, for Bashō to simply anthropomorphically project his own grief onto the world around him would be an instance of the pathetic fallacy and a betrayal of the ideals of *hon’i*.

However, when we interpret Bashō’s poem from the perspective of the root implications as they were understood within his cultural background, we see that he is not projecting his own sorrow onto the birds and fish, but to the contrary, because of his immersion in his native poetic tradition, he is able to see the resonance between his individual grief and the larger grief that arises out of the

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<sup>57</sup>. Translation here is from Keene, *The Narrow Road to Oku*, 23.

situation itself. It was his own grief at leaving that provided a gateway for Bashō to step through and feel correctly the pathos inherent to the situation. The grief was already in the birds and fish, but it was only at that very moment that his own perspective allowed him to see their grief. A certain subjectivity was required to see this grief, but this was the collective subjectivity of his poetic tradition, rather than just the individual subjectivity of Bashō alone. Hence, this situation holds a normative value over and above the experience that Bashō happened to have. Just as one can only see the beauty of the sunrise if some stimulus wakes one up early in the morning, in order to understand the passing of the spring, Bashō had to find himself in a context in which his grief acted as a stimulus that awoke him to the deeper grief of the passing of spring. His own grief is what awoke him, but what he saw once awake was something outside of himself: the fullness of the object as he and it arise from emptiness together.

Kawamoto notes that *hon'i* are difficult to categorize using traditional Western schemes of classification since they are neither clearly subjective nor clearly objective. Kawamoto explains that while *hon'i* are in one sense merely connotative, nevertheless,

it is not a subjective meaning dependent on each individual speaker or listener. Rather, as a conventional association, it has gained the objectivity and legitimacy of something normative. (4)

Using the analysis that has been worked out in this chapter, we might say on the other hand that *hon'i* are something subjective, but they are not “subjective” as individual impulses, but as the normative aesthetic judgments of a collectively embodied subjectivity that arises out of nothing and tries to position itself in such a way as to gain the authority to speak for the emptiness at the heart of things. Hence in the *Sanzōshi*, according to Kawamoto,

Bashō is saying that poetic truth can only be achieved through a sympathetic and selfless faith in the traditions of the past. As the boundary between the one who sees and the object seen grows weak, the two are fused, and the division into subject and object becomes meaningless. (65)

*Hon'i* are difficult to classify as objective or subjective exactly because of the brittleness of those categories as they have been traditionally understood. There is an aesthetic normativity to *hon'i*. *Hon'i* are what one *should* feel in a given situation. Indeed, the Japanese poets would insist that a fact about the autumn sunset was revealed when it came to be associated with a sense of forlornness, and a fact about the passing spring was revealed when they came to associate it with the calling birds. Though different in their scope, from within Bashō's poetic milieu these associations are just as normative as the causal associations that force us to think of the second billiard ball rolling away when see the first about to impact it. In the case of Japanese literature, it is just that the object of association is emotional rather than physical. In spite of the emotionality and subjectivity of these associations, they are not merely idiosyncratic they are a way of entering into and showing the sincere truth of things. What makes these associations normative for Bashō is that his aesthetic sensibility was born out of his cultural tradition, hence he owes it to them that he was able to experience the things that he did.

At the same time, however, it should be clear that these associations are culturally constructed, and they acquire their normativity only insofar as we are willing to enter into membership of the aesthetic community by which they were created. There is no need to posit a universal normativity to these associations that extends to all rational beings. Rather, this normativity extends only to those who are willing and able to join in the aesthetic community as it increases its span in time and space.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted a hermeneutic reconstruction of aesthetic judgment. The subject of aesthetics, we have seen, is not a passive observer of objects, but active and embodied. We live our aesthetics out among others. Moreover, the subject is not only individual but also collective. The commonality of aesthetic judgment rests on our ability to share our feelings with those to whom we are closest. The aesthetic object is neither the independent and aloof object of realist ontology nor the imaginary figment of idealist ontology. The object emerges from the same experiential flux of the subject, but it is placed outside of the subject and draws the subject away from itself.

Because subject and object emerge from a common source, it is possible for the subject to inhabit the fullness of the object and present judgments about this fullness for examination by others. In the same way, the tastes of the community are able to gain normative authority over the individual through their shared subjective origin. The key to aesthetic judgment is the coming together individual subjects to form a collective subject as preparation for the ecstatic appreciation of the object. In the case of art objects, the embodied subjects of the artist and the audience meet to form a community of taste. They establish norms and principles based on their mutual interaction and disinterested enjoyment of the object. The object as well, in art and nature, meets the subject and calls it out of itself into an ecstatic experience of the common ground between them. Judgment is rendered on the basis of the overall fullness felt when meeting with empathy.

The Japanese aesthetic tradition illustrates well the claims of this chapter. In many Japanese arts, the unifying principle is not a rational formula but the coming together of vital energy (*ki ai* 気合い) of the artists and audience involved. Such a coming together cannot be understood apart from the lived experience of the participants. Linked verse in particular makes this quite evident. Poets in this

tradition sought to capture the *hon'i* 本意 or “root implications” of the situations they related in verse. These root implication are neither simply individual associations nor “objective” representations of the situation. Instead, they are subjective sensitivities developed within a particular cultural history that enable one to realize the feelings inherent in the situation. The feeling is in the situation, but so is the feeler of the feeling. The subject and object of aesthetics must be distinguished to create an aesthetic judgment, but this distinction is always only temporary and conventional.

Having examined the nature of the subject and object of aesthetic judgment and taste, we must now attempt to describe not only subjectively felt aesthetic normativity but the objective expression and development of this felt normativity in the arts. Accordingly, in the next chapter we will look at the role of history and milieu as the context in which art develops.

## Chapter 5. Art, History, and Milieu

### Aesthetics in context

In the last chapter, we looked at *bigaku* 美学, the study of beautiful things, from two directions: from individual judgments to collective tastes and, vice versa, from tastes to judgments. Doing so was part of an attempt to reconstruct the aesthetic subject and object, but both directions of the examination began from the subjective pole of aesthetics. Therefore, to deepen our reconstruction, I next wish to pursue the topic in a direction beginning from the objects that concretely manifestation aesthetic agreement. In other words, I wish to reconstruct our understanding of the subject and object of aesthetics through the topic of theories of art (*geijutsuron* 芸術論).

How is it that particular tastes and judgments come together to create an art scene? Art is, in a sense, more “objective” than aesthetic experience (which is highly personal) or aesthetic judgment (which is a product of shared subjectivity), but in the end art relies on a set of aesthetic agreements to give it significance, which means that even if we begin from the examination of art objects, our understanding of art cannot be divorced from our understanding of the collective subject. In this chapter, I will explore the mechanisms by which art and its subjects are constructed.

A complete definition of art is out of the scope of this work, but I will attempt to address some major frameworks for thinking about art. A comparison of the strengths and weakness of these frameworks will help show the centrality of *context* to art. The context of art has two aspects, temporal and spatial, which I will explain with reference to the philosophy of WATSUJI Tetsurō. First I will explore the temporal context of art: How does art develop over time? Is there such a thing as progress in art history? Then I will explore its spatial context: What role does milieu play in our aesthetic self-understanding? Why does art vary from place

to place? And doesn't globalization mean these differences are destined to fade away? Finally, I will conclude the chapter with illustrations of the importance of historical milieu taken from the life and work of OKAKURA Kakuzō, author of *The Book of Tea*.

## **Understandings of art**

### **The many theories of art**

It is a philosopher's delusion to think that hidden behind our jumbled ordinary intuitions there must stand a single unified and determinative definition for whatever we put into question. Surely, "art" is among those terms for which a singular definition is particularly ill-met. Still, looking at how various theories of art are used, it is clear that the definition of art is at its most contested when the matter of prestige is on the line. The public fascination surrounding the question of "what is art?" turns on precisely this issue. Besides a conflation of "art" and "good art," the debate reflects the fact that there is a public norm that holds art to be an unconditioned good. As such, for a project to claim the title of art is to demand a certain level of public approbation.<sup>58</sup>

Frequently, certain activities that might otherwise be taken to be arts (for example, quilting, weaving, glass blowing, etc.) are deemed to be merely crafts or skilled trades because of the low social status of their practitioners.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, those who find modern art distasteful express their distaste not by saying that abstract painting is an inferior art but by claiming that it is not an art at all. Such debates are not dissimilar to the debate among school children about whether cheerleading counts as a "sport." The arguments given, however worthwhile on

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<sup>58</sup> To be sure, there can also be situations where rejecting the title of "art" in order to pick up the title of "science" is a prestige enhancing move. For an example of positioning a discipline relative to art in order to increase its prestige see Donald Knuth's "Computer Programming as Art." For more on the debate between art and science, see C. P. Snow's classic, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*.

<sup>59</sup> See Parker and Pollock, "Crafty Women and the Hierarchy of the Arts" for more on the relationships between gender, power, and the art/craft distinction.



their own, are of secondary importance to the deeper cause of the debate, which is an attempt to order the values of society in a certain way. To call cheerleading a sport is to place a stereotypically female activity on a plane with masculine activities. Partisans in the debate begin with their vision of the social order, then work backwards to their justification of placing cheerleading in a given place within that order. So too, to call Jackson Pollock an artist is to put him in a category of secular veneration alongside Michelangelo and da Vinci. One's feelings about modernity are likely to be an important predictor of one's feelings about Pollock.

I will not attempt to define art for myself but examine the broad categories into which theories of art can be placed. I will do so for two reasons. First, different theories of art bring with them different values about what makes art good or bad. By looking at a theory of art, we get a sense for what it is that a group of people are agreeing about when they come to an aesthetic agreement. Second, by showing the great diversity of art theories, I hope to escape the trap of believing that one pet theory that accounts for a few favored examples can be effortlessly extended to cover all other forms of art without thereby losing something valuable. Aesthetic disagreement so pervades our experience of art that it would be foolish to suppose that because I favor art of a certain kind, therefore properties of that kind of art are normative within all other forms of art.

To bring order to what might be a nearly endless task, I will begin by lumping theories of art into four very broad categories. An *artist* or artists creates a *work* which is experienced by an *audience*. Looking at each of these elements in isolation suggests three approaches to art—artist-centric theories, work-centric theories, and audience-centric theories—and looking at the time and place in which they come into conjunction suggests a fourth—context-centric theories. As the suffix -centric suggests, my own position is that a truly robust theory of art ought to combine the strengths of each category. Nevertheless, there is also something

useful about looking at art from a one-sided perspective if only as a clarifying exercise, since it allows one to focus on what it is that each perspective adds to our overall understanding. For that reason, for the most part I will present these theories myself rather than presenting a detailed picture of the particular systems of past theorists. For obvious reasons, nearly all theories that have been seriously proposed in the past contain elements of each of the four approaches, which tends to muddle the issue with questions of emphasis and interpretation.

### **Artist-centric theories**

One seemingly tautologous way of speaking about art is to say that “Art is what artists make.” From that logical starting point, one might propose that the presence or absence of certain qualities in the would-be artist is what make some things works of art and others not. Although logically speaking one might just as easily suppose the reverse—that it is the properties of the art that makes the artist—nevertheless, this is a way of thinking about art with broad popular reception, and it is reinforced through stereotypes like the starving artist and the tortured genius. Hence many theories of art focus on the artist as the determinative factor.

For example, one artist-centric theory might explain that what makes one an artist is a combination of virtuosic technique and painstaking attention to detail. On this basis, purported artworks that are created in a slapdash manner may be eliminated from consideration as possible works of art. This leads to the common objection to certain purported artworks that “a child could have done that.” In other words, the degree to which a work is artistic is related to the skill possessed by its creator.

On the other hand, some theories of art focus on the importance of the “spontaneity” of the artist over mere skill. Such theories describe skill as a quality of the *craftsperson* rather than the artist proper. Related theories hold that it is the process

of “expression” that makes an act artistic. In these theories, artworks are the result of processes in which artists express for others some strongly felt emotion through their art. A great artwork is a kind of mirror reflecting the soul of its creator: the greater the soul, the greater the art. This set of theories eliminates banal but meticulously crafted objects from consideration as art on the grounds that such purported artworks fail to express any aspect of the inner life of the artist. Similarly, overtly commercial objects are viewed with suspicion because they were created according to commercial necessity rather than an individual impulse.

The apotheosis of the artist-centric view must be the famous urinal of Marcel Duchamp (or “R. Mutt”).<sup>60</sup> The first and most famous of Duchamp’s series of “readymades,” the urinal was an ordinary object with no claim to being art until Duchamp submitted to a gallery for exhibition under the title *Fountain*. For the artists and theoreticians who followed Duchamp, the primordial artistic act is the signing of one’s work. This act deems the work finalized and transforms the finished product into art. In 1917, *The Blind Man* (a Dadaist publication from New York) defended the work against its critics. They wrote, “the *Fountain* was not made by a plumber but by the force of an imagination” (6) and

Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, place it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for that object. (5)

Once an artist has chosen to deem a work final all that remains is for a gallery to accept it and exhibit it to the public. When Duchamp signed a store-bought urinal, it was transfigured into art, and the fact that the urinal itself was ugly or beautiful became immaterial to its artistic value.

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<sup>60</sup> The portrait of Duchamp’s theoretical position painted here is, by necessity, somewhat of a caricature. For example, in an essay entitled “The Creative Act,” Duchamp himself calls artist and audience “the two poles of the creation of art” (77). For purposes of theoretical clarity, however, we can ignore this aspect of his thinking for now.

The clearest shortcoming of such a theory of art is that it utterly neglects the artwork itself, and yet there must be something about the artwork that makes it a topic of concern for parties besides the artist. (Bear in mind that Duchamp and the other Dada artists also meant to satirize the self-importance of art with their readymades.) To remedy this oversight, next let's look at the work-centric theories.

### **Work-centric theories**

A conceptually simple way of looking at art is to say that what makes a work<sup>61</sup> art or non-art is its form. Paint on canvas is a painting, and therefore art. Marble when hewn makes a sculpture, which is art. Rhythmic strumming on a guitar makes a song, and so is art. Paper when marked becomes a drawing, hence art. Of course, this view is too simplistic to stand up to much scrutiny, so further restrictions might be added. Perhaps it is not enough for a drawing to be a collection of lines on paper. Perhaps the drawing must also be representational. Adding restrictions of this sort may be conceptually useful within a given medium, but there are difficulties in applying them across media. For example, if representationality makes a drawing art, what makes a musical performance art? Is there a hidden sense in which a symphony is representational? Some might wish to make the argument that it is, but in doing so, they lose the simplicity that gave this approach to art its initial appeal.

In spite of this, theories of art that focus on the qualities that make for an outstanding art object or art event are quite venerable and can be found in every flourishing human culture. Around the world, whenever a form of art becomes sufficiently mature, artists and critics naturally begin to create elaborate theories to explain just what qualities a superior work has to separate it from an inferior

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<sup>61</sup>. For terminological purposes, the term "work" should be read broadly enough to encompass both objects and events. The performance of a play is an art "event," hence also a "work" of art.

work. For this reason, there are innumerable different (and sometimes conflicting) work-centric views of art. These artistic canons tend to flourish for a particular style with a well-defined critical tradition, only to be forgotten as the style itself fades away. We already saw examples in the previous chapters of Zeami and Bashō explaining to their students what made for great theater and meaningful poetry. Further examination will reveal canons behind virtually every other conceivable artistic practice. Once a style emerges, critics and artists inevitably set out to explain what makes a work good or bad.

Whichever specific work-centric theory one favors, it is clear that the existence of such a vast range of theories casts doubt on the comprehensiveness of any one particular theory. Work-centric theories are subject to the passing whims of history and milieu. They inevitably enshrine the tastes of their origin. When painters paint colorful canvases, the critics praise vividness; when painters paint subdued canvases, the critics praise restraint. Each theory has too specific of a vision of what proper form is to extend its domain beyond a limited time and territory.

One approach to resolving this difficulty is to focus on the artwork itself even more strongly, to the exclusion of any generalization about its form. A theorist might claim that artworks *just are* and canons only come along afterwards to try to systematize what cannot be formally encapsulated. Indeed, art objects are often invested with a kind of inexplicable “aura” or historicity.<sup>62</sup> For example, a perfect copy of a Van Gogh painting that is formally identical to the original would not have the same economic value as an original Van Gogh. Furthermore, many would insist that it also properly lacks the same artistic value as the original. There is a certain value possessed by the original artwork that no copy can ever possess,

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<sup>62</sup> Cf. Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” which claims, “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art.”

no matter how exactly it duplicates the outer form of the original. One might try to explain this value in terms of the artist as the cause of the work as in the artist-centric theories. It might be suggested that the difference between the two lies in the fact that the original was created by the artist in an act of expression, whereas the copy was created for merely base commercial reasons. However, such a theory will be unable to explain why another person who happened to have the same character and experiences as Van Gogh would not be able to spontaneously create paintings of identical artistic value.<sup>63</sup> The work itself has a primitive value apart from its creator but not reducible to its origin or its form.

Pushed too far, this sort of intense focus on the artwork is not a theory at all, just the bare assertion that some things *are* art. It would be an art ontology that denies the possibility of an art epistemology. However one could create a hybrid theory combining a formal explanation of the qualities of outstanding works of art with an emphasis on the haecceity of particular objects and events. Each work has a particularity all its own, which no other work possesses. Certain objects have a kind of artistic sacredness because of their historicity. The goal of artistic practice is to utilize certain formal techniques that bring the haecceity to the fore in the mind of the audience.

But who are the audience and what sort of response ought they to have to the artwork? How can we tell when the artist has successfully brought the value of the work to their attention?

### **Audience-centric theories**

How should art affect its audience? The purpose of art is a topic that has been debated just as extensively as the topic of what art is. Indeed, there is widespread

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<sup>63</sup> For a humorous example of an author attempting to replicate the form of a work without replicating the mindset of the original artist, see J. L. Borges' short story "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*."

disagreement about whether art can or should have a purpose or not. If art does have a purpose, is it to affect the audience or to relieve the artist of some inner pressure? Here I will consider a few theories of audience response to art.

One common theory of the purpose of art is that art is for moral instruction.<sup>64</sup> In the strong form of this theory, all art is didactic; it is only that sometimes the artists do not know how their art is instructing others. In a weaker form, good art is art that allows for the proper instruction of others, neutral art is that which has no effect, and bad art is that which leads to corruption. Although this family of theories may seem quite vulgar to aesthetes, it finds backing from such well-respected sources as Leo Tolstoy and Plato. Tolstoy in *What is Art?* explains that the activity of art is based on the “capacity of man to receive another man’s expression of feeling and experience those feelings himself” (121) and that as a result “*The stronger the infection the better is the art, as art, speaking of it now apart from its subject-matter*” (228). Great art for Tolstoy is a kind of vector for the transmission of feelings of unity with God and humankind. Plato in the early books of the *Republic* has Socrates discuss music and poetry solely as it relates to the education of the auxiliaries and guardians and seems to take this as the purpose of art.

One possible alternative purpose for art can be seen in the tenth book of the *Republic* when poetry is banned for its overly broad mimesis of things the poet does not know. Many in the public seem to take mimesis of visual experience to be the defining quality of visual art, and they seem positively offended by the nineteenth and twentieth century trends in painting and sculpture away from mimesis and towards expression and abstraction. Although mimesis is somewhat mysti-

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<sup>64</sup> Even the movement towards “transgressive” art of the 1980s and 1990s exemplified by Charles Saatchi’s controversial *Sensation* exhibition (London 1997, New York 1999) can also be seen as embodying a kind of didactic theory of art. For the artists and critics who supported this movement, the purpose of art is to shock the sensibilities of ordinary people in order to get them to question stifling traditional values. Art is a vanguard for the evolution of societal norms.

fying as a purpose for art (why should I want a perfect visual copy of a table rather than a real table that I can really use?), it cannot be denied that art is often utilized for its mimetic abilities and ranked according to its fidelity of mimesis.

Similar to theories of simple mimesis are theories of refined mimesis. In these theories, the purpose of art is not simply to double the world like a mirror, but to bring out its most salient aspects for their contemplation by an audience. In chapter three, we looked at Aristotle's theory of catharsis. If Aristotle is right that the function of art is to relieve the emotions of the audience, then perhaps art's essence lies in its ability to so affect its audience. The audience is, as in didactic art, brought to greater understanding of life and their place in the world by engaging with art that takes the chaos of raw experience and transforms it into something aesthetically appreciable. This gives art a place within the good life without thereby constricting it to a narrowly instructive role.

Other theories about the purpose of art place less emphasis on the fact that art allows for the aesthetic re-appreciation of the world than the disinterested enjoyment of aesthetic experience itself. These theories are closely connected to theories of "art for art's sake." Disinterested enjoyment is taken to be different from mere pleasure but nevertheless good for its own sake without any need for further instrumental value. The appreciation for the world gained by aesthetic experience may or may not lead to any difference in one's behavior, but the experience itself is nevertheless of value. Artworks, for these theories, are any objects or events that assist in the inducing of aesthetic experiences in some audience.

One difficulty for theories of audience response is that two observers may have different experiences when faced with the same thing or situation. Theories about the "ideal observer" attempt to circumvent this shortcoming by describing what sort of observer is best positioned to have the right kind of aesthetic experience. Such theories can be further combined with earlier theories of didactic art



by postulating that the enculturation of the individual so as to be able to have a certain kind of aesthetic experience is best spurred on by prior exposure to other art objects in a certain progression in a manner similar to moral education. Theories of the ideal observer can be further combined with larger moral, political, or religious ideals in order to describe the sort of individual who, it is hoped, will be the product of a proper aesthetic education.

To talk about “ideal” observers necessarily draws us away from a discussion of the audience themselves and into a discussion of what makes an audience ideal. That is, the discussion becomes ethical/political in its contemplation of the broader social sphere in which the audience is situated.

### **Context-centric theories**

Theories of art that focus on the artist, the work, or the audience seem to exhaust the possibilities for how to think about art, but in the twentieth-century a new approach to art theory emerged that looked not at any one corner of this triangle in isolation, but drew back to look at the conditions out of which the three emerge. These are the context-centric theories of art.

A glib way of encapsulating the family of context-centric theories of art is that, “art is what you find in a museum.” What makes something an artwork or not is not so much a function of its origin in the activity of some artist, certain properties of the artwork, or even how it is received by its audience as it is the context as a whole into which the artwork is received.

For example, let us return to Duchamp’s urinal. Duchamp’s theory seems to have been that it was his signature that transformed the urinal into art. On the other hand, one might equally well contend that what was important about the urinal was less Duchamp’s signature than its eventual admission into a gallery. It is the place that makes the art. The original place of Duchamp’s urinal was,

of course, the restroom. Nevertheless, after having been selected by an artist and accepted by a curator, its new place is the museum.

Since the distant past, cathedrals, temples, and so on have been used as mechanisms for ripping us out of the context of everyday life in which we all have certain aims and desires and putting us into a new context in which our former selves are lost in the ecstasy of the supermundane. In ordinary life, I may seek to outcompete my neighbor in various respects, but within the religious realm we come to see one another as siblings. According to context-centric theories of art, the museum is a place that inherits the social role of the temple in the same way that secular theater inherits the role of the religious rite. In these cases, what was originally a *divine* ecstasy is secularized into a communal aesthetic experience. A theory of art as the inheritor of the place of civil religion will point out that cult objects are also thought to have a literal aura in virtue of their position in a sacred place.<sup>65</sup> The “suchness” or “aura” of a work of art is best explained by its ability to encapsulate its context of creation and reception. Curators on this theory are a kind of literal priesthood who have the ability to transubstantiate things from vulgar objects into art objects merely by introducing them to the museum space in the proper way. Once so installed, ordinary people will make pilgrimages from great distances in order to have their lives improved by contact with these set-apart objects.

The theory that the gallery historically inherits the place of the temple accounts for many of the more romantic or grandiose sentiments that are attached to art, but it fails to account for who the artists and curators are and what sort of activity unites them. If they are a priesthood of some sort, they must have a set of dogmas

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<sup>65</sup> Cf. Matthew 23:17, in which Jesus rhetorically asks, “for which is greater, the gold, or the temple that hath sanctified the gold?” It is clear that Jesus sees the sacredness of the temple as a place lending sacredness to the contents of the temple rather than vice versa.

and rituals that give them common purpose and make them a secular priesthood of art and not of something else. Let us look at a few specific context-centric theories to see how they describe this unifying aspect of art's context.

One widely received context-centric theory of art is Arthur Danto's "Artworld" theory. On this theory, artists select works (some commenters use the term "baptize") and submit them to relevant individuals in the Artworld for consideration. If the Artworld approves of a work, then it becomes art. If they does not, it remains what it is. This may look at first like an audience-centric theory of art. The Artworld is a kind of audience that reacts in a certain way that determines what does and does not qualify as art. The difference is that in Danto's theory, there is no particular response that the Artworld-as-audience is meant to have in response to art. Rather, the topics of conversation that set the Artworld apart from other groups of human beings are novel "aesthetic predicates." Through this conversation, the Artworld collectively decides what sort of audience reactions are desirable, what sorts of properties of a work are praiseworthy, and so forth. The Artworld considers the aesthetic experience of the work that is possible when certain formal properties are taken into account and progresses by developing new and more interesting predicates as time goes on, while discarding old predicates that are no longer considered interesting. Understanding an artwork means understanding the aesthetic experience the work would provoke in its intended Artworld and in the Artworld as it stands today. When the work's place in an Artworld is grasped, the work is known.

Martin Heidegger also offered a context-centric theory of art of his own. "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1936) is a wide-ranging examination of the relationships between terms, particularly artist and work, world and and earth, truth and concealment. In his usual style, Heidegger constructs a framework that sheds light on a number of aspects of being and Being, but I wish only to highlight

his thinking on the place of art. Heidegger begins by looking at the relationship between artist and work:

On the usual view, the work arises out of and by means of the activity of the artist. But by what and whence is the artist what he is? By the work... (143)

In other words, making an artwork is what makes one an artist, but art works are made by artists. The two are mutually co-arising. This is similar to Watsuji's analysis of the parent-child relationship and the author-reader relationship in *The Study of Ethics* (WTZ 10:58–9, 51–5). Just as Watsuji explains the mutuality of parent-child and author-reader by appealing to the persistent relationship or *aidagara* 間柄 in which they arise, so too Heidegger looks for a context existing between artist and work:

The artist is the origin of the work. The work is the origin of the artist. Neither is without the other. Nevertheless, neither is the sole support of the other. In themselves and in their interrelations artist and work *are* each of them by virtue of a third thing which is prior to both, namely, that which also gives artist and work of their names—art. (143)

In this case, “art” plays for Heidegger the role that *aidagara* plays in Watsuji's ethical thinking. But what is art? For Heidegger, art is a means by which a “world” comes into view. In art, a work becomes so imbued with its context that it reveals itself not just as a thing with a particular purpose as equipment (an instrument for use towards a goal) but as a rift revealing the world from which it came. Heidegger writes that,

Towering up within itself, the work opens up a *world* and keeps it abidingly in force. (169)

Because a work is so revealing of its origin, Heidegger further claims that, “*Beauty is one way in which truth essentially occurs as unconcealment*” (181) and that, “*Art then is a becoming and happening of truth*” (196). The disinterested enjoyment spoken of in aesthetics arises out of the truth of art. Art allows things to be as they are and in doing so they disclose their world.

For Heidegger, the “world” is different from the “earth” in that the world is the subjective space in which we together exist, whereas the earth is the ever concealed ground supporting our existence. The world is emphatically not just “a merely imagined framework added by our representation” (170). Instead, he writes, “*The world worlds...*” (170), in other words, the world continuously creates itself as a substance. We could say in Kantian terms say that the world is the phenomenal realm, yet it is created not by static *a priori* reason but by itself in the active life lived by human beings. The earth is that basis of the world that ever recedes from our reach. It is “essentially self-secluding” (173), yet “*The work lets the earth be an earth*” (172). That is, the work uncovers the earth disinterestedly. In our dealings with one another, we construct a world, and an artwork is an artifact that reveals without self-interest the world we have built together. The world expands in two ways: spatially and temporally. A successful work will reveal both. He explains, “A work, by being a work, makes space for that spaciousness” (170) and “Art is history in the essential sense that it grounds history” (202). History takes the passage of time and imbues it with significance. Because of this, Heidegger feels that artworks can only be understood in terms of the historical context out of which they emerge:

The origin of the work of art—that is, the origin of both the creators and preservers, which is to say of a people’s existence—is art. This is so because art is in its essence an origin: a distinctive way in which truth comes into being, that is, becomes historical. (202)

There is much more to be said about Heidegger’s theory of art, but suffice it to say for now that his is a theory of context. What makes something art is not so much any specific characteristic in the artist, work, or audience as it is the historical and spatial coming together of all of those aspects and the subsequent disclosure of being.

In *Art and Nonart* (1983), Marcia Eaton also argues for a context-centric theory of art. According to Eaton, “the context of a work of art is essential to its definition” (87). Eaton’s work is derived from Danto’s and comes from a strongly analytic background (at one point, she digresses into an explanation of the key differences between one-place predicates and two-place predicates), so she does not reference Heidegger directly. Nevertheless, the theory of art Eaton presents is remarkably similar to his. She offers the following definition of art:

x is a work of art if and only if (1) x is an artifact and (2) x is discussed in such a way that information concerning the history of the production of x directs the viewer’s attention to properties which are worth attending to. (99)

Like Heidegger, Eaton explains art in terms of the effect of the context on the interaction between artist, work, and audience. For her, an artwork is an artifact (that is, made by an artist) and is received by an audience that ideally ought to attend to certain properties in the work, but what directs the creative process of the artist and the attention of the audience is not so much a global theory of what makes for a superior or inferior work but the local theories that have emerged in the course of aesthetic history. An artwork brings with it a theory of an ideal observer that it has inherited from history, but at the same time, new artworks create new ideals for future observers.

### **Implicit values in theories of art**

The value of having reviewed these different theories of art at some length is that we are now in a position to see the different areas implicitly valorized by the different theories of art. Artist-centric theories valorize the act of creation. Work-centric theories valorize the being of the work. Audience-centric theories valorize the experience of the audience. Context-centric theories valorize the development of the conjunction of artist, work, and audience.

The emergence of artistic-centric theories in the West coincides neatly with the rise of individualism. The Renaissance and Romantic-era had different concepts of the individual and different emphases in their theories of art, but in both cases, it is the work of the artist as individual that is valorized. On the other hand, that artistic communities themselves should gravitate towards work-centric theories in nearly every era is quite appropriate, since such communities must be focused on their work if that work is to have any depth of meaning. Audience-response theories on the other hand, inevitably become enmeshed in the question of the public purpose of art, exactly because once we move away from the artist and the art, we are faced with the question of what remains to valorize at all. Is it the effect of art on public morals as didacticism claims? Or is art itself an intrinsic good? Or is it possible for it to be extrinsically useful without that undermining its intrinsic meaning? The context theories are unique in that they tend to do less valorizing of art as compared to examining the mechanisms through which art comes to be valorized. They investigate the historical channels through which communal approbation is carried and attempts to show how the artwork comes into possession of its context.

My own greatest sympathies are with the context-centric theories of art, but even this perspective can become too narrow if we cling to it too tightly. The other theories also contain much of value. A context theory that fails to pay proper attention to the roles of the artist, work, and audience in art can easily become too abstract to be put to use. Only when a context theory is combined with past artist, work, and audience theories can it become as truly robust as it ought to be.

### **History as temporal context**

#### **History as an aid and hindrance to aesthetic experience of art**

The two central aspects of the context of art are its time and place. Let us look first at time. Every work of art is created within history and brings its history

forward with it to the present. The history of art is a history of aesthetic agreements made and broken by communities and individuals. Artistic scenes exist because groups of people make similar aesthetic judgments as part of a community of taste. Nevertheless, no artistic scene has been able to establish more than a temporary and local hegemony. Even seemingly timeless works of art vary in their reception from age to age and place to place. The now world famous *Mona Lisa* was largely ignored between the time of its creation and the advent of mass reproduction in the nineteenth century.<sup>66</sup> Its fame is just as rooted in contingent historical conditions as any other artwork.

David Hume in “Of the Standard of Taste” notes the sources of difficulty in creating a universal aesthetic agreement:

But notwithstanding all our endeavours to fix a standard of taste, and reconcile the discordant apprehensions of men, there still remain two sources of variation, which are not sufficient indeed to confound all the boundaries of beauty and deformity, but will often serve to produce a difference in the degrees of our approbation or blame. The one is the different humours of particular men; the other, the particular manners and opinions of our age and country.

In other words, differences of aesthetic judgment are due to differences of individual (“humor”), history (“age”), or milieu (“country”). Nevertheless, we should not think of the existence of these differences as something entirely negative. They also help us create the distance needed for aesthetic experience, and this allows us to gain a deeper appreciation for the work than we otherwise might:

a real genius, the longer his works endure, and the more wide they are spread, the more sincere is the admiration which he meets with. Envy and jealousy have too much place in a narrow circle; and even familiar acquaintance with his person may diminish the applause due to his performances: But when these obstructions are removed, the beauties, which are naturally fitted to excite agreeable sentiments, immediately display their energy; while the world endures, they maintain their authority over the minds of men.

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<sup>66</sup> Some significant historical contributions to the *Mona Lisa*’s fame include its praise in 1874 by Walter Pater (“Leonardo’s masterpiece,” *The Renaissance*, 123), its theft and return in 1911, and its parodying by Duchamp’s *L.H.O.O.Q.* in 1919.



Historical distance aids in our receiving a work disinterestedly, but at the same time too much distance can also make it difficult to enter into ecstatic intoxication with the work. As Hume reminds us,

every work of art, in order to produce its due effect on the mind, must be surveyed in a certain point of view, and cannot be fully relished by persons, whose situation, real or imaginary, is not conformable to that required by the performance.

In particular, works that offend our sense of morality are difficult to enjoy aesthetically, since “I cannot, nor is it proper I should, enter into such sentiments; and however I may excuse the poet, on account of the manners of his age, I never can relish the composition.” The history that a work of art brings with itself is both an aid and a hindrance to aesthetic experience, since it transports us out of our usual self and allows us to ecstatically experience another self without losing that original self altogether, but in doing so, it may require a mode of thinking so foreign or repugnant to our own context that identification with it is impossible.

### **Art history and the dialectic**

When we say that a work of art brings its history with it, what do we mean by history? There are several possible meanings:

- (1) Everything that has really happened.
- (2) The important things that have happened.
- (3) How we are shaped by the important things that have happened.
- (4) How we recall the important things that have happened.
- (5) How our recollection of the things that have happened has changed over time.

Possibility (5) is now usually referred to as “historiography” (the history of histories) rather than history itself proper. (1) is just another name for time. (2) and (3) seem distinct at first, but upon closer examination we may ask, what is it that makes an event in the past important? Surely, its importance comes from its causal efficacy in the present. It is possible for something in the past to be impor-

tant without our being aware of it, but it is strange to say it could be important without our being affected by it. The distinction between (2) the really important things in the past and (3) our being shaped by the past is less sharp than it may appear at first. However, once we weaken the distinction between (2) and (3) we end up also weakening the distinction between (3) and (4), since one of the key ways in which the past influences the present is as our recollection of the past. (The other way is as an ongoing effect on the environment or space around us.) History should therefore be seen as a way for the past to show its importance in and for the present. Naturally, there are more ways to analyze history than this (think, for example, of Heidegger's distinction between "history" and "historicity"), but for our purposes, these should be adequate.

When speaking of the importance of history, it is impossible to avoid mentioning Hegel and his theory of dialectical evolution. In *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, Hegel affirms that the difference between (3) and (4) is indeed only slight. History that is real history is not just a matter of the past alone but the present as well:

Those moments which the spirit appears to have outgrown still belong to it in the depths of its present. Just as it has passed through all its moments in history, so also must it pass through them again in the present. (150)

What Hegel means by this is that every individual must recapitulate history for himself or herself. History that fails to make itself present again in this moment fails to be history. It is merely the past.

The history of art certainly behaves like a dialectic in certain respects. When a new thesis emerges, it also results in the creation of a new antithesis that competes with it, but eventually both are superseded by something even newer. For example, the emergence of photography would have been impossible without the *camera obscura* (which in prior centuries had been vital to the creation of true

single point perspective), but photography in turn led to Impressionism and the movement away from visual representationalism and towards abstraction. Development in one direction creates a reaction in the other.

On the other hand, while we do observe communities of aesthetic agreement form within particular cultures around the world, agreement in aesthetics appears to have limitations not possessed by other disciplines or at least not to the same degree. In science, for example, (ideally) cultures around the world and across time converge in agreement about certain facts and theories.<sup>67</sup> The heliocentric model is now a globally entrenched fact, although our contemporary understanding of the solar system goes beyond either Copernicus or Kepler. The same can be said of Newton's gravity, in spite of its being superseded in certain respects by the Einsteinian model. In Hegelian and pragmatic theories of science, scientific truth *just is* this tendency of agreement to become deeper and wider as the historical dialectic advances. In aesthetics, however, we see nothing quite so linear as scientific progress. Although one-point perspective was an innovation historically, the charcoal sketches in the caves of Lascaux show that human beings have been competent to execute basically "realistic" drawings for tens of thousands of years. Innovation in artistic technique has played only a minor role in art history as compared to change in artistic style. While clearly later artists in a tradition pick up certain themes in earlier works and attempt to develop them in their own works, at the same time, later artists are not so much agreeing with earlier aesthetic judgments as exploring new aesthetic spaces opened up by their forebears. Particular works may survive from era to era, but the styles that gave rise

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<sup>67</sup> The picture of science presented here is of course a simplification, but the point stands that aesthetics differs quite significantly from the ideal of scientific progress. If one subscribes to a non-dialectic theory of scientific advance, say Kuhnian paradigm shifts, all the more, one would be surprised to discover that aesthetic history is dialectically progressive.

to those works eventually either evolve or are supplanted. (About these works of genius that survive from era to era and place to place, see the next chapter.)

### **Art history as double negation**

To explain the lack of clear progress in aesthetics, I propose that art history is not a true Hegelian dialectic but a Watsuian double negation. New styles emerge when individuals assert their identities over and against the group (the first negation); this newly asserted identity is then either embraced or rejected by the group. If it is embraced, the double negation is made complete (the individual has “returned” to the group by the group’s own movement). If it is rejected then the artist must either return to the group by abandoning his or her self-assertion, or remain aloof in aesthetic rebellion (aesthetic badness as the stoppage of further cycles of double negation). Art history is created through this ongoing movement through which human beings constitute themselves as aesthetic subjects.

Think for example of the relationship between rock and roll and punk music. According to the creation myths of punk music, rock was once the music of rebellion, but by the mid-seventies it had grown commercial and decadent, so punk music emerged in order to strip rock back to its rebellious essence. Of course, in time, even punk was commercialized, so that by 1978, punk was already considered to have “sold out” and “died.”<sup>68</sup> This cycle of rebellion and selling out is perfectly understandable in terms of Watsuji’s theory of double negation. A new style may position itself as counter to society as a whole, but if it has any success, society will absorb it, and in doing so, remove its rebelliousness. Perma-

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<sup>68</sup> See Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, xi, et al. for the early death of punk. In 2001, the parody newspaper *The Onion* mocked the trend towards the taming of punk with the article, “Song About Heroin Used To Advertise Bank.” The article wryly notes that Iggy Pop’s 1977 “Lust for Life” had been used in a television commercial and asks “what better way [to advertise] than to call to mind punk forefather Iggy Pop’s long, terrifying struggle with a near-fatal heroin habit?” (The article is fictional; in reality, “Lust for Life” was used to advertise a Carnival cruise, not a bank.)

ment rebelliousness is only possible as a permanent revolution that ever pushes the boundaries of acceptability further and further afield. As Simon Reynolds explains in *Rip It Up and Start Again*,

Punk's simple stance of negation, of being *against*, briefly created unity. But as soon as the question shifted to "What are we actually *for*?" the movement disintegrated and dispersed. (11)

A new style gains traction by positioning itself in opposition to the social whole, but as the movement of human existence plays out, this opposition breaks down, causing the rebels to either be co-opted by the whole or find a source of unity for a new whole of their own creation.

The advantage of this Watsuji-inspired view of aesthetic history over a traditional Hegelian view is that it allows us to explain aesthetic evolution without presupposing an end to history or a pre-determined direction to the Absolute Spirit. Art history evolves because human existence is a dynamic movement and not a static essence. The evolution of art cannot come to a standstill because human beings cease to exist when they cease to change. This movement of the double negation makes art spontaneous and open-ended. Just as ethical virtues exist relative to the communities in which they originate,<sup>69</sup> aesthetic values originate in their valorization by particular human communities and must grow alongside those communities. Double negation is what lets human beings be human beings, but it does not restrict us to a single linear path for future development.

The theory of double negation further reveals the meaning of all of those different theories of art just reviewed. A close emphasis on the first negation produces artist-centric theories of art, as one attempts to explain how it was that

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<sup>69</sup> See Watsuji's appendix to *Study of Ethics*, "Varieties of Virtue" (*Shosō no Toku* 諸相の徳, WTZ 10:627–59).

the artist was able to break away from prior social conventions. On the other hand, as part of the second negation, we turn our eye away from the rebellion of the individual and attempt to comprehend the artwork under a work-centric theory that minimizes the individuality of artist in favor of an appreciation of the work itself and a return to the pre-cleavage suchness of the situation. This allows an answer to the question of “What are we for?” to take hold, if only temporarily. The audience-centric theories fall out of the tendency of this ongoing double negation to create new aesthetic subjects. Because aesthetic experience is an experience that contains within it a potential of being shared with others, it is natural that disinterested enjoyment will be employed by particular interests as a means of creating particular subjects. This occurs not only through the gross method of didacticism, but also through the more subtle identification with others that accompanies our feeling of intoxication with the aesthetic object. (Think, for example, of the community building role played by the Dionysian frenzy of ancient Greek theater.) As for context-centric theories, they succeed to the degree that they uncover the mechanisms of human existence at play in art as it moves from context to individual and back to the collective as the embodiment of context. Watsuji’s theory of double negation gives us a lens through which can see more clearly the advantages of these various approaches to art.

### **Cultural stratification as an alternative to dialectical development**

The concept of history contained in Watsuji’s work has a strong influence from Hegel (and Marx), but at the same time, Hegel’s theory of world history also presents a serious challenge to Watsuji because of its Eurocentrism. For Hegel, Asia was where civilization first developed, but since then the continent has stagnated because while “Asia is the continent of sunrise and of origins in general” (*World History*, 190), nevertheless “World history travels from east to west; for Europe is the absolute end of history, just as Asia is its beginning” (197). The

national spirit of an Asian nation is condemned to ever be mired at the dawn of civilization and to recapitulate its past, whereas the future of the dialectic belongs to Europe. Though, as we saw, Hegel acknowledged that true history requires the past to live on in the present, he nevertheless discounted its meaning. The ontogenesis of individuals recapitulates the past, but the individual must overcome the past as part of his or her development. In Hegel's view, Asia is no longer the center stage for human history because it is too tied down by the weight of the past.

To counter this narrative of Asian stagnation, in "The Japanese Spirit" (1934)<sup>70</sup> Watsuji proposes instead that Japanese culture is marked not by stagnation but by "stratigraphical layering of various moments" (WTZ 4:314). Watsuji coins the term *jūsōsei* 重層性 or "multi-stratification"<sup>71</sup> to refer to this tendency in Japanese history for various theses and antitheses not to annihilate one another through sublation into a synthesis but to layer on top of one another and persist together simultaneously. If we understand stratification in Japanese history, we can better understand the nature of progress in aesthetics.

Watsuji gives several examples of this tendency, such as in clothing styles:

Not only is the style of clothing from three hundred years ago largely preserved [in Japan], even the styles especially developed within the warrior and commoner classes are united in multi-stratification as one way of life. The spread of Western clothing adds another layer on top of that. (WTZ 4:315)

As has been widely noted, even today traditional forms of Japanese dress such as the kimono have been preserved, not merely as a cultural relic, but as a living choice suitable for certain social situations. This has led to the now ubiquitous

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<sup>70</sup>. "The Japanese Spirit" is *Nihon Seishin* 日本精神, WTZ 4:281–321, part of *Study of the History of the Japanese Spirit, Continued*, *Zoku Nihon Seishin-Shi Kenkyū* 続日本精神史研究 (1935). These translations are mine, but compare Dilworth, et al. *Sourcebook for Modern Japanese Philosophy*, 231–61.

<sup>71</sup>. David Dilworth translates *jūsōsei* 重層性 as "stadiality" ("Cultural Phenomenologist") or "the stratified or laminated character of Japanese culture" ("Guiding Principles of Interpretation," 110), and William Lafleur suggests "multi-leveledness" (*Karma of Words*, 181).

cliché of Japan as the “land where new and old co-exist” and presenting the image of a geisha in traditional attire checking her ultra-modern cellular phone or a bullet train speeding past Mt. Fuji. Although such phrases and images are at this point rather clichéd, the clichés persist because of the underlying truth that Watsuji identified: Japanese aesthetic history is marked not only by progress in creating new styles but also the retention of old styles as something equally alive. As he goes on to explain the old styles

are not simply lined up along side the new styles: while mutually opposed, they are unified in that opposition. This is because new styles are created as the negation of old ones, but just for this reason, they end up revitalizing the old. (WTZ 4:319).

That is to say, when a new style is created, it does not exist solely as a new, unconnected style. It is related to prior styles and brought into a kind of union with them, even if it is the union of opposition. For example, after the development of Noh theater, Bunraku puppet theater also developed in Japan. Where Noh is marked by the concealing of the living human face with a lifeless mask, in puppet theater a lifeless puppet is brought to life through skillful artifice. In a certain sense, puppet theater developed as a negation or inversion of Noh theater, but in spite of this both Noh and puppet theater are able to retain their individuality as styles through their mutual relatedness as negations of one another. Watsuji writes,

While the present style of Noh is said to show signs of sclerotization following the Tokugawa era, this just means that the distinctness of Noh has been made self-aware (*jikaku* 自覚) through the development of puppet theater and Kabuki. To that extent, we may say its having been overcome is its truly living. (WTZ 4:320)

In other words, the essence of the thesis can only be brought forward after it has been negated by its antithesis, without thereby demanding that they both be erased by a synthesis. Noh was overcome by later artistic styles, but these later styles allow us to better understand retroactively what was distinctive about Noh



in the first place. This is the same pattern that we observe throughout Watsuji's hermeneutic of double negation as cleavage. When unity is negated by division and that division is in turn negated by union, neither of these negations mean the erasure of the earlier phases. The ordinary self is negated by the intoxication of aesthetic experience, but time does not thereby eliminate the ordinary self and its distance from the aesthetic object. Rather, all aspects of this process exist together in a dynamic multiplicity of strata that grows through historical time in response to context.

### **Post-modernism and multi-stratification**

Watsuji feels that the multilayered nature of Japanese culture is perhaps unique in the world, and it is fair to criticize this supposition as an example of what Peter Dale has called "the myth of Japanese uniqueness." On the other hand, it is also fair to say that the tendency towards multi-stratification had not been as pronounced in the modern West, and modernist Western theorists themselves tended to deny the ability of layering to hold out against the flow of history, which makes Watsuji's faulty supposition of Japanese uniqueness more understandable in this regard. Since Watsuji's time, however, Western architecture and other arts have been swept over by the post-modern movement, which explicitly takes the reappropriation and juxtaposition of different historical styles as its core methodology. In other words, Watsuji's multi-stratification is now acknowledged as a global phenomenon.<sup>72</sup>

Before it came to be applied to other areas of thought, the term "post-modern" was first popularized by the architect Charles Jencks. He explains in *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (1977) that he uses it to refer to a new style of archi-

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<sup>72</sup> Note that not everyone finds this global phenomenon agreeable. In "Guiding Principles of Interpretation," Dilworth complains that Watsuji's writing is a vanguard of the contemporary multiculturalism and post-modernism, which he feels is overly ethnocentric (111).

tecture that has come after the modernist International Style. Whereas the International Style is purely functional and eschewed all ornamentation, post-modern architecture is whimsically eclectic in its designs, hence Jencks also describes his work as “radical eclecticism” or “ad hocism.” He writes,

If there is a single direction I prefer, the reader will discover that it is pluralistic: the idea that an architect must master several styles and codes of communication and vary these to suit the particular culture for which he is designing. (7)

Modern architecture sought to rush towards an end to history and bury the past, but post-modern architecture gleefully resurrects the symbols of the past as playthings for the present. The important thing for an architect to master is the suiting of past styles to the present context of the structure.

Jencks also notes that Japanese architects in particular seem to be especially proficient at employing this new pluralism in their work. He attributes this to

the persistence of traditional Japanese culture in all areas, and the absence of a revolutionary avant-garde which establishes its credentials by inverting those of the previous generation. (87)

Again, modernist architecture is ever in search of the antithesis to whatever thesis has just emerged. According to Jencks, because Japanese architects were raised in a multilayered culture, they easily took up a new style in which past styles are juxtaposed in creative ways instead of subsuming one another.<sup>73</sup>

After its success in architecture, the post-modern movement spread out to other areas of Western culture and earlier movements like Pop Art and Dada were celebrated retrospectively as forerunners of its playful pastiche-making. According to Watsuji’s theory of multi-stratification, however, we may say that Japan has always been post-modern in the sense that it has never subsumed its

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<sup>73</sup> This is not to say that all Japanese architects are post-modern from birth. For example, Jencks dates the death of modernity to the 1972 demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe housing complex, which was designed by Japanese-American modernist architect Minoru Yamasaki in 1951 (9).

past under a unified narrative of progress as was developed in the modern West. Even in the area of religion, Buddhism complemented and redefined Shintō, but it did not eliminate or expunge it.

A Hegelian might complain that this merely shows that Japan is outside of the mainstream of the development of Absolute Spirit, since it is not unifying its oppositions in sublation under a synthesis. If this were so, however, it would seem impossible that post-modernism could have ever spread in the West. As Watsuji argues,

Concrete unity exists in the place where every contradictory moment is revitalized in its own distinctive life. (WTZ 4:320)

In other words, unity cannot mean the elimination of the original context and the snuffing out of its life, but must mean its flourishing within a new context. The suchness of each past moment must be preserved and brought back to life in the present moment if a true historical unity is to be created. Hegelianism temporarily obscured this truth in the West, but eventually it re-emerged. This interpretation gives us a way to better understand the post-modern movement, which has been criticized (often rightly) for its obscurantism and lack of focus. The goal of multi-stratification, according to Watsuji is not merely to juxtapose nor even to transgress social boundaries, but to bring into the highest development each of the theses under consideration. Historical theses only come to really live when put into dialogue with later antitheses. Post-modernism should aim not just at eclectically collecting and transposing but at trying to show the core significance of what it gathers through the skillful arranging of things into a meeting of vital energy. Post-modern art is at its most aesthetically appealing when it is able to bring its references together with respect for their uniqueness.

## **Milieu as spatial context**

### **Space, environment, milieu, and emptiness**

Having looked at the role played by time in the context of art, I wish next to look at the role played by space. As regards time, "history" refers to the way that past moments bear significance even in the present. Regarding space, I want to make a similar distinction between space as the object of scientific inquiry and space as a lived aspect of our experience.

That the environment around us has a significant impact on the lives we are able to live ought to go without saying, but too often Western philosophers have neglected the importance of the environment to our self-comprehension within history. A happy exception to this rule is Aldo Leopold and his "land ethic." As one of the fathers of the current wave of environmental ethicists and deep ecologists, Leopold brought attention to the core constitution of the human being in an especially striking way. In *Sand County Almanac* (1949), he argues:

That man is, in fact, only a member of his biotic community is shown by an ecological interpretation of history. Many historical events, hitherto explained solely in terms of human enterprise, were actually biotic interactions between people and land. The characteristics of the land determined the facts quite as potently as the characteristics of the men who lived on it. (205)<sup>74</sup>

That is not to say that human agency is wholly insignificant. Human beings are unique as a species in our ability to adapt ourselves for suitability to every climate from the Sahara to the Arctic and recently even to outer space. But the range of expression open to human agency as it develops historically is nevertheless contained within parameters set for it by the natural environment with which it has co-evolved. Like Watsuji, Leopold sees ethics as a matter of finding an accommodation between the group and individual that does justice to the

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<sup>74</sup> Cf. Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, which attempts to trace exactly the interactions between people and land in the rise of civilization. Diamond summarizes the conclusion of his book as, "History followed different courses for different peoples because of differences among peoples' environment, not because of biological differences among people themselves" (25).

authentic character of each. He claims that all ethics, “rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts” (203). In Watsuji’s terms we might say that because my existence as a human being requires the existence of other human beings, it is only right for me to give deference to prerogatives of the community in certain situations and vice versa for the community to defer to the individual. Leopold takes this core insight and “simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land” (204).

While Watsuji’s environmental ethics are not as broadly considered as Leopold’s, Watsuji does clearly acknowledge that because we lack substantial existence as human beings (that is, we are not independent beings but dependently co-arising), we are radically dependent on the environment around us for our construction as subjects. He attempts to explain this environmental construction of the spatiality of the subject in greater detail in his book *Milieu* (*Fūdo* 風土, 1935, WTZ 8:1–256, translated as *Climate and Culture* by Geoffrey Bownas).<sup>75</sup>

In Japanese, *fūdo* means roughly “milieu” or “climate” and is written with the characters wind or style (風, meaning the human factors of a place) and soil (土, meaning the natural factors of a place). The Japanese dictionary *Daijisen* 大辞泉 defines *fūdo* as,

1. Regional forms of weather, soil, topography, and so on.
2. The spiritual environment as it affects the make up of human cultures.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Berque’s “Offspring of Watsuji’s Theory of Milieu” is (rightly) critical of shortcomings in Bownas’s translation. In particular, Bownas renders both *fūdo* 風土 and *fūdosei* 風土性 as “climate.” Berque proposes instead “milieu” and “mediance.” For the sake of intelligibility, I translate them as “milieu” and “climaticity,” respectively.

<sup>76</sup> Translation mine. Original is “1. その土地の気候・地味・地勢などのありさま。2. 人間の文化の形成などに影響を及ぼす精神的な環境。”

The title of Watsuji's book also relates to the *Fūdoki* 風土記, an eighth century chronicle of the geography, culture, and customs of the provinces of old Japan. In other words, *fūdo* refers not only to the external environmental conditions of the weather and so on, but also to the human cultural milieu as situated in a particular space. For our purposes, milieu is the equivalent in space of what history is in time. Milieu is what it is for space to be significant as a part of a subject.

Watsuji wrote the initial form of this book after his 1927–28 journey to study abroad in Europe, and it contains his reflections on how the local cultures of the areas he visited were shaped by and shaped their milieux. By his own admission, the book is a further extension of the “climatology of the human spirit” that J. G. Herder (1744–1803) undertook, although Watsuji grants that Kant was right to criticize Herder's thinking as “the product of a poet's imagination” (WTZ 8:23).<sup>77</sup> Watsuji's aim in *Milieu* is not only to improve upon Herder's thinking, but also to address what he saw as a shortcoming in then-contemporary German philosophy. Heidegger's *Being and Time* was published while Watsuji was in Germany, and in Watsuji's estimation, the work was critically flawed. The trouble is that Heidegger consider being in relation to time but not in relation to space, and “Temporality that does not correspond to spatiality is not yet truly temporality” (WTZ 8:2). Watsuji's focus on space was no doubt in part a reaction to the work of his colleague NISHIDA Kitarō on “place”<sup>78</sup> and in part a reaction to his own experiences as a stranger visiting new regions. Whatever the reasons for

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<sup>77</sup> Watsuji devotes a chapter of the book to explaining Herder's theory of climate, which unfortunately has not been translated into English (WTZ 8:209–24). Naoki Sakai considers this omission a somewhat sinister attempt to cover up the Western antecedents of Watsuji's work (*Translation and Subjectivity*, 150–1), but the more charitable interpretation is that Bownas felt that the chapter, being mostly historically focused, did not add much to existing English language scholarship on the German enlightenment. Instead, Bownas chose to include an essay by FURUKAWA Tetsushi that puts *Milieu* into the context of Watsuji's life and work.

<sup>78</sup> “Place” in Japanese is *basho* 場所 and corresponds to Plato's *chora* or Aristotle's *topos*. Nishida published an article under the title *Basho* 場所 in June of 1926 in *Tetsugaku Kenkyū* 哲学研究 vol. 123, crucially just before Watsuji's journey when both were employed at Kyōto University.

Watsuji's addressing the issue, there can be no doubt that his central point is correct—"being" without "space" is just as impossible as being without time.

In *Milieu*, Watsuji aims to show not just that space is as important as time, but in many ways, he wants to elevate it over time in our understanding:

When a human being becomes self-aware (*jikaku* 自覚) of the deep root of one's existence and expresses that objectively, that method is limited not only historically but also climactically (*fudo-teki ni* 風土的に). There has not yet been an occurrence of self-awareness of spirit (*seishin* 精神, i.e. *Geist*) lacking such limitations. Yet, it is precisely these climactic limitations that offer a superior point within which the most sharp self-awareness can be realized. (WTZ 8:119)

In other words, any objectification of experience necessarily loses something and is situated within a time and place, but an expression that takes into account its milieu will better realize itself than a merely historical account. This claim is of a piece with the distinction between the subject as observer (*shukan* 主観) and the subject as an agentive aspect of the larger subject-object complex (*shutai* 主体) that was explored in the last chapter. Watsuji wants to elevate the practical self over the theoretical self, and the practical self exists out in the world with others. On the other hand, it is because the practical self is with others that Heidegger deemphasized the spatial aspect of human existence in *Being and Time*. Heidegger felt that when one is out with others, one is bound to fall prey to the group (*das Man*, "the They") and lose one's authenticity. A resolute focus on time and one's being-towards-death is the only way to remain true to one's ownmost possibilities. Watsuji, however, feels that Heidegger's analysis overlooks the twofold character of human existence:

Here as well, the twofold character of human existence as finite and infinite becomes clear. Persons (*hito* 人) die, their context (*hito no aida* 人の間) changes, and yet, without ceasing, persons live while changing towards death, and their context continues. There is an unceasing *continuing* in that *unceasing ending*. What is seen from an individual standpoint as "being-towards-death" is from society's standpoint "being-towards-life." (WTZ 8:16)<sup>79</sup>

To be sure, whether we agree with Watsuji's privileging of space over time or not, Watsuji himself acknowledges that the two are intertwined in a way that makes an isolated analysis of one without the other misleading:

That milieu is not something separate from history is shown plainly in a climactic understanding (*fūdo-teki ni rikai* 風土的に理解) of styles of art. (WTZ 8:14)

In a culture, historicity and climaticity (*fūdosei* 風土性) are two sides of the same coin, and one cannot isolate just the one side of it. If there are no historical formations lacking a climactic character, just so there are no climactic phenomena without a historical character. (WTZ 8:119)

In fact, later in his life Heidegger did attempt to redress the imbalance between considerations of time and space present in *Being and Time*. In "Art and Space" (1969), Heidegger extends his contextual theory of art with an examination of the question of space from the point of view of language:

Let us try to listen to language. Whereof does it speak in the word "space"? Clearing-away (*Räumen*) is uttered therein. This means: to clear out (*roden*), to free from wilderness. Clearing-away brings forth the free, the openness for man's settling and dwelling. (5)

Reflection on this clearing-away draws Heidegger into a consideration of the nature of emptiness:

To empty the collected fruit in a basket means: To prepare for them this place.

Emptiness is not nothing. It is also no deficiency. In sculptural embodiment, emptiness plays in the manner of a seeking-projecting instituting of places. (7)

Heidegger's linguistic examination here resonates not only in German but also in English and Japanese. In English, of course, we "space out" items on a desk by creating room between them. This room is a roominess in which things can be arranged in a context. We ourselves can also "space out" by emptying our

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<sup>79</sup> For further criticism of Heidegger's concept of authenticity by Watsuji, see WTZ 10:226–7. For criticism of Watsuji's criticism, see Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity*, 94–5. For a more balanced take on the issue, see Augustin Berque, "The Question of Space."



minds of any particular content. Space is an emptiness that allows the possibility of future fulfillment. A room gives us room to room in.

The Japanese term for space is even more suggestive: *kūkan* 空間. The *kū* of *kūkan* is the “emptiness” or “openness” of chapter two, corresponding to the Sanskrit *śūnyatā*. Written as *suku* 空く, it becomes a verb meaning “to empty.” In isolation, the *kan* of *kūkan* is read as *aida*—the spatiotemporal interval also explained in chapter two and the basis of *aidagara* 間柄, our persistent relationships. Watsuji’s emphasis on space in *Milieu* no doubt emerged from a desire to show the “emptiness” or “openness” of things and the importance of relationality to existence. In that sense, *Milieu* is a response to the early Heidegger that anticipated some of later Heidegger’s insights.

### **The milieux of desire**

In the last chapter, I shared some of Watsuji’s examples of the ways in which our milieu is responsible for the creation of shared feelings and tastes. My feeling of cold and yours are “subjective” experiences, and yet we are able to share this experience because we occupy the same milieu—the same subjective space. The food that I eat, I eat because it is presented to me from within the context of a particular form of cuisine. The context of my culture gives rise to particular desires for particular foods—a sense of taste.

Michael Pollan makes this point well in *The Botany of Desire*. In it, as he plans to plant a garden, he finds himself questioning the division of subject and object as it is traditionally applied to matters of agriculture and gustatory taste:

We divide the world into subjects and objects, and here in the garden, as in nature generally, we humans are the subjects.

But that afternoon in the garden I found myself wondering: What if the grammar is all wrong? What if it’s really nothing more than a self-serving conceit? A bumblebee would probably also regard himself as a subject in the garden and the bloom he’s plundering for its drop of nectar as an object. But we know that this is just a failure of his imagination. The truth of the matter is that the flower has cleverly manipulated the bee into hauling its pollen from blossom to blossom. [...]

Matters between me and the spud I was planting, I realized, really aren't much different; we, too, are partners in a coevolutionary relationship, as indeed we have been ever since the birth of agriculture more than ten thousand years ago. [...]

So the question arose in my mind that day: Did I choose to plant these potatoes, or did the potatoes make me do it? In fact, both statements are true. [...] All these plants, which I always regarded as the objects of my desire, were also, I realized, subjects, acting on me, getting me to do things for them they couldn't do for themselves. (xiv–xv)

Even on a smaller scale than the evolutionary framework employed by Pollan, we find ourselves intertwined with our milieus in such a way that it is foolish to conceptualize ourselves as aloof from it. Our authentic desires are not a product of pure individuality, but individuality as just one moment within a large process of double negation.

For Watsuji as well, our environment is not just a pool of resources to satisfy independently existing desires. As a milieu, it is the space of our desire. Our inner desires and feelings are what they are in virtue of this seemingly external space:

We find that our existence is extremely rich in climatic baggage: The clarity of feeling on a clear day, the gloomy feeling during the rainy season, the feeling of life in the buds of spring, the gentle feeling of spring rain, the cool feeling on a summer's morn, the dreadful feeling of a storm—no doubt we could not exhaust such baggage even using all the words for seasonality in haiku. In just this way, our existence becomes climactically prescribed by infinitely rich modes. We are not only shouldered with the past; we also carry our milieus on our backs. (WTZ 8:21)

Japan has a long literary tradition relating places and seasons to the human world of culture and arts. The clarity of the autumn moon, for example, was not just an external condition of the world, but a *hon'i* 本意 (“root implication”) that was culturally achieved. Similarly, particular places in Japan became famous for particular associations with the site and the products of the region (*uta-makura* 歌枕 and *meibutsu* 名物). This being so, we ought not conceive of milieu as something outside of us. This aspect of human existence was particularly pronounced in Japan, but once we know to look for it, we see that it is universal. The milieu is where you and I find ourselves as individuals. It is a part of us that is extended as “ex-sistere.” Because this milieu is a part of us, we should not conceive of it

entirely negatively, as something imposed upon us against our will. Milieu is the ground of our will. Moreover, Watsuji denies simple climactic determinism: "From the first, our existence has not only this burdened character but also a character of freedom as well" (WTZ 8:21). There would be no point in escaping the historical determinism of Hegelianism by substituting instead a simple climactic form of determinism. Through our actions together as human beings in the world, we create milieux for ourselves while they in turn create us.

### **Climates of the world**

Based on his travels from Japan to Europe, Watsuji divides the world into three basic climatological milieux: monsoon, desert, and meadow. Monsoon climate prevails from India to Japan. In these areas, the weather is so wet and warm that plant life is able to flourish in abundance. The bulk of human interaction with nature takes the form of trying to control its wild fecundity. Arabia and the Middle East, on the other hand, are a desert climate. In these areas, the absence of water and the stifling heat sets human beings and nature into a confrontational opposition. The desert must be forced to live through human control. The meadows of Europe are somewhat in between these two extremes. According to Watsuji, nature there is docile enough to be understood rationally. He provides a striking anecdote that shows the effects of these different milieux on their inhabitants. While touring Italy, he found himself struck by the unusual regularity of the trees:

The shape that the many trees had naturally arranged themselves into was like the prescribed regularity a Japanese gardener would arrange cypresses into. Here one notices also that the branches are spread out in the prescribed and regular manner of horticulture. This not only gives us [Japanese] a feeling of artificiality, but it also gives a feeling of outstanding rationality because of the prescribed regularity and logicity of its shape. Yet, if one thinks about it, the reason for its seeming artificial is that we are accustomed to the irregular way that they appear on the land in our country. While in our country a regular shape can only be created through artifice, for the plants, this shape was the *natural* one, and it follows that an irregular form would be an unnatural one. Hence, one may say that

in our country *artificial* goes with *rational*, and in Europe, *natural* and *rational* go together.  
(WTZ 8:76)

My own feeling is that Watsuji's speculation here does not entirely escape falling into the trap of a Herder-like "poet's imagination," but nevertheless he gets at something important. The environmental conditions of the world around us are sure to influence how our society views nature, which in turn will affect our culture in a myriad of ways. This influence will show itself not as a deterministically imposed national fate but as a repository of cultural possibilities. Whatever we see around us throughout the day everyday is sure to have a powerful influence on our thinking, and the surpluses and deficits of our environment will have an important effect on our desires. Because of this, a truly global art permeating all space is as unlikely to come into existence as an end to art history. Art must always take on something of the flavor of the milieu in which it flourishes, just as it must reflect the character of its history.

Watsuji admits that his schema of just three distinctive global milieux is a bit of a simplification, but he feels that it is a helpful one:

It may be that the creative power of art itself is not something to be divided into two or three essences on the basis of differences of "place" that have taken root in the nature of human beings, but to the degree that some "place" concretely shows itself in the creative power of an artist, that creativity must take the particularity of its "place" for its own character. (WTZ 8:201)<sup>80</sup>

The important aspect of his theory for our study is less the specifics of the descriptions of milieux that he proposes than his central insight, which is the irrepressible if subtle influence of place over our feelings, perception, and creativity.

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<sup>80</sup> For an antidote to Watsuji's simplified scheme of just three main climactic regions, see Lewis and Wigen, *The Myth of Continents*, which proposes looking at the world as a series of overlapping cultural "regions," rather than monolithic interlocking blocks.

### **Globalization and hybridity**

But how applicable is Watsuji's theory of milieu today? A critic might protest that the process of globalization has resulted in an erasure of the importance of place. The airplane and the internet have made it the case that distance no longer matters. Even from his vantage in the early twentieth century, Watsuji was aware of the ongoing diminishment of place. Still, he feels that even if it is diminished milieu cannot disappear entirely as a factor in human existence:

Today, it seems like the world is becoming one and the stimuli of different cultures is overwhelming the particularity of nature. Nevertheless, the particularity of nature is surely not something that will vanish. Just as much as ever, people, unknowingly and unconsciously, are restricted by it even as they sink their roots into it. (WTZ 8:203–4)

Although we are tempted to look only at the world from the point of view of globalized history, the emergence of the environmental movement in the mid-to-late twentieth century happened because people became increasingly aware of the importance of the ecosystems around them. The root of this awareness is a continuing series of ecological crises (including Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, Love Canal, Chernobyl, the hole in the ozone layer, global climate change, and many others). The meaning of these crises is that we are able to create virtual spaces with our technology, but we ignore our milieux at our peril:

Ignoring milieu is not how one goes beyond it. It just means remaining within one's climactic limitations without self-awareness (*mujikaku-teki* 無自覚的). (WTZ 8:120)

As Watsuji argues, the increasing connection among the places of the world only shows the importance of the differences between them that remain and grow deeper over time:

This inquiry clearly contains two problems: the problem of art that differs in "time" and art that differs in "place." From the beginning, art that differs in its "place" has also possessed a style internal to itself that differs by "time." The two intertwine closely to prescribe the particularity of a concrete work of art. Now, at a time when all the cultures of the world are in contact with one another and it can seem as if the world is becoming "one place" as in the modern era, it comes to be the case that only the problem of "time" is evident. Yet, it is all the more precisely in the circumstance in which the world seems

to be becoming “one place” that it will be even easier to reflect on the questions of why in previous ages the world was divided into significantly different “places,” how those differences prescribed forms of art, and how deeply those forms of art participated in differences of “place.” (WTZ 8:171–2)

If the present really is a moment of globalization, we need now more than ever to understand the global milieu that are now coming into union with one another. A key question for the future is how the various distinctive milieux of the world will be able to hybridize with one another. Throughout *Milieu*, Watsuji attempts to show that when an idea moves from one milieu to another, it carries the seed of its old milieu with it even as it is transformed by its new one. The particular characteristics of a milieu, he writes,

are able to transfer to other “places” through historical influence. For example, that the particularity of a “place” is not an absolute is shown by the fact that the Old Testament, born of the desert way of life, has held Europe under its spell for thousands of years, and that the Koran, coming out of that same desert, has a strong power over India today. Nevertheless, one cannot properly understand the Old Testament or the Koran without an understanding of the particularity of desert life. (WTZ 8:201)

When the product of one milieu enters another, both the work and milieu it enters are transformed in novel ways while retaining without erasure the cleavages of the past. If globalization truly is going to be an important aspect of the future of art history, then hybridization will be a necessary aspect of that history. Just as post-modernism emphasizes novel juxtapositions across epochs of time, so too multiculturalism emphasizes the value of juxtaposing regionally rooted cultures in space. Here again, Watsuji was able to anticipate the coming trend in thought:

If we take it that limitations of milieu create nations (*kokumin* 国民) and give them advantages in different areas, then it is precisely on this point that we are also made self-aware (*jikaku* 自覚) in our own shortcomings and come to be able to learn from one another. It will be in just this manner that we may go beyond climactic limitations (*fudo-teki gentei o koete* 風土的限制を超えて) and develop our selves. (WTZ 8:119)

Watsuji saw Japan as a unique world stage for this surmounting of the limitations of milieu. He believed that it uniquely preserved the spirit of ancient Greece in

art while also learning from Indian Buddhism and Chinese Confucianism. Whatever excesses were present in Watsuji's valorization of Japan, we are able to take this theory and remove its more nationalistic elements in order to reveal its core contribution, which is an appreciation for the richness of diverse contexts.

In relation to taste, Watsuji's theory of milieu helps us understand how it varies not only over time but also from culture to culture without implying a lack of refinement in other cultures. In a Hegelian paradigm, we might think of the ancestors of our community as rational individuals but limited in their tastes by what artistic media and objects had historically developed up to that point in time. For Hegelians, it is only in history that a culture develops its aesthetic refinement. However, these Hegelian accounts can only describe other cultures as more or less advanced in coming to embody Absolute Spirit in its progression through history. The path of Absolute Spirit is, like rationality, singular, and history has only one endpoint, though there are many different stragglers on the one path.

Watsuji lends us a new way of understanding the distinctiveness of other cultures without denying their rationality or dismissing their differences as the product of their "savageness." Since tastes emerge out of the perspectives of the community, they must be grounded in milieu. Cultural difference cannot be deterministically reduced to climate, but a theory of milieu does allow us to understand how a different culture can produce different art without therefore being "backwards" in comparison to some other culture with a different art history. This is not to suggest that all cultures are equally well developed or civilized (cultural relativism), just that there are multiple possible ways in which a culture may progress in embodying the spirit of its time and place at which it may excel or lag behind (cultural pluralism). The goal of art, if we must speak of one, is to promote excellence through the unification of such diverse experiences.

## Okakura, *The Book of Tea*, and “Teaism”

### The crisis of Japanese aesthetics

Nothing more clearly illustrates the role of hybridity in the history and milieu of art than the crisis of Japanese aesthetics following Japan’s opening to the West and the embodiment of that crisis in the life of OKAKURA Kakuzō. The art forms valorized in pre-modern Japan only partially overlapped with those art forms valorized in the modern West. To a Japanese snob of the Edo period (1603–1868), *ukiyo-e* 浮世絵 (mass reproduced prints of “the floating world”) and Kabuki theater (歌舞伎) were hopelessly vulgar; landscape paintings and nature paintings were clearly superior to historical paintings; achieving linear perspective was an error, not a goal; statuary was almost exclusively religious; poetry was an invariably social pursuit; and the highest forms of art were flower arranging and tea ceremony. Needless to say, these values were nearly completely overturned after Japan was reopened to engagement with the West. In France, artists under the spell of *Japonisme* (notably, van Gogh and Toulouse-Lautrec) were strongly influenced by *ukiyo-e* rather than “higher” forms of visual art like *sumi-e* 墨絵.<sup>81</sup> Too much has been written about the shift to linear perspective in the Renaissance and its greater implications for a shift in patterns of thought to attempt a summary here, but suffice it to say that just as the shift from the reverse perspective of medieval Christian iconography required a shift of mindset in the West, a similar change was necessary in the East in order to move away from the traditional zig-zagging perspective of traditional Asian landscape painting. Similarly, Western statuary had been transformed from religious to secular during the Renaissance as a byproduct of the iconoclasm of earlier eras. Western romantic poetry is ideally written by brooding, lonely geniuses. Tea ceremony and flower arranging have

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<sup>81</sup>. See Joseph Masheck’s introduction to *Composition* (especially 25–30) for an account of the roles of OKAKURA Kakuzō and Ernest Fenollosa in bringing Japanese compositional techniques to American art.



never achieved more than fringe acceptance in the West at best. With so many reversals of value happening at once, a crisis of self-confidence in the arts in Japan was only natural. The sole exception to this pattern is the supposed superiority of landscape and nature painting. However, this is only so because Japanese art arrived in the West at a fortuitous time to accelerate the shift away from historic and occasional paintings to landscapes, still life, and eventually abstract art in part because of the embrace of *ukiyo-e* by *Japonisme*.

If there is any lesson to be gleaned from this cultural clash, it must be our reception to art cannot be separated from the culture at large. When Japan found itself face-to-face with the West politically and technologically, an aesthetic confrontation was sure to follow. At the same time, however, the arts of Japan did not simply collapse in the face of Western pressures. Rather, they adapted to the crisis by developing various potentials that were hidden in the matrix of past artistic choices. For example, Masaoka Shiki took the longstanding trend towards a separation between *renga* 連歌 and individual poems and formalized it by coining the term *haiku* 俳句 to refer to these poems. While in retrospect the antecedents of this separation are evident in the work of his predecessors, it was pressure from the West that caused Shiki to draw out the distinction explicitly. A similar dynamic of Western pressure causing the reevaluation of past artistic values is evident in *The Book of Tea* by OKAKURA Kakuzō.

#### **OKAKURA Kakuzō**

OKAKURA Kakuzō (岡倉覚三, 1862–1913), also known as OKAKURA Tenshin (岡倉天心), was born in Yokohama, Japan. Commodore Perry had recently opened Japan to foreign trade and influence, and by the time of Okakura's childhood, Yokohama had become a bustling center for the influx of Western goods and ideas. According to Christopher Benfey, Okakura learned English in the missionary school of James Hepburn at a young age (*Great Wave*, 77), and throughout his

life, Western acquaintances were struck by how fluent and elegant his English was. (Okakura published three books in English during his lifetime that were made available in Japanese only after his death.<sup>82</sup>) After Okakura's initial Western education, his father was alarmed to realize his son was illiterate in Japanese and sent him to a Buddhist temple to receive traditional training in the Eastern classics (78). Following this, Okakura graduated from Tokyo Imperial University, an institute then dedicated to bringing Western learning to Japan. As a result of his upbringing, Okakura was always something of a hybrid: appearing Japanese but fluent in English, knowledgeable about the East but initially educated by the West, wearing in a suit when in Japan but costumed in a kimono when in Boston. In that sense, Okakura lived his life as an embodiment of the conflicting values of Meiji era of Japan (1868–1912). Just as Japan was opening itself up to Western values and trying to decide how to integrate them into its culture, so too, Okakura lived his life traveling the world attempting to defend what he thought to be Japan's artistic and cultural legacy while also looking towards its future. He simultaneously sought to reverse the radical Westernization of Japan and to advance Japan's development as a civilization and a world power.

Okakura had a profound, if subtle, influence on the theories of art that we have been looking at in this chapter so far. Watsuji was once a student of Okakura and claims that his lectures "filled us with a *love of art*" (WTZ 17:352) and "gave us a viewpoint from which to look at works of art" (WTZ 17:353).<sup>83</sup> Okakura's account of Japan's ability to retain and revive its past no doubt influenced Watsuji's own

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<sup>82</sup> A supposed fourth book entitled *Awakening of the East* was published after Okakura's death based on his notes. See Kinoshita, "Distance Between East and West" for an extensive criticism of the use made of this fourth book by Japanese nationalists.

<sup>83</sup> In "Memories of Professor Okakura" (*Okakura-sensei no Omoide* 岡倉先生の思い出, WTZ 17:352–4), available as part of the essay collection, *Mask and Persona* (*Men to Perusona* 面とペルソナ) and originally written in 1936 on the occasion of Okakura's work being translated and published in Japanese.

account of multi-stratification (*jūsōsei* 重層性) and the importance of receptivity to foreign ideas.<sup>84</sup> At a young age, Okakura was a student of and translator for Ernest Fenollosa. When Fenollosa went to Nara to catalog the “lost” treasures of Japanese art, Okakura was by his side as they uncovered the Yumedono Guze Kannon of the Hōryūji for the first time in unknown hundreds of years (Benfey, 82–84). This mission again shows the two sides of Okakura’s life. His love of Japanese art sent him out to preserve it against Western appropriation, but he went alongside a Western art collector. He respected the ancient temples as repositories of beauty, but he was mistrustful of their ability to preserve their collections. He wanted to catalog scientifically and precisely the art that represented for him the religious and mystical. The tales of this journey surely influenced Watsuji when Watsuji wrote *Pilgrimages to the Ancient Temples in Nara* (1919)<sup>85</sup> based on his own travels to many of the same locations.

Heidegger’s theories also seem to have been profoundly influenced by the work of Okakura. The first occurrence of the phrase *in-der-Welt-Sein* (“being-in-the-world”) appears to have been in the 1919 translation of Okakura’s *Book of Tea* from English into German. According to Tomonobu IMAMICHI, his teacher Kichinosuke ITO gave this book to Heidegger as a gift shortly after its publication, and this led to Heidegger’s later use of the phrase in *Being and Time*.<sup>86</sup> Thus, the

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<sup>84</sup> Okakura writes, “Different and conflicting as were these various schools of thought, Japan has welcomed them all and assimilated whatever ministered to her mental needs” (*Awakening of Japan*, 188) and “Accustomed to accept the new without sacrificing the old, our adoption of Western methods has not so greatly affected the national life as is generally supposed” (189). After the war, Watsuji argued in *Closed Country: Japan’s Tragedy* (*Sakoku: Nihon no Higeiki* 鎖国—日本の悲劇, 1951, WTZ 15) that Japan is at its best when it receives and synthesizes foreign influences rather than cutting itself off from the world, which he took to be the cause of the war. Both Okakura and Watsuji also had a tendency to cast Japan as the “Greece” of Asia—a tendency that aided the nationalistic justification of Japan’s military aggression.

<sup>85</sup> *Pilgrimages to the Ancient Temples in Nara* is *Koji Junrei* 古寺巡礼 (WTZ 2:1–192). (A translation by Hiroshi NARA is available.) In *Pilgrimages*, Watsuji mentions the presence of KUKI Ryūichi with Fenollosa but oddly neglects to mention Okakura (WTZ 2:183), perhaps because Watsuji’s account was based on the writings of Fenollosa. I would like to thank Professor Nara for his personal correspondence on this issue.

concept of space in Heidegger's early work that Watsuji found to be valuable but underdeveloped actually stemmed in part from a Japanese source. Additionally, Benfey accuses Okakura of having illegitimately fathered Japanese philosopher KUKI Shūzō (九鬼周造, 1888–1941), and while others dispute the claim because the timing of his birth seems to rule out the possibility, in any event it is true that Okakura was close to Kuki's mother and played an important role in Kuki's upbringing (89, 107). Kuki, in turn, was a fellow student with Heidegger under Husserl. Kuki took eagerly to the young Heidegger's work and later introduced it to Sartre, which led to its further development by the French existentialists and Heidegger's reactions to that development.

Given the remarkable circumstances of his life, it is fair to say that Okakura was positioned in a very particular milieu in history that allowed him to synthesize global currents of thought in art and aesthetics while also injecting his own personality into its future development. His life's work might be cast as merely an antithetic reaction against Japan's rapid Westernization, but it is better understood as an effort to ensure the preservation of Japan's multilayered character. Okakura worked tirelessly in his life and writing to show that modern life has much to learn from the values of the past, but he also believed in the importance of judging the past rather than receiving it uncritically. Past layers of culture must continue to evolve without being eliminated by new layers.

In the same way, we must not make the mistake of looking only at the positive side of *The Book of Tea* or of Okakura himself. Like his era, for all that is commendable about the balance between East and West sought in his work, the seeds of something darker were germinating below the surface. Okakura may be forgiven for the fact that his writings were utilized for their propaganda value by the

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<sup>86</sup> Cited in Parkes, "Rising Sun over Black Forest," 118, n. 75, Marion, "Wittgenstein on Heidegger and Cosmic Emotions," 8–9, n. 29, and obliquely by Benfey, *Great Wave*, 107.

nationalists who took control of Japan in the decades after his death. However, his negative outlook on the prospect of democratic art (103) and his desire that “some great wizard” would “from the stem of society shape a mighty harp whose strings would resound to the touch of genius” (105) can only sound proto-fascist from our perspective on the other side of the Pacific War.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, in many cases Okakura appeared all too ready to cross the line from patriotism into nationalistic chauvinism. For instance, in *Ideals of the East* (1903), Okakura proclaims that, “It is in Japan alone that the historic wealth of Asiatic culture can be consecutively studied,” (6) and “The history of Japanese art becomes thus the history of Asiatic ideals” (8). Such proclamations of Japanese primacy make the opening sentence of *Ideals of the East*—“Asia is one” (1)—seem less like a reflection of pan-Asian solidarity and more like a precursor to the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Similarly, *The Awakening of Japan* (1904) contains on the one hand a rejection of military expansionism and on the other a careful explanation of why Japan’s then-recent wars with China and Russia were completely justified as an expression of Japan’s pacific intent.<sup>88</sup>

In spite of these shortcomings of its author, *Book of Tea* itself is a remarkable work, and it must be examined on its own terms.

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<sup>87</sup> In many ways, Okakura and *The Book of Tea* are similar to NITOBE Inazō (新渡戸稲造, 1862–1933) and *Bushidō: The Soul of Japan* (1900). Nitobe wrote his book in English and coined the word *bushidō* 武士道 to describe the moral code of the bygone samurai warriors. In doing so, Nitobe, perhaps inadvertently, created the central ideal of Japanese nationalist propaganda.

<sup>88</sup> “We have been repeatedly accused of belligerent designs and expansive ambitions. Perhaps to European nations, with their traditions of conquest and colonization, it may be inconceivable that we are not animated by the same spirit of aggrandizement that has often led to war” (*Awakening of Japan*, 201), but “Korea lies like a dagger ever pointed toward the very heart of Japan” (208). Okakura also takes at face value ancient Japanese accounts of Japanese imperial control over Korea. Modern scholars generally take these accounts to show the opposite—namely, that the Japanese imperial family originated in Korea and only gradually became nativized, as was the case for Norman kings of England.

### ***The Book of Tea* and tea ceremony**

In an introduction to one version of *The Book of Tea*, Soshitsu Sen XV praises it and declares,

it is a classic in the genuine sense, being firmly rooted in its own milieu, and at the same time transcending its time and setting. (22–3)

As I have shown, the historical milieu of *The Book of Tea* was a tumultuous one. The tea ceremony faced a serious intellectual challenge at the time of its publication because of the lack of anything like an analogue in Western aesthetics. With nothing to compare it to, how could Westerners ever understand it? And without any Western recognition of tea ceremony, could it really be preserved as a part of modern Japan? In a literal sense, the milieu of the West is a poor match for tea, since tea plants grow only in tropical or sub-tropical climates. On the other hand, as Okakura keenly noted, Westerners certainly appreciate a nice cup of tea as much as their Asian counterparts—“The white man has scoffed at our religion and morals, but has accepted the brown beverage without hesitation” (35). The British in particular gave “tea time” and “tea parties” a central role in social life. Under these circumstances, would it be so strange for the tea ceremony to make the trip west? As it happened, tea ceremony has survived in Japan up to the present, but despite the hard work of its popularizers like Okakura, it has never gained a substantial following in the West.

Okakura’s description of the tea ceremony in *The Book of Tea* is at once broad and yet maddeningly non-specific. Instead of simply laying out the mechanical procedures for performing the ceremony, Okakura works diligently to place tea ceremony into something of its historical context for a Western audience, and along the way he explains what he takes to be the basic points of Confucianism, Daoism, and Zen. Okakura’s goal clearly is not simply to write a how-to manual but to impart just some of the background his readers would need in order to

understand the significance of the ritual. In Japanese, tea ceremony is *chanoyu* 茶の湯, also called *chadō* or *sadō* 茶道 (“the way of tea”). Okakura refers to it as “a religion of aestheticism—Teaism” (29). In general terms, the aesthetic theory that underlies Okakura’s Teaism is not far removed from what has been argued for here. In the last chapter, I showed that Watsuji emphasizes the coming together of vital energy (*ki ai* 気合い) as the form of unity at work in Japanese aesthetic judgment. Okakura concurs:

Nothing is more hallowing than the union of kindred spirits in art. At the moment of meeting, the art lover transcends himself. At once he is and is not. (100)

Okakura’s description of tea ceremony makes it clear that aesthetic experience requires both a distancing from the ordinary self and an ecstatic dissolution into the tea room. This process cannot be thought of from a merely individual perspective. When we examine the tea ceremony, which is more important the tea master (the artist) or the tea drinker (the audience)? Those who subscribe to artist-centric or audience-centric theories of art will give different answers, but Okakura denies the underlying presuppositions of the question:

The sympathetic communion of minds necessary for art appreciation must be based on mutual concession. The spectator must cultivate the proper attitude for receiving the message, as the artist must know how to impart it. (97)

Hume argues in “Of the Standard of Taste,” that aesthetic judgment requires me to consider “myself as a man in general, forget, if possible, my individual being, and my peculiar circumstances.” Okakura concurs that, “Our very individuality establishes in one sense a limit to our understanding” (102). If individuality limits the possibility of aesthetic experience, then the process of mutual concession in tea ceremony ought to be thought of as a Watsujian double negation. It is only by overcoming individuality in a return to the unity prior to the division of self and

other that I can hope to overcome the division of subject and object and thereby enter fully into the experience of the tea ceremony.

What is it that makes the tea ceremony artistic? Perhaps it is the skill of the tea master (artist-centric theory). Or perhaps it is the taste of the tea, the design of the instruments, and the beauty of the ceremony (work-centric theory). We might suppose the artistry to rest in the reaction of the participants to the experience (audience-centric theory). For Okakura, in addition to all these possibilities, the context of the tea room itself is not to be underestimated. As he writes,

The simplicity of the tea-room and its freedom from vulgarity make it truly a sanctuary from the vexations of the outer world. There and there alone can one consecrate himself to undisturbed adoration of the beautiful. (91)

According to Okakura, the tea room is a kind of gallery or temple that reveals another world inside of itself. The tea room creates its own milieu, which the tea master seeks to bring out for the contemplation by the participants. As Okakura notes, the way of writing the Japanese name for the tea room (*sukiya* 数奇屋) has changed over the years in ways that suggest different interpretations of its significance:

The original ideographs for Sukiya mean the Abode of Fancy [viz. 好き屋]. Latterly, the various tea masters substituted various Chinese characters according to their conception of the tea-room, and the term Sukiya may signify the Abode of Vacancy [空き屋, cf. emptiness, *kū* 空] or the Abode of the Unsymmetrical [数奇屋]. (75)

Originally, the tea ceremony was an idle pleasure, but in time its practitioners came to think of it as a means of emptying themselves of their ordinary lives and entering another space. Okakura's translation "Abode of the Unsymmetrical" is a fanciful interpretation of *kisū* 奇数 ("odd numbers"), but it gets at the importance of the asymmetrical suchness of the relations within the tea room. It is within this space that distance from the ordinary is achieved, which allows the participants to imaginatively transcend the tea room's walls:



True beauty could be discovered only by one who mentally completed the incomplete. The virility of life and art lay in its possibilities for growth. In the tea-room it is left for each guest in imagination to complete the total effect in relation to himself. (89)

The beauty of the tea room is the result of a total synthesis of artistic experience. Within the tea room, one experiences the taste and smell of the tea and sweets (cuisine), the touch of the tea cup (pottery), the sight of the wall scroll (calligraphy) and the flower arrangement (*ikebana* 生花), and the sounds of the tea pot, the tea master and one's fellow guests. An understanding that brings unity this experience can only come from a knowledge of the history, milieu, and personalities involved.

Two of the most important figures in the establishment of modern tea ceremony are Sen no Rikyū (千利休, 1522–1591) and his teacher, Takeno Jōō (武野紹鷗, 1502–1555). Jōō coined the concept of *ichi-go ichi-e* 一期一会 (loosely, “one unique meeting at one unique moment”). *Ichigo ichi-e* means to realize the unrepeatable significance of each moment. In the last chapter, I showed the emphasis that Japanese poets put on revealing the *hon'i* 本意 or “root implications” of the situation instead of merely private implications (*shii* 私意). The meaning of *ichi-go ichi-e* is that we must grasp the root implication of a situation afresh every moment. When we grasp the transitory and impermanent nature of existence, we realize as well that each instant has a suchness all its own that had not been before and will not be again. The job of the tea master is always to bear this suchness in mind and present it to his or her guests.

Sen no Rikyū referred to the core virtues of tea ceremony with the formula *wa kei sei jaku* 和敬清寂: harmony, respect, purity, and tranquility. Harmony refers not only to the social accord of our persistent relationships (*aidagara* 間柄) within the space of the tea room (the self-other relationship) but also to the mutual accord between the things in the space (subject-object relation). Soshitsu Sen XV is one

of the successors of Sen no Rikyū's tradition. In an afterward to one version of Okakura's *Book of Tea*, he writes that harmony means,

to live with a refined attention to detail—the flowers of the season, the sound of the water poured onto stone, the time at which evening turns to dusk—not because these things will enlarge the self, but because they bring our lives into harmony with that which transcends the self. (144–5)

The ecstatic intoxication and advance into novelty of aesthetic experience depends on the achievement of such a harmony—a distancing from the ordinary self and inhabitation of the larger no-self. Respect, like harmony, is directed towards others and objects. It is similar to what Zeami referred to as *ri-ken no ken* 離見の見 (“the seeing of distant seeing”) in Noh. One shows respect by looking at things from the perspective of the other. Without respect, no distancing from the ordinary self would be possible, and without distance, aesthetic experience would not arise because the object experienced ecstatically would just be an aspect of the self and nothing more, as in unreflective everyday experience. Respect elevates others. As Okakura writes mutual concession is at the heart of the tea ceremony. An ordinary or even somewhat lumpy and ugly cup has its inner beauty uncovered when approached with respect. Purity refers to the physical cleanliness of the tea hut and also to the purity from selfishness necessary to go beyond one's idiosyncratic attachments. Finally, tranquility refers to disinterested enjoyment. In tranquility, one does not seek to fulfill some concrete desire of the self but merely enjoys the fullness of the object from its own perspective.

Okakura's attempt to bring the values of tea ceremony to the West is inspiring in many ways. He is to be applauded for his role in ensuring that the exchange of cultures in the age of globalization has not been an entirely one-sided affair. Though “Teaism” never spread beyond the borders of Japan, Okakura nevertheless successfully aided the positive hybridization of global culture through his

promotion of the ideal of tea, and the positive reverberations of his work can be seen throughout the world.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have attempted to complete our reconstruction of aesthetics by looking at theories of art as a further systemization of aesthetic experience and judgment. In *Milieu*, Watsuji claims that,

Whatever is drawn into our horizon, taking the unification of diversity as the fundamental principle of art is not something to be shaken. (WTZ 8:177)

Accordingly, I have examined the unifying principles behind various theories of art and grouped them into four major categories: artist-centric, work-centric, audience-centric, and context-centric. Each category has its strong and weak points, but context-theories—when not so abstract as to become unusable—are particularly powerful because they allow us to describe how the elements of artist, work, and audience become related to one another within a given time and place.

A work of art possesses a history and milieu. History and milieu construct and are constructed by the significance of time and space to the subject. Historical development is often interpreted as a Hegelian dialectic, but I argue that art history (at least) can be better understood using Watsuji's concept of double negation. The evolution of art takes place against a permanent backdrop of the unceasing movement of rebellion and return within human existence. Art history does not march forward by overcoming and erasing its past but by adding new layers of multiplicity as the post-modern movement has suggested.

The space around us is not just space. Space creates an environment for our existence. Without it, we could not be, hence we owe to the natural world, just as to other people, an ethical debt. Watsuji launched an investigation into the impact of space on our existence as subjects under the title *Milieu*. Watsuji's investigation

was a critique of Heidegger's one-sided focus on time in *Being and Time*, but the later Heidegger reversed this imbalance by exploring the importance of emptiness for existence, an insight that resonates with the emphasis on emptiness in Buddhist-influenced philosophy. For aesthetics, milieu is the way that the space around us takes on subjective significance that we are able to experience in art and nature. Space matters to aesthetics because our preferences and desires are not given in advance but emerge out of the milieu in which we develop. In this era of globalization, it might be thought that differences of place are no longer as important as they once were, but these differences are not so simple to shrug off.

To illustrate the importance of context to art, I looked at the life of OKAKURA Kakuzō and the crisis of Japanese aesthetics. Following the opening of Japan to the West, the values of traditional Japanese art were nearly overturned, but the efforts of Okakura and others like him ensured that these values were not merely lost to “progress” but were strengthened through their juxtaposition in a broader context creating a multiplicity of styles rather than an overcoming of the past.

Okakura's *Book of Tea* is interesting both as a representative product of his historical milieu and in its own right as an explanation of the tea ceremony. As past tea masters suggest, tea ceremony requires above all an insight into the relational dynamics within the tea room. The room is a kind of micro-milieu that is calibrated to allow the tea master, the participants, and the objects in the tea room to come into aesthetic unity for a brief period of time. For this reason, the tea ceremony is said to be *ichi-go ichi-e* 一期一会 “one unique meeting at one unique moment.”

There is much more to be said about art than can be encapsulated by one chapter. As Watsuji writes in *Milieu*, whatever theories of art we construct, they must be “founded on nothing less than the particularity of the artworks themselves that theory only chases along after” (WTZ 8:178). In the next chapter, I

will look at those works of art that seem to have a particularity which not only thrives within one particular contextual niche but which goes beyond the borders of its birthplace and era. In other words, as a means of entering the third step of the hermeneutic process described in chapter two—deconstructing the particularity of our constructed subjectivities and grasping aesthetics in its most general form—I will examine the importance of “genius” to development of art and society.

## **Chapter 6. Beyond the Bounds of Aesthetics: Criticism, Genius, and Culture**

### **Deconstructing aesthetics**

In this dissertation, I have attempted to apply the anthropology and methodology of WATSUJI Tetsurō to aesthetics. Accordingly, I have restored awareness of the unity underlying aesthetic experience (chapter three) and reconstructed the subject of aesthetic judgment and taste (chapter four) and objects of art theory (chapter five). The final step in the hermeneutic method outlined in chapter two is to deconstruct aesthetics into its most general components. How could such hermeneutic destruction be possible? As Watsuji writes in *Study of Ethics*, “self-awareness (*jikaku* 自覚) of particularity is the only path (*michi* 道) by which to go beyond particularities” (WTZ 10:49). Abstract theory must be grounded on the basis of concrete experience. A total deconstruction of aesthetics is beyond the scope of this work, but I do wish to end with an examination of one phenomenon in aesthetics that cuts through the range of aesthetic experience, aesthetic judgment, and theories of art; namely, the phenomenon of genius. Genius is something that goes beyond the boundaries of its context of creation and manifests itself throughout space and time, hence it is a fitting emblem of the kind of deconstruction of aesthetics at which I wish to aim.

As the title “WATSUJI Tetsurō and the Subject of Aesthetics” implies, I have primarily focused on the importance of subjective factors in aesthetics. Aesthetic experience is a matter of a subject’s disinterested enjoyment. Aesthetic judgment requires subjects to come together to assess the fullness of the object. Theories of art must account for the context in which subjects encounter art objects. However, I hope I have also shown that aesthetic experience, aesthetic judgment, and theories of art must all have an appropriate regard for the importance of the insistent particularity of the object itself. Works of genius certainly show us that this impor-

tance is not to be slighted. These works carry new worlds within them and invite us to enter in. They speak to us across the chasm of historical and climactic difference by enriching the contexts into which they are introduced. They lure the self out of its ordinary shell and into the wider emptiness out of which it and the object were born.

Before I directly address the question of genius, it will be necessary to look at its counterpart, namely criticism. A work of genius is one that is capable of overturning existing critical consensus, hence without a background of critical consensus there would be nothing to disrupt. Criticism also has a life of its own. In a certain sense, a critic must be a lover. Put in less provocative terms, critics must be able to feel a pure empathy for the work under consideration and convey this empathetic attitude to others. Critical consensus is thereby created as a set of shared touchstones.

With this background in place, I will be able to answer key questions about the role of geniuses in society. Is the genius an individual opposed to all social restraint? Or is genius a crystallized expression of the structure of a particular society? Looked at through the lens of a Watsujiian anthropology we see that, paradoxically, in opposing society, the genius expresses its highest significance. This is why genius is able to push the boundaries of society forward. It is a process in which private values are exteriorized into society and vice-versa, public values are internalized and felt subjectively. An examination of this process leads us to reevaluate the false choice presented between a liberal society in which public and private values are fixed in permanent division and a totalitarian society in which no distinction between public and private values is made. Once this false choice has been rejected, we will be able to understand the development of culture as the shattering of stagnant values in the pursuit of higher ideals.

Finally, I wish to conclude with a concrete discussion of Murasaki Shikibu 紫式部, a genius of Japanese literature and author of *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji Monogatari* 源氏物語), as well as the critics who were vital to our reception of her work.

### **Criticism and empathy**

Both individuality and sociality are necessary for artistic creation. In the past it may have been that these two aspects of artistic creation were not well distinguished,<sup>89</sup> but in our contemporary culture at least, the social pole of this process has been institutionalized as “criticism.” Let us refer to the individual pole of the process as “genius.” Artistic creativity comes from the intersection of genius and criticism as a double negation. The artist may retreat to the studio alone to create a work, but when the work is done it must be presented to the public for appreciation. Without some individuality, there would be no novelty to the work. It would only present the preexistent ideas of the group. On the other hand, without sociality there could be no individuality. The ideas that the individual creatively enhances come from the history and milieu of the group and must return to the group if they are to have any future efficacy. The works of the individual require the group for its evaluation. Genius, however radical and new it may be, is always an extension of existing art history, and purported genius that does not affect the future growth of art history is not true genius.

How should we understand criticism? One approach to critique is to be critical, that is, to criticize. One can search the object closely for faults in order to seize on them and present them to its creator and society. This attitude, however, is clearly of more use in fostering one’s reputation among fellow connoisseurs than it is for allowing one to aesthetically engage with the object. It has its place, but it

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<sup>89</sup> For example, as discussed in chapter four, in a linked verse meeting, the line between critic and creator is only temporary. Each participant at the meeting will take turns playing each role as the night goes on. Nevertheless, conceptually speaking, it is clarifying to consider these roles as distinct aspects of a greater phenomenon.



is not strictly aesthetic insofar as it cuts off the possibility of engagement with the object.

Naturally, part of the project of criticism will be negative: we define ourselves as a group by excluding what it is that we reject. We hate this; we reject this; we find this vulgar. But there is also a positive side to criticism: we embrace certain objects and are united by our shared values. We love this; we accept this; we find this refined. These two aspects of criticism are important but inward facing. The works themselves, to the extent they matter, matter only insofar as they promote or hinder our unity as a critical community. A fuller account of criticism must also strive to understand why some works in particular come to possess the power to unite or divide critics.

In a short essay entitled “Art Criticism,”<sup>90</sup> Watsuji explains his own approach to criticism and that of the French philosopher Jean-Marie Guyau (1854–1888). Both are opposed to the brand of criticism that seeks only to tear down. Watsuji interprets Guyau’s view as being, “one who we ought to call a critic is one who best sings praises to the beautiful and also one best able to explain this praise to others” (WTZ 17:189). While agreeing with this sentiment, Watsuji feels that we must not lose sight of the source of criticizing criticism either. In his view, “The ideal critic knows best how to praise beauty, while also being at the same time the most sensitive towards the ugly” (WTZ 17:190). When the critic criticizes, it should not be out of a desire to impress others with one’s snobbish sophistication, but out of a sensitivity to the ways that object came so close to achieving greatness but fell short.

The attitude a critic must possess in order to simultaneously praise the beautiful and criticize the bad is, Watsuji and Guyau agree, love. Love, of course,

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<sup>90</sup>. “Art Criticism” is *Geijutsu Hihyō* 芸術批評 (WTZ 17:189–90), included as part of *Revival of the Idols* (*Guzō Saikō* 偶像再興, 1918).

can be understood in many ways beyond even the traditional Greek distinctions between *agapé* (“charitable love”), *eros* (“erotic love”), *philia* (“brotherly love”), and *storgé* (“familial affection”). To add in distinctions from the East Asian tradition, we might also mention 慈悲 (Ch. *cibei*, Jp. *jihi*, “compassion”), 戀 (Ch. *lian*, Jp. *koi*, “yearning love”), 愛 (Ch. *ai*, Jp. *ai*, “possessive love”), and 仁 (Ch. *ren*, Jp. *jin*, “humane conduct”). Each of these concepts of love has a different shade of meaning that has evolved historically and each reveals a different aspect of human existence. Hence each also sheds new light on the attitude needed for aesthetic judgment. The one thread that runs through them all as concepts is the sense of outward yearning concern. They all seek something outside the narrowness of the ordinary self.

In *Study of Ethics*, Watsuji mentions one view of love given by Hegel (WTZ 10:87). Watsuji summarizes Hegel’s view as, “love is the contradiction that to abandon oneself is to acquire oneself” (WTZ 10:88). Hegel captures something important about our conceptions of love, so I shall provide an extended quotation from his *Philosophy of Right*:

Love is in general the consciousness of the unity of myself with another. I am not separate and isolated, but win my self-consciousness only by renouncing my independent existence, and by knowing myself as unity of myself with another and of another with me. [...] The first element in love is that I will to be no longer an independent self-sufficing person, and that, if I were such a person, I should feel myself lacking and incomplete. The second element is that I gain myself in another person, in whom I am recognized, as he again is in me. Hence love is the most tremendous contradiction, incapable of being solved by the understanding. Nothing is more obstinate than this scrupulosity of self-consciousness, which, though negated, I yet insist upon as something positive. Love is both the source and solution of this contradiction. As a solution it is an ethical union. (§158, 139)

In other words, love means that our individuality is constituted in and through our openness to the other.

For the purposes of understanding aesthetic judgment, what love must mean is one’s identity as a subject requires a willingness to go beyond one’s horizons

while accepting the otherness of the object. That is, love desires the other without needing to possess it or smother it. To the contrary, the lover finds herself only by losing herself to the beloved. The feeling of disinterested enjoyment rests on just this.

In Plato's *Symposium*, the character Aristophanes tells a myth about the origin of love. Once, human beings were wholes with four arms, four legs, and two faces, but now we have been divided into halves as punishment by the gods. As a result, we spend our lives searching for our lives in search of a lover to complete us, that is, searching for our other halves:

Why should this be so? It's because, as I said, we used to be complete wholes in our original nature, and now "Love" is the name for our pursuit of wholeness, for our desire to be complete. (192e)

The form of love that makes criticism possible is similar in that it too is a drive to reunify in cleavage what was originally together without division. In criticism, we are not just looking for another person to complete us, but for oneness with the emptiness out of which subject and object co-arise. This return with difference is the foundation of aesthetic goodness and the drive that compels our experiences to evolve in progressively novel forms. The true critic must clear a path through culture on which this process can manifest itself.

To be sure, an overemphasis on the word "love" when explaining the attitude of the critic can lead to a misunderstanding of what aesthetic judgment calls for. Again, the critic must always be ready to criticize the ugliness of the ugly. While this is compatible with a deeper understanding of love, it easily becomes obscured if our concept of love is too shallow.

Referring to this attitude with the name "empathy" may prevent some misunderstandings at the cost of a degree of vividness. The English word "empathy" was coined as a translation of the German *Einfühlung*, which was popularized by

German philosopher Theodor Lipps (1851–1914).<sup>91</sup> Watsuji mentions Lipps in his unfinished notes on art theory and wrote about him several times in *Revival of the Idols* (1918).<sup>92</sup> The German *Einfühlung* and the Greco-English “empathy” are both compounds meaning “in feeling.” The preposition “in” suggest that while outside the thing being empathized with, we nevertheless enter into it ecstatically. We feel from our position as subjects into the position of the object. In doing so, we come together with our fellow appreciators, the artist, and the object itself.

If we reexamine aesthetic experience in light of the importance of empathy to criticism, we find that the “disinterest” of “disinterested enjoyment” refers not to any lack of interest for the object, but a disinterest in the prerogatives of the ordinary self. By looking on an object with empathy, we are able to appreciate what is good for the object apart from how the object could be instrumentally good for us. In the moment of ecstatic unity with the object, we do not seek to annihilate it or change it, but delight in its being what it is. It is for this reason that Buddhists and other religious practitioners claim that taking up the perspective of the non-dual no self (*muga* 無我) leads us to look with a gaze of compassion. In the feeling of beauty we get the sense that everything is in its right place and take joy from the dynamic goodness of the object as a whole. The role of the critic is to form a space in which the ordinary self can be set aside and the perspective of non-duality underlying ordinary experience can be uncovered.

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<sup>91</sup>. See the etymology of empathy presented in the Oxford English Dictionary: “empathy, n.”. *OED Online*. December 2011. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/61284>.

<sup>92</sup>. *Revival of the Idols* is *Guzō Saikō* 偶像再興 (WTZ 17:1–284), a collection of short essays by Watsuji. See *Lipps and Nietzsche* (*Rippusu to Niche* リップスとニイチェ, WTZ 17:167–171), *Lipps’s Individualism* (*Rippusu no Kojinshugi* リップスの個人主義, WTZ 17:172–174), and *Lipps’s Warning* (*Rippusu no Keikoku* リップスの警告, WTZ 17:175–178).

## Individuality and sociality in genius

If criticism is the name we apply to the social pole of creative evolution as double negation, genius is the name of the individual pole of that relationship. However, can we consider genius as a purely individual phenomenon or must we also consider its relationship to a critical milieu?

Kant writes in the *Critique of Judgment* that, “Genius is the innate mental predisposition (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art” (Ak. 307). On Kant’s theory, genius is an innate talent in particular individuals to create new rules of taste to match our indeterminate concept of beauty, rather than any communal capacity (though it is through this capacity that communal nature speaks). However, if we examine the concept of genius more closely, we find, as Hegel emphasizes, genius must speak to “the spirit of the times.” For one to paint like Picasso in the Renaissance would not have gotten one far, and to paint like Picasso today is merely to be an imitator. Moreover, as presented in the last chapter, the milieu of a work is not to be neglected. Frank Lloyd Wright’s famous house “Fallingwater” would not be a work of genius if reproduced anywhere else in the world. Genius requires an empathic ability to read into the “vital energy” of one’s time and place.

In addition to this ability to read into the existing spirit of things, genius also seems to redirect the course of artistic history. In “The Decay of Lying,” Oscar Wilde has an interlocutor remark,

At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did not exist till Art had invented them. (41)

The passage is slightly hyperbolic, but Wilde’s basic point is fair. As artistic genius penetrates into a culture, it changes the quality of our aesthetic experiences. Genius reveals to us a world that would have been otherwise invisible,

and through the coming together of critical sentiment in aesthetic judgment, our perception is made sharper than it would otherwise be.

In addition to penetrating into the world as it is and changing the world into something new, genius also possesses the ability to travel from one world to another. A work of genius is born at a particular moment in history within a particular milieu, but it shows its inner genius when it then crosses those contextual boundaries and become a global phenomenon. The greatest artists are those who create global standards for art (think of Picasso who was Spanish by birth but celebrated worldwide) and the greatest works of art are those that function even beyond their original contexts (think of the Venus de Milo, which was originally a religious artifact). The passage of time, in particular, is crucial to genius because only time allows us to separate the particular fancies of our own era from the enduring features of the human condition. As time passes, works of genius shine brighter with relevance rather than dimming under the dust of history.

Examined from this perspective, though genius is the individualized pole of critic-genius dyad, it must not be seen as the possession of an individual alone. The *Odyssey* is clearly a work of genius whether or not it was created by a single individual named Homer. The individuality of genius is a reflection of its ability to create a work with a context inherent within it that spills out into the world of the audience who receive it. This process is “individual” in the sense that genius enriches the private experience of a world that opens up to public criticism. The new world in a work of genius is the crystallization of the historical and climactic conditions of its context of creation, but genius also gives rise to a new space of possibilities above and beyond those conditions. Those great works of art like the Venus de Milo or the paintings of Picasso are great because they bring their ideals with them when they travel and instantly reconfigure the cultures into which they are introduced.

Kant claims that genius is the ability to bring a rule of nature to art, but it would be better to see it as the ability to bring an object out of its context by expanding its context in unexpected new directions. What makes genius so fascinating is not just the individual accomplishment of a particular work or object, but the social achievement of an ability to create or alter the existing ethos of an aesthetic community. Genius is made possible by the pre-conditions of the history and milieu it expresses, but genius goes beyond its origin to alter the possibility of future aesthetic experiences. Genius reads into its world with empathetic, loving identification, but then causes that empathetic love to spread to others and the world to grow.

Because of the nature of the subject as primarily actively embodied alongside objects (*shutai* 主体) rather than passively contemplating objects disembodiedly (*shukan* 主観), genius is better understood as a mode of creative activity within society than as a form of individual insight alone. The activity of genius is a kind of “world traveling” in which the genius taps into the non-dual no self (*muga* 無我) that underlies the separation of the subject and object in ordinary experience. The “empathy” or “love” that makes this kind border crossing possible is an openness to the emptiness (*kū* 空) of the self and all things. By realizing the emptiness of things, the genius feels the contingency of the current configuration and begins to inhabit a new possibility through a concrete act of self-expression. The self thus expressed is not the ordinary self of everyday experience but the enlarged self of no self. What makes this process possible is the universal emptiness of things. Because all things are empty, there is always going to be more to reality than we can capture in a reduction, hence there will always be new worlds for genius to explore.<sup>93</sup> Whether we understand parts in terms of the whole or wholes in terms of their parts, such understandings always leave behind a surplus of value available for genius to creatively appropriate.

The ability of genius to both incorporate and transcend its circumstances in history and milieu is well illustrated by Watsuji in “The Japanese Spirit” (1934, WTZ 4:281–321). There he looks at the nature of novelty in the development of a people’s history. On the one hand,

the realization of a national mission is an attempt to make truly and newly manifest that which *is not yet manifest*. To speak in Bergson-like fashion, this realization is an entirely new creation; it must not be just a making real of something seen before in a previously existing idea. (WTZ 4:301)

On the other hand,

The past is the past of something that comes to work itself into the future; just as the future is the future that shoulders the past. It follows that however fundamentally new a creation may be, it is not able to cast off its limitations from the past. (WTZ 4:301)

Watsuji explains his meaning by reference to the work of Michelangelo:

Greek and Roman sculpture was a past he shouldered. Because he understood it sufficiently, he understood also the impossibility of establishing new boundaries for creation by walking the same old path. So, he set his sights on a beauty never looked for by the Greek sculptures. We may call it an internal beauty or a spiritual (*seishin-teki* 精神的) beauty. [...] One who see his statue of Moses will feel vividly his violent moans as he tried to push off the heavy weight of Greek style. The heroic balance and quiet dignity possessed by statues of the Greek gods is nowhere shown in the shape of the character here created. Generally speaking, it has no beauty and grandeur beyond its form. And yet, that body, wrapped in its intricate garments, causes one to feel keenly a tremendous strength of will and tenacious personality (*jinkaku* 人格). This is an impression wholly unseen in Greek sculpture. (WTZ 4:302)

The genius of Michelangelo was his ability to use his extensive knowledge of the world of Greek sculpture to create of a new world of his own. His work was not simply a copy of what came before him, but at the same time neither was it a something wholly new. Without Greek sculpture to provide a basis for his understanding, the creation of a new style would have been impossible. Its novelty lay

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<sup>93</sup> The computer scientist Alan Kay remarks, “All creativity is an extended form of a joke. Most creativity is a transition from one context into another where things are more surprising. There’s an element of surprise, and especially in science, there is often laughter that goes along with the ‘Aha.’ Art also has this element. Our job is to remind us that there are more contexts than the one that we’re in—the one that we think is reality” (Feldman, 29).



in the way that he was able create a bridge between worlds, and even today we are able to cross those bridges and travel to the worlds he created.

The activity of crossing from one world into another is valuable because it is this process that uncovers the seams of cleavage in ordinary experience. We feel differences by contrasting them, so movement from one world to another is the only way to uncover the structures that give a world its shape. This is why theory and understanding are so often retroactive rather than prospective. Only once the contrast has been experienced is its meaning clear. Because of this, our search for the most general form of aesthetics must be conducted in and through particulars. Genius creates something particular and great in private, then this private greatness reconfigures the values of the public by communicating this private feeling to each individually as well as to all collectively. Hence a truly thorough deconstruction of aesthetics cannot overlook the importance of the nation as the broadest context in which a unified culture is disseminated. To understand this process in greater depth I must next make a slight detour into the nature of private and public values in the realm of national politics.

### **The public/private distinction** **Totalitarian and liberal extremes**

Conceptually, we can distinguish two extreme methods for determining the degree of separation between public and private values. The first extreme is a form of totalitarianism in which public and private values are one. No individual person may possess a value without authorization by the state, and vice versa, the values endorsed by society as a whole must also be upheld by each person individually. The opposite extreme is a form of liberalism in which private and public values have no intersection. Each individual may possess whatever private values he or she likes, but that individual is forbidden from imposing these private values onto the public as a whole, and, vice versa, the public is forbidden

from altering the private values of any of its members. What is shared by these caricatures of totalitarian and liberal positions is a lack of dynamism. The line between the personal and the political is fixed where it is fixed, and there can be no alteration of the line, whether to allow more personal latitude in the case of a totalitarian state or to allow public recognition of private feeling in the case of liberalism.

The totalitarian extreme has the advantage of clarity but the disadvantage of sheer impracticality. Human beings vary in their experiences and beliefs, and so far no sublation of the historical dialectic has yet caused the formation of a total unity of persons. As a result, totalitarian states find themselves constantly faced with the problem of internal dissidents, traitors, and subverters of the public order. The Watsujian anthropology of unity/division/union predicts this will be so as long as human nature endures.

The liberal extreme has the advantage of practicality but the disadvantage of a certain incoherence. Various attempts have been made to explain where precisely public values originate if not private values, but none of these attempts have been especially convincing. The exact position of the line separating the personal and the political is also subject to much dispute. One frequently seen strategy is to appeal to Thomas Jefferson's famous aphorism, "it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg," and claim that the line between public and private concern may be drawn where private beliefs impose a harm on others in the public. However, there are many privately held convictions about the nature of the world that the state has a public interest in contradicting.<sup>94</sup> Whether such beliefs cause "harm" to others depends greatly on one's definition of harm and one's conception of the public's justifiable interests. In the limit, one might claim that anything that undermines the unity of the nation does harm to the public, in which case

liberalism has collapsed back into totalitarianism. The state is an arrangement of human affairs that gains legitimacy through its promotion of the general welfare, and it is impossible to imagine such an enterprise could be conducted without some shared picture of what the good life or good lives may be.

Both extreme totalitarianism and extreme liberalism run into these problems because they fail to account for the full range of human existence. In *The Study of Ethics*, Watsuji lays out two cases in which the movement of human existence becomes stagnant and society is harmed as a result:

in a certain case, there is a *stagnation of the movement towards individual independence*, and as a result a society closely resembling an organism emerges. [...] In the other case, there is a *sublation of independence*, that is, the *stagnation of the movement of return* in the negation of a negation, and as a result we see the emergence of individuals closely resembling coexisting atoms. (WTZ 10:143)

In other words, both extremes—the dreamt of organic unity of totalitarian society and the atomized anonymity of liberal society—are forms of society that result when we attempt to put a halt to the movement of human existence. As such, neither form of social arrangement gives full expression to our authentic natures as human beings. Watsuji is quite clear that both social arrangements are bad to the extent that they become fixed in place (*kotei* 固定).

Against both of these static views of the private-public distinction, I wish to advance a dynamic conception of the private-public distinction that I derive from my reading of Watsuji's work. On my view, the private values of individuals and the public values of societies must be understood through the logic of double negation. Liberalism is correct that there must be a realm reserved for private

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<sup>94</sup> One of the most notable of these is the belief of Christian Scientists that vaccines and medicine are harmful, but it is easy to multiply examples. Denialism about global climate change or the link between HIV and AIDS can also be injurious to the welfare of a nation, but most Americans would be highly wary of restricting such speech. During wartime, however, nations routinely take it upon themselves to restrict speech as ordinarily harmless as talk about the weather, if it is felt that such speech constitutes a vital state secret. As such, the line between private belief and public concern is not as simple to draw as it might seem on the surface.

values that is outside of the scope of public criticism. The first moment of the movement of double negation is the moment of individuality and without this moment, there would be no truly human life. The attempt to prevent the development of novel private values is an attempt to bring to an end the forward movement of history. Many totalitarian systems explicitly champion this claim—that the end of history is upon us—but if it were so, it would hardly need championing. The preservation of a space in which private thoughts, beliefs, values, and feelings can be nurtured is essential to the well-ordering of society.

On the other hand, the attempt to halt the flow of private values into the public realm as envisioned by some but not all liberal theorists can also be damaging to human existence if taken too far. The moment in which a value can return to society for incorporation into the public as “common sense” has a great importance. To give a few examples from recent American history, it is impossible to imagine the abolition of slavery, the development of universal suffrage, or the extension of civil rights without a background of strong private moral conviction bleeding into the public realm. The “problem” of Martin Luther King’s religiosity is often mentioned in this discussion. Can we imagine his incredible efficacy at appealing to the sympathies of the American public without reference to the religious nature of that appeal? Private values that are successful become incorporated into the fabric of society and transform the public.

Of course, my purpose in this dissertation is not to debate the nature of the state but to explain the role of the subject and object in aesthetics, but I feel that this explanation would be incomplete without some reference to the dynamic interplay of public and private value feelings in double negation as well as the political implications of Watsuji thinking. Aesthetic genius depends critically on the ability of private and public values to interchange.

### Watsuji on the nature of public and private

The first volume of Watsuji's *Study of Ethics* approaches the public/private distinction from two directions. The first is to explain the private experience of time and space in terms of public experiences like communication, news, and so (WTZ 10:152–62). The second is to explain the public experiences of various social structures (couples, families, cultures, states, etc.) in terms of the private experience of solidarity (WTZ 10:330–36).

Important to understanding Watsuji's anthropology is the concept of the social realm or *seken* 世間. As in word *ningen* ("human"), the character 間 conveys a spatial or temporal interval, but what is interesting is that 世 (also read *yo* when written in isolation) is likewise both spatial and temporal. *Yo* indicates either the world (spatial) or a generation (temporal).<sup>95</sup> *Seken* plays a role in Watsuji's philosophy similar to that played by "the They" (*das Man*) in Heidegger, but unlike Heidegger's the They, Watsuji's social realm is not an alienating force that divorces us from our authenticity but the ground out of which our authenticity emerges. The social realm is an important extension of our "being in the world" (G. *In-der-Welt-sein*, Jp. *yo no naka* 世の中) as relational beings. Criticism can therefore be understood as the judgment of the social realm without it thereby either becoming divorced from the judgment of subjects or simply reduced to an aggregation of the private judgments of so many individuals. The social realm is made of many interlinked realms of publicity and privacy.

Publicity and private existence are mutually entailing terms. Publicity is lack of privacy. It is a mode where everything is shared together. Privacy on the other

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<sup>95</sup> The English word "world" and the German *Welt* once shared with the Japanese *yo* the dual meaning of time and space, but they eventually lost the sense of temporality and became nearly purely spatial. See "world, n.". *OED Online*. June 2012. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/230262>.

hand is lack of publicity or a mode that attempts to share nothing. According to Watsuji,

publicity (*kōkyōsei* 公共性) is something that is not hidden from the social realm (*seken* 世間). That is, it is possible for all persons to take part in it. If persons take part in an existence and are able to *divide and share it together* (*mit-teilen*), then that existence is public. (WTZ 10:158)

Here Watsuji explains publicity in terms of the German word *mit-teilen*, which is a compound of “with” and “dividing” that means “communication.” Publicity is based on this process of taking information and communicating it to different subjects by dividing it up. Another way to put it is that publicity is “the character of the social realm (*seken* 世間) as such a ‘place (*basho* 場所) where things are apparent’ ” (WTZ 10:153). Publicity comes about as shared knowledge through our physical communication with one another and not through a kind of extra-sensory “social consciousness” that connects mind to mind directly (WTZ 10:160–2).

Privacy, on the other hand, is the deprivation of social existence:

the individual moment in human existence becomes apparent as “private existence” (*shi-teki sonzai* 私的存在). It is an existence that does not become apparent in the place where things become apparent; that is, it is a deprived form (*ketsujo-tai* 欠如態) of publicity. It follows that private existence is also *something essentially public*, but this only goes so far as it possesses the mode of *privatus*. (WTZ 10:153)

The logic of Watsuji’s double negation ensures that privacy always contains within itself the seeds of possible communication with others:

Even things like the secrets hidden away in the depths of one’s heart are private just insofar as one does not desire or allow others to take part in them, and not because it would be absolutely impossible for another to take part in them. (WTZ 10:333)<sup>96</sup>

Privacy comes about because we resist publicity. We hide certain truths away; we exclude others from our groups and associations; we are selective in our loves.

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<sup>96</sup> The reader is invited to compare Wittgenstein’s famous “no private languages” argument (*Philosophical Investigations* I §256 and onwards, pp. 78ff).

This does not mean that privacy is an ill to be combatted as a totalitarian might claim. A family, for example, has certain people who are members of its society and others who are excluded. This gives the family a characteristic of privacy with respect to outsiders but a characteristic of publicity with respect to its members. Hence publicity and privacy are contrastive terms (like *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽), rather than an exclusive binary of absolutes:

as a deprived form of publicity, private existence is just *a mode of communal existence*.  
Communal existence realizes itself *through private existing*. (WTZ 10:334)

The communal structures of society depend crucial on the setting of boundaries and the building up of walls, but the tendency of these walls is to slowly crumble due to erosion by the waves of publicity. Hence, Watsuji concludes, “history moves forward, not by hidden true aspects (*shinsō* 真相), but by publicity” (WTZ10:159). That is, the advance into creative novelty sought in aesthetics and elsewhere depends crucially on the making public of values. Imperfect publicity may conceal the world of a genius today, but if the genius is truly efficacious, it will overcome this concealment tomorrow:

The publicity that concealed Socrates’ greatness was also exactly the place where his greatness was made apparent. Seen this way, though publicity conceals the true aspects of events, it also makes them apparent. (WTZ 10:159)

The greatness of a genius like Socrates may be hidden from the social realm temporarily, but when the truth comes out, the social realm will be the space in which it presents itself.

One criticism that has been raised of Watsuji’s system is that these publics are structured in a rigid hierarchy from the couple up to the state. The downside of such a rigid hierarchy is that, especially in his war era writings, he may make it seem that the state is synonymous with the absolute totality out of which individuals and collectives emerge (that is, emptiness), and that the individual must in

all cases return to a national totality. Even from his own perspective, it must be emphasized that any concretely realized collective is as empty as the individual, hence it would be wrong for the nation to be conflated with absolute emptiness. At best, the nation is able to *symbolize* the absolute in which there is no privacy or exclusion, but it can never itself *be* such an absolute. Treating it as a such is the root of many excesses and errors. That Watsuji himself seems to do so in some of his writings should be seen as a warning to us of the terrible importance of describing the structure of human existence correctly.

### **The necessity of both idols and iconoclasm**

Watsuji's critics often contend that his system subordinates religion in the service of the state, because he takes the state to be the public that symbolizes the absolute. These criticisms are not without merit but must be placed within the broader context of Watsuji's life and career. In his very earliest years, he followed the English Romantics, Bernard Shaw, and even Nietzsche in rejecting religion as an outmoded influence on society, but as time went on he began to reconsider its importance. By the time of his *Revival of the Idols* (1918), Watsuji had begun to understand religion as an important determinant in the evolution of culture. Where for Nietzsche "idols" represent congealments of life that ought to be destroyed, Watsuji saw also their positive role in the progression of life. In "The Psychology of Idol Worship,"<sup>97</sup> Watsuji explores the mindset of those Japanese who first accepted the foreign importation of Buddhism to Japan. In it, Watsuji writes,

What especially catches the eye is that they demanded artistic joy (*geijutsu-teki na kanki* 芸術的な歓喜) from religion. Going further than that, they tied their faith to this sensuous joy. The former is proved by the great art that was born of the Nara period. The latter is unquestionably proven by several prominent social phenomena manifesting the power the priests of that era held over the human body. These characteristics may have varied in form to some degree but are surely apparent in every religion that has since been born in

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<sup>97</sup>. "The Psychology of Idol Worship" is *Gūzō Sūhai no Shinri* 偶像崇拜の心理 (WTZ 17:276–84).



Japan. [...] This close melding of art and religion is able to provide an extremely justified ground for idol worship. (WTZ 17:277)

In other words, the ancient Japanese came to accept Buddhism as a religion first because of their love of the aesthetic, artistic joy it provided, which they expressed through the religious experience of idol worship. In that context, “Art appreciation and religious conversion were one” (WTZ 17:283). As a result, “Just as art appreciation springs in origin out of the inner life of its makers, so idol veneration also springs from the inner life of idol makers” (WTZ 17:283).

Watsuji describes the strong aesthetic experience of distancing and dissolution that the early Japanese Buddhist adherents would have had listening to chanting of the monks:

Those who were intoxicated (*tōsui* 陶醉) on music would sometimes open their enchanted eyes and gaze on the heavenly idols. They had already lost consciousness of themselves. They had already integrated the idols into their hearts, and in an infinity of gratitude and blessings they experienced an intense shining and a nimbleness of the whole heart.—Actually, their agitated hearts were extremely sensitive toward the statues and music. The strength and chiaroscuro of that inner life was no different in its extreme intensity of feeling, though it could not be called well defined. When all of their artistic results and religious influences were concentrated on just one point, that is, the veneration of idols, especially as in the aforementioned circumstances, the depth and strength of that ecstasy (*uchōten* 有頂天) seems to be almost beyond our imaginations. In this way, our ancestors had tasted one kind of aesthetico-religious great joy (*bi-teki shūkyō-teki na dai-kanki* 美的宗教的な大歓喜) in idol worship. (WTZ 17:282)

While a strong influence from Nietzsche’s concept of Dionysian ecstasy is apparent in this passage, we also see the beginnings of a unique understanding of the relationship between private religious and aesthetic sentiments and public social conditions. Watsuji shows that the rigid structure and rules of Buddhism—anathema to the Dionysian Nietzsche—have provided the space in which the Japanese devotees can experience an aesthetic rapture together. The rapture of the monks was made possible first by their resolute detachment from the world, which became a precondition for their losing themselves to the world. Though Buddhism took root on the strength of its connection between aesthetic

experience and religious experience, nevertheless, it brought a political and social meaning that was to transform Japan:

The temple of that time was a treasure hall of culture as seen from perhaps any perspective. They were not merely places for the monasticism and discipline of an ascetic lifestyle. Rather, its chief content was the whole of scholarship, artistry, self-cultivation, and so on. It was one place that contained all kinds of spiritual nourishment, as if a university, a theater, an art school, a museum, a music school, a concert hall, a library, and a monastery had all been rolled into one. There the priests heard the sutras containing the Buddha's lectures on philosophical principles as symbolical poetry. As they became familiar with those legendary, highly symbolic expressions, they connected those lectures with the statues and images of the Buddha that concretized them. (WTZ 17:282)

Here we see that the private aesthetic and religious feelings that swept over the primitive Japanese ended up causing a wholesale reordering of the public. The Buddhist idols had a kind of genius to them that brought with them the power to restructure the social realm of the primitive Japanese technologically and culturally as well as religiously and aesthetically.

Unlike Nietzsche's theory of *ressentiment*, as Watsuji portrays it, this restructuring is not the cause of the loss of a more authentic nobility but a deepening of the self-understanding of the Japanese people. Watsuji finds in Buddhism an appreciation for the importance of experiencing the flow of life unimpeded by conceptual congealing similar to Nietzsche's, and this leads Watsuji to see the positive value of idols, both literal and conceptual. Where Nietzsche casually sneers at the inauthenticity of Buddhism's life negating tendencies (it is guilty of "denying the will" and "longing for nothingness"<sup>98</sup>), Watsuji began to appreciate life affirming aspect of self-negation in the face of an awesome aesthetic other. Nietzsche was only aware of a caricatured portrait of South Asian non-Mahāyāna Buddhism, but Watsuji was thoroughly acquainted with both Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna Buddhism, which gave him a better perspective on the ways in which Buddhism could be life affirming and embrace aesthetic experience. While both

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<sup>98</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, §7, p. 40 and §21, p. 98.

Watsuji and Nietzsche emphasize the importance of intoxication to the opening of the self to the Dionysian joy of aesthetic/religious ecstasy, Watsuji also begins to sympathize with the veneration of the idols as well, which is an act that would strike Nietzsche as servile and a betrayal of the will to power. As David B. Gordon argues in *Self-Overcoming*, the common thread connecting Watsuji's work before and after his *Study of Nietzsche* (1913) is a recognition of the overcoming of self-egoism as the means of expressing the authenticity of the true self (vi, 13, et al.).

In his preface to *Revival of the Idols* (WTZ 17:9–17), Watsuji expands the themes of the essays in the collection by illustrating his point with the story of the Apostle Paul. According to Watsuji, Paul was disgusted by the Dionysian excesses of the ancient Athenians and managed to so impress them with his disdain for idolatry that a period of iconoclasm followed for the better part of two millennia. Watsuji allows that this was for the best historically, and yet we cannot wholly rid ourselves of the idols:

There is no need at this time to repeat that iconoclasm, or the destruction of idols, is indispensable to the progress of life activity. The flow of life is maintained by this path (*michi* 道) alone. Idols, which we unceasingly construct in our subconsciouses, must be destroyed by careful and unceasing effort.

And yet, it is not that these idols are created without meaning. They ought to give the flow of life strength in unity and guide the growth of life toward a healthy abundance and beauty. This is the indispensable duty that they have for our life activity. Stuck without them between the confusion of consciousness and the division of desires, a person will end up stunted. It is possible that some will even go so far as treating "nihility" (*kyomu* 虚無) as an idol in order to be able to lead a life of positivity. (WTZ 17:9)

In other words, the idols so ostentatiously cast out by Paul, Nietzsche, and Bacon must not be dismissed out of hand. They give life a direction through the attractiveness of the ideals contained within them.

What finally brought an end to the era of iconoclasm in the West was a literal return of the idols of the past: ancient Greek and Roman statues were restored to positions of honor within society as part of a revival of classical values. However,

the new positions of those statues was by no means identical to what it had been before the period of iconoclasm:

Nevertheless, idols that have been revived are no longer gods deserving of veneration. No one thought to offer before them a beast in sacrifice. No one thought to entrust his own fate into the hands of these idols. What caused the people tremble was not their being heretical gods but their beauty. Paul's expulsion of idols is something that should have been accepted as a matter of course only to the degree that the idols were taken to be gods for veneration. However, as works of art venerated for their beauty, the idols were offered unfair treatment by Paul. Now that unfair treatment is being recompensed, and the idols are seen by the people as possessing a dignity even as mere works of art. (WTZ 17:12)

In other words, statues like the Venus de Milo continue to possess a kind of awe inspiring power, but we no longer feel that power to be a religious one, but primarily an artistic one. The meaning of its genius has been transmuted. It still contains a world within itself, but this world is now a secular one. Nevertheless, the genius of the work is so great, that even without its religious trappings, we feel compelled to supplicate before its beauty. This shows the change brought about in the status of religion and the change in the status of art. New iconoclasts in the form of anti-clerical and even atheistic movements had taken root in the West, but their iconoclasm could not be total. So soon as they suppressed God, they found that they had to put "Art" on a pedestal to replace him. Watsuji writes,

The Christian "God" is also a kind of idol. Paul expelled idols made by "the hands of men." The modern iconoclasts expelled gods made by "the heads of men." However, just as Paul could not completely purge the idols, the modern iconoclasts were also unable to completely purge God. Even after the much-discussed pronouncement that "God is dead," a god-seeking heart stealthily takes root in the breast of the people. (WTZ 17:13)

Though the cycle of iconoclasm and idolatry that Watsuji describes took place in the West, he clearly felt that its lessons were applicable for Japan as well.<sup>99</sup> Moder-

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<sup>99</sup> See Lafleur, "A Turning in Taishō," which argues that Watsuji was strongly influenced by his disgust at the *haibutsu kishaku* 廃仏毀釈 ("Discard the Buddha, Cast out Śākyamuni") movement in Meiji era Japan. During this movement, many treasures of Buddhist artwork were destroyed because Buddhism was thought to be foreign and opposed to Japan's native Shinto religion.

nity has its own idols, and though they may seem indispensable today, tomorrow they are sure to be cast out:

Though we have lost the name of God, nevertheless we cannot refrain from searching for a new name to give Him. Should we call Him "the Will"? Ought we to speak of Him as "the Absolute"? Or might we call Him "the Electron" as well? Perhaps these names ought to be cast out by a new Paul as demonic gods. We have built an altar to "the Unknown God" and await the appearance of a Paul that can clearly preach about God to us. And so we wait in anticipation of the destruction of all of the idols created by the spirit of modernity. (WTZ 17:14–5)

For his part, Watsuji sees both iconoclasm and idol worship as necessary moments in a process of historical unfolding. Neither can exist without the other, because they both bring us closer to discovering the hidden depths of the ordinary. The "god" that we seek is the unknown and unknowable, hence any attempt we make to absolutize the public over the private or vice versa must fail. Our private vision of the good must spill into public life without thereby choking out the possibility of new private visions taking root. The idol worship of sclerotic public values must be smashed by a private zeal for iconoclasm, but so soon as the values of iconoclasts become sclerotic, it is time for a private worship of idols to drive out the iconoclasts who now dominate the public. This historical cycle is another key facet of the movement of double negation underlying human existence.

The central fact that drives this endless cycle of idol worship and iconoclasm is that there is a mysterious profundity behind everyday life. Geniuses are those who somehow become alert to this profundity and find a concrete means of conveying it to others. It is overlooked by the ordinary self, but we can recover it when we use aesthetic awareness to alert us to the ecstatic interiority of things:

I preach the path of righteousness. I suppose some will call this banal. I, however, am talking about the joy of discovering new life in the banal. I am trying to tell you about the sweetness of the nectar secreted away inside the shell of the banal. As for the banal—fixed ideas that are taken to have no life—we needs must first shake the dulled senses out of their sleep by waking (*satoru* 悟る) the shell itself and then wield an iron hammer to break it apart. The eyes of new senses will for the first time be awakened to the revival of the idols.

I do not, however, merely aim to “resurrect the old.” When the old is raised up again, the old shell is cast off and a new life shines forth. The fetters of time no longer apply in this new life. It is eternally young, eternally new. My aim is in this way to extoll the eternally present life. I feel a presentiment of a great path that converges in the heart of all idols. And I feel that all human efforts, past and future, will at the last be gathered in the direction of this path. (WTZ 17:16–7)

In this passage, Watsuji waxes purple about the possibility of a more ecstatic existence. Thus we see that for the early Watsuji, religion is not just a means of ethnic self-expression whereby the state comes to enlist higher ideals for its legitimation. At its best, religion is a means to aesthetic appreciation of the eternal in every moment. The difficulty is that over time religions inevitably evolve into mere “idol worship” and must be smashed by iconoclasm so that the innate impulse to religiosity can find new and better ways of expressing itself without being stifled by frozen conceptions of how things ought to be. While this understanding of religion does not make up for the shortcomings of Watsuji’s later “idolization” of the state, it helps put into perspective how such idolization came about, in that he came to identify the state with that power driving the cycle of idolization and iconoclasm forward. Properly understood, however, we should see the power of genius that deepens the development of creative novelty in history like a pedestal to the unknown God—the anticipation of a presence ever deferred.

### **The genius of Murasaki Shikibu**

#### ***The Tale of Genji***

To illustrate my arguments about the interplay of criticism and genius, I will now examine the work, world, and critical reception of Murasaki Shikibu (紫式部, 973?–1014? or 1025?), the author of *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji Monogatari* 源氏物語, c. 1010). *The Tale of Genji* is a vast literary work (sometimes called “the first novel”) suffused with a particular expression of empathy that Watsuji called an “infinite emotion” (WTZ 4:151). According to Royall Tyler, one of the many translators of *Genji*, the

following praise by Montaigne of Homer applies to Murasaki in a near perfect parallel:

It is against nature that he made the most excellent creation that could ever be; for things are normally born imperfect; they then grow and gather strength as they do so. He took poetry and several other sciences in their infancy and brought them to perfect, accomplished maturity. Because of this one may call him the first and last of poets, in accordance with that fine tribute left to us by antiquity: that, having had no predecessor to imitate, he had no successor capable of imitating him. (“Translating The Tale of Genji”)

As Tyler puts it in a lecture about his experiences as a translator,

*The Tale of Genji* is not the first extended work of prose fiction in Japanese, to say nothing of Latin or Greek, but is surely the earliest such work from anywhere in the world that lives on even today as a widely revered masterpiece. No predecessor in Japanese literature foreshadows its greatness, and nor did any successor equal it thereafter. Since the roughly the first decade of the eleventh century, when the lady Murasaki Shikibu wrote it, it has been the foremost classic of Japan. (“Translating”)

If the phrase “work of genius” applies to anything, it certainly applies to *The Tale of Genji*. *Genji* was undeniably something individual and new. It achieved a scope and scale unprecedented in Japanese literature and transformed the context of its creation. At the same time, however, it is not entirely accurate to see the work as without a predecessor in its critical milieu. Even before *Genji*, the genre of *monogatari* (物語, “tales”) was prolific, but few treated it with the seriousness that Murasaki brought to her work. Prominent *monogatari* include the fairytale-like *Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* (*Taketori Monogatari* 竹取物語) and the swaggering romance *Tales of Isé* (*Ise Monogatari* 伊勢物語). *Monogatari* were written in the classical Japanese vernacular, but literary Chinese was considered much more prestigious. Because only men were encouraged to learn Chinese, many of the best works of classical Japanese were written by and for women—and therefore suffered from a deficit of esteem in the eyes of society. *Genji* showed that it was possible for an author to write a work in Japanese that could rival the best works of Chinese in its ambitions.

*The Tale of Genji* is a work of enormous scope. A full translation into English can easily run over one thousand printed pages. It contains over 430 characters (Morris, 265), but focuses primarily on the life of its eponymous hero, Hikaru Genji 光源氏, and his wives and children. Genji is the son of the Emperor, but because his mother is a low ranking concubine and Genji has no influential male relatives to support him in court, the Emperor believes Genji's life will go more smoothly if he is deemed a commoner. Genji is stripped of his imperial rank and given the surname Minamoto 源 ("Genji" 源氏 means "one named Minamoto"). From this inauspicious beginning, Genji embarks on a series of love affairs and other adventures in which his star slowly rises. With the passage of time, his charm and good looks eventually cause him to be raised to the rank of honorary retired emperor. After Genji passes away, the final twelve chapters of the work follow the careers of Kaoru (who is falsely believed to be Genji's son) and Niou (Genji's grandson) as they reenact some of Genji's earlier adventures with less success than their illustrious forebear. The work is set about one hundred years before the time of its composition, and despite the enormity of its cast of characters, the author is unerringly consistent in her portrayal of the age, rank, and relationships of the figures appearing (Morris, 266).

In spite of this vast scope, *Genji* manages through its repetition of themes and structures to provide a unity to the work without having to follow the traditional format of conflict, climax, and resolution commonly found in Western novels. According to Ivan Morris in *The World of the Shining Prince*, the central theme of the *Genji* is

the nebulous, unreal quality of the world about us, and the idea that our life is here is a mere "bridge of dreams" (the title of her final book), over which we cross from one state of existence to another. (271)



While it is true that “the books tend to be more independent than the chapters of most modern novels” (266), the themes of the whole “combine to give it an artistic unity” (267), which makes the work a true “novel” and not just “a haphazardly sequence of loosely connected episodes” (266).<sup>100</sup> The work makes careful use of foreshadowing and repetition in order to produce a psychological depth few works can rival. Morris writes that Murasaki

had keenly observed how different kinds of men and women spoke and behaved, and she tried to enter into their feelings and to know why they acted as they did. She was sensitive to the natural surroundings in which these people lived and to the subtle effects these surroundings had on them. (256)

This ability to synthesize these private observations into a new world for public appreciation shows clearly Murasaki’s genius as an author. A work of genius is one that creates a world that brings privately felt values out for public examination, and *Genji* masterfully allows us to enter into the internal lives of its characters by making unprecedented use of the Japanese language as a tool for penetrating into the perspective of others. As Morris notes, classical Japanese, “was endowed with an extremely rich grammatical apparatus but a relatively limited choice of words” (281). Earlier writers had been restricted by these linguistic limitations, but Tyler gives one example of how Murasaki employs the unique grammatical features of classical Japanese to her advantage:

A feature of Japanese grammar, especially in this earlier period of the language, is that it offers only direct, not indirect speech. It is not possible to say, “He said he would go.” One can only say, “He said, ‘I will go.’” A passage reporting the gist of what someone said therefore looks as though it is repeating the speaker’s precise words. A reader familiar with indirect speech, as the tale’s original audience was not, easily gathers most of the time that the words reported are unlikely to be those originally spoken, or certainly not all of them; but the exclusive use of direct speech certainly gives the narrative freshness and immediacy. Imagine, then, the effect of reporting a character’s silent thoughts in exactly the same way, as unvoiced speech.

Murasaki Shikibu seems to have been the first Japanese writer to exploit interior monologue fully as a narrative technique. When it appears, one suddenly finds oneself

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<sup>100</sup>. Note, however, that opinions differ. Watsuji felt that *The Tale of Genji* was not as unified as it could be and found the work somewhat disjointed (WTZ 4:141–3).

listening directly to a character's thoughts [...]. The text shifts from third-person narration to first person interior monologue and back again. ("Translating")

A reader of *The Tale of Genji* must be prepared at every moment to jump into the perspective of a character and see things from that point of view if only for a paragraph or two. The overall impression this gives the text is a kind of cloudy feeling that is impossible to convey in translation. The deliberate vagueness of the text can be compared to the sense of *yūgen* (幽玄, "mysterious profundity") stemming from *ri-ken no ken* 離見の見 ("the seeing of distant seeing") in Noh theater discussed in chapter three. One pivots from one perspective to another and inhabits first this and then that character's point of view. Names and titles are used only sparingly if at all, and typically it is only the level of politeness employed grammatically that allows one to know who is speaking to whom. This vagueness is used very deliberately to give the reader an internal sense of the concerns of life for those aristocrats in this very narrow social world. Unlike literary Chinese, in which words are strictly regimented into characters that take on life in relation to one another, in classical Japanese, one word blends into the next in a profusion of auxiliaries, stems, and particles such that it is difficult to say where one ends and the next begins. Each part is interpenetrated by the whole, just as each perspective yields to the next. The genius of this work shown in the way that Murasaki skillfully employs the vocabulary and grammar of classical Japanese to reinforce her overarching themes.

Where Murasaki's facility with language particularly shows itself is in the hundreds poems included in the work. Tyler explains that,

Good manners required every member of the nobility to compose such poems at suitable junctures, and every young lord or lady was brought up so as to be able to do so, although naturally not every effort was a great success. There are 795 poems in *The Tale of Genji*. It is difficult to overstate their importance, readers over the centuries having often valued them above the prose. In fact, for hundreds of years the tale was seen by many as above all a manual of poetic composition. ("Translating")

Murasaki shows her genius in her ability to match the quality of the poems to their fictional authors. It is impossible for an author to write convincingly about a poet better than himself or herself, but Murasaki is able to match noble poems to the noble characters and coarse poems to the coarse characters. In doing so, she not only sheds light on the fictional world of her creation but also makes the real world that existed in Japanese history a thousand years ago seem to unfold before our eyes as something living and breathing even now.

Take for instance, this unusually frank exchange between Genji and Hanachirusato, a woman with whom Genji has had several affairs and who eventually comes to live with him. In chapter 25, *Hotaru* 蛍 (“Firefly”), she tells him the following poem:

その駒もすさめぬ草と名に立てる汀の菖蒲今日や引きつる  
*Sono koma mo / susamenu kusa to / na ni tateru / mizawa no ayame / kyō ya hikikitsuru*

Have you chosen today to pluck after all at the water’s edge  
the sweet flag that everyone knows full well a steed disdains? (Murasaki, 1:460)

To which he replies,

鳩鳥に影をならぶる若駒はいつか菖蒲に引き別るべき  
*Nio-dori ni / kage wo naraburu / waka-koma wa / itsuka ayame ni / hikiwakaru beki*

When would the young steed who aspires to keep company with the faithful grebe  
ever let himself be drawn to abandon the sweet flag? (1:460)

About the pair of poems, the narrator comments, “They certainly were blunt enough with each other” (460). This remark may seem puzzling to modern readers—what is blunt about grasses, horses, and birds?—but the explanatory notes in Tyler’s translation make its meaning clear. Hanachirusato is referring to herself as “sweet flag” and to Genji as a “steed.” An earlier poem—*Kokinshū* 古今集 #892, “Old is the grass beneath the trees at Ōraki; no steed grazes there, no one comes to mow it” (460, n. 16)—was known to contain a blatantly erotic subtext,

and Hanachirusato alludes to it in order to express her feelings of neglect. Genji has gone off in pursuit of other, often younger, women, though today he has chosen to return to her. In his response, Genji picks up her metaphor but mentions the grebe because the bird is known for pairing for life (460, n. 17). The meaning of his response is that he will be faithful to support Hanachirusato even though she has aged.

The genius of Murasaki is that she can make this otherwise impenetrable exchange something inviting to contemporary readers, such that we can look at this exchange through the eyes of Hanachirusato and Genji in turn and see from the perspective of their world just how “blunt” it truly is. As Tyler notes,

The characters seldom call a spade a spade, and moreover their notion of “spade” is very broad. Although the issue of marriage is prominent in the tale, the narrative has no stable word or locution for “marriage” or even for “husband.” (“Translating”)

Only by giving up the perspectives of our ordinary selves can we fully enter into the world of the text and its seemingly strange customs and culture.

### **The world of Murasaki Shikibu**

We do not know what name the woman now known to history as “Murasaki Shikibu” 紫式部 used in life, nor can we be sure of her year of birth, her year of death, or indeed even if she was the sole author of *The Tale of Genji* as we have it today. We do know that her father, Fujiwara no Tametoki 藤原為時, served for a time in the Ministry of Ceremony (*Shikibu-shō* 式部省), hence the use of “Shikibu” today. “Murasaki,” which means violet, is commonly thought to refer to the heroine of *The Tale of Genji*, one of Genji’s primary wives, but it could perhaps also refer to the color of her family flower, the wisteria (*fuji* 藤), or to a poem in the *Kokinshū* 古今集, an imperial poetry anthology (Morris, 252, n. 2). Murasaki was probably born between 973 and 977 (Bowring, 9 and Morris, 254) and may have

died as early as 1014 or as late as 1031 (Bowring, 15, Morris, 255 and Tyler, Introduction, xvii).

Although various theories of alternate authorship for *The Tale of Genji* have been proposed (particularly regarding the later chapters of the work, which take place after the death of Genji), there is no strong evidence to linking anyone other than Murasaki to the text (Tyler, Introduction, xviii and Morris, 259). There is, however, internal evidence suggesting that the work was written out of order and otherwise edited (Tyler, Introduction, xvii and WTZ 4:130–43). The oldest manuscripts of *The Tale of Genji* are from some centuries after its composition; nevertheless, the differences between the various manuscript lineages appear to be relatively minor (Tyler, Introduction, xviii–xix).

Most of what we know for certain about Murasaki's life comes from her diary, started in 1008 and kept for around two years during the period when she would have been writing *The Tale of Genji*. Unfortunately, as Morris notes it "does not help us to fix any accurate chronology; for the Heian diary was an impressionistic literary form rather than a systematic record of events" (255). Indeed, her diary does not even mention the daughter she was raising as a widow (Morris, 254). Nevertheless, the diary does give us some insight into her world and provides the best evidence we have of Murasaki's sole or at least primary authorship of the *Genji*, since it refers to her involvement with the tale. Another frequently used source of first hand information about the life of Murasaki is her poetic memoirs, but as Robert Bowring warns in the introduction to his translation, these are "highly artificial" and "hardly a reliable guide to objective truth" (3).

The impression of Murasaki given by historical accounts is of someone studious and reserved but with a keen insight into the character of the world around her. Bowring calls her "somewhat retiring and pensive" with a "pervasive melancholy" balancing out any *joie de vivre* (12).<sup>101</sup> Entry 71 in her diary paints a

self-portrait of a woman somewhat embarrassed by her intelligence trying unsuccessfully to hide her light under a bushel (Bowring, 138–9). As a child Murasaki was more adept at memorizing Chinese characters than her brother, leading their father to lament, “If only you were a boy, how happy I should be!” (Morris, 253). At one point to her dismay, she was even given the nickname “the lady of the Chronicles” for the understanding of *The Chronicles of Japan* (*Nihonshoki* 日本書紀, 720) demonstrated by *The Tale of Genji* (Morris, 257). When Murasaki is caught secretly teaching Empress Shōshi (彰子, also called “Akiko”) how to read the poems of Bai Juyi (白居易, 772–846), she remarks on the whole scandal, “Ah what a prattling, tiresome world it is!” (Bowring, 139). Empress Shōshi is also thought to be the patron who allowed for the composition of the *Genji*. Unlike her peer and literary rival, Sei Shōnagon (清少納言, c. 966–1017), Murasaki seems never to have had the gift of ready wit but instead had a slower but deeper understanding (Morris, 256).<sup>102</sup> She married a bit late for her time to a man about the age of her father (Morris calls it “a *mariage de convenance*,” 254) only to have her husband pass away a few years later. Some speculate this may have influenced the feeling of impermanence (*mujōkan* 無常感) in the *Tale of Genji*, but Morris finds it unlikely (254). It seems more likely that Murasaki drew inspiration from the Buddhist teachings that dominated the outlook of her era.

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<sup>101.</sup> As an illustration of Murasaki’s outlook on life, take entry 27 in her diary, “As day dawned I looked outside and saw ducks playing about on the lake as if they had not a care in the world: ‘Birds on the water; / can I look at them / dispassionately? / I too am floating through / a sad uncertain world.’ They too looked as though they were enjoying life but must often suffer, I thought to myself” (Bowring, 75).

<sup>102.</sup> It is interesting to note that two literary geniuses of the Japanese world would be born and live in such close proximity to one another. One thinks also of the clustering of artistic talent in the Italian Renaissance, literary talent in “moveable feast” of expatriate writers in Paris in the 1920s, musical talent in turn of the nineteenth century Europe, or philosophical talent in ancient Athens. It seems that nothing spurs on a genius so well as peers of a similarly great stature. A young person begins as a critic of the older genius before developing a new genius of one’s own. The social milieu of the Heian court was apparently especially conducive to the development of Japanese literature in spite of (or perhaps even because of) its low social status compared to Chinese.

Murasaki lived during the height of the Heian period (平安時代, 794–1185). The preceding Nara period (奈良時代, 710–794) was a period of tumult and transformation due to the adoption of Buddhism and other mainland influences, but by the time of the Heian these foreign influences had become internalized and were being transformed into a thoroughly native form. It was an era of unprecedented decadence for the aristocrats at the imperial court in what is now Kyōto. In many ways, it was a world “which in customs, beliefs, and social organization was more alien than anything that Gulliver discovered on his travels” (Morris, xii). As Tyler explains, the world of the novel is a world in which

no one is ever alone. A lord or lady lived surrounded by a more or less large staff of women and, just outside, men. The notions of solitude and privacy did not exist. (Introduction, xix)

This is the stage upon which Genji conducted his many romances. The number and frequency of these affairs has been a scandal to many later readers, but we must not think of his world as one “blithe permissiveness” when we consider the many means that were employed “to defeat erotic spontaneity” by separating men and women (xix). Etiquette and architecture were entirely arranged to allow only indirect communication while hindering direct visual contact. In this world, when a man in love with a woman he has never seen “takes it upon himself to brush her curtain aside and go straight to her, he will by that gesture alone have claimed something like the final intimacy” (xix). It within this atmosphere of simultaneous absolute publicity and privacy that the term *yo no naka* 世の中 (“being in the world,” cf. *seken* 世間, “the social realm”) came to also take on the narrower meaning of “the relationship between a particular man and woman” (xx) because of the paradoxical centrality of this relationship to the conduct of existence.

In spite of the seemingly alien nature of the customs of Heian court life, Morris finds that

one of the remarkable things about this novel of a millennium ago is how readily we can enter into the thoughts and feelings of its characters and respond to the total vision of life that its author communicated. The more we know about its times—social organizations, religious ideas, marriage customs, literary conventions, and so forth—the greater our understanding will be. Yet, even with the most elementary knowledge of the Heian background, the sensitive reader can grasp the psychology of a character like Kaoru, for example, and appreciate the close connection between beauty and sorrow that is the underlying theme of the novel. (278)

This surely is the greatest testament to the genius of *The Tale of Genji* and its author: that it draws us into its world not by minimizing the differences between its world and our own but by inviting us to give up our attachment to our ordinary self and to look deeply into what Morris calls “an authentic picture of a beautiful and most intriguing world” (289).

### ***Genji* and the critical tradition**

The earliest bit of “critical reception” to *The Tale of Genji* that we have outside of Murasaki’s own diary is by the thirteen year old author of the Sarashina Diary (*Sarashina nikki* 更級日記, c. 1022):

I read *Waka Murasaki* and a few of the other early books in *The Tale of Genji*, and I longed to see the later parts... I was feeling most dejected about it when one day I called on an aunt of mine... And so it was that she presented me with fifty-odd volumes of *The Tale of Genji* in a special case... Oh, how happy I was when I came home with all these books in a bag! (Morris, 263)

Besides helping us set a *terminus ante quem* for the composition of the bulk of the tale, this shows the enthusiasm that readers have brought to the text for centuries. A work like *Genji* is not yet a work of genius when its author lays down her pen. Rather, it grows into the work of genius that it is by affecting this sort of response in those critics who later approach it with an empathetic heart. A coming together of vital energy is thereby achieved, and the course of art history altered.



The continued vitality of *The Tale of Genji* is shown in part by the numerous adaptations that continue to be made of the work. It has been made into nearly countless movies (live action and animated), television series, manga series, Noh plays, operas, and other works.<sup>103</sup> Chief among these adaptations are the many translations. A partial translation into English by Suematsu Kenchō published in 1882 marks the first time *Genji* left its native land. The first complete translation of *Genji* was YOSANO Akiko's 1913 translation of the work into modern Japanese—a task only slightly less demanding than a translation into a wholly foreign language (Tyler, “Translating”). Arthur Waley's translation (1925–1933) is noted for coupling a relatively free translation with an acutely refined sense of style. Complete, direct translations now exist in at least a half-dozen languages with more being made all the time (Tyler, “Translating”).

One of the most important of critical interpreters of *The Tale of Genji* is Motoori Norinaga (本居宣長, 1730–1801). Norinaga was a pioneer in the field of National Studies (*kokugaku* 国学), and his many writings on *The Tale of Genji* work diligently to downplay any foreign or Buddhist influences found within the text. After an initial education in neo-Confucianism, Norinaga turned sharply against Chinese culture and sought to recover what he took to be the lost ‘way of the gods’ shown in ancient Japanese works like *Genji*.

In “The Exquisite Comb” (1799), Norinaga sets out what he takes to be the moral of *The Tale of Genji*:

What Confucianism deems good, Buddhism may not; and what Buddhism considers good, Confucianism may regard as evil. Likewise, references to good and evil in *The Tale of*

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<sup>103</sup>. Here is a partial list of just some of the adaptations for film and screen: YOSHIMURA Kōzaburō's *Genji Monogatari* (1951), KINUGASA Teinosuke's *Genji Monogatari: Ukifune* (1957), MORI Kazuo's *Shin-Genji Monogatari* (1961), TAKECHI Tetsuji's *Genji Monogatari* (1966), ICHIKAWA Kon's *Genji Monogatari* (1966), KUZE Teruhiko's *Genji Monogatari* (1980), SUGII Gisaburō's *Murasaki Shikibu Genji Monogatari* (1987), TBS's *Hashida Sugako Special Genji Monogatari* (1992), NHK's *Eizōshi Genji Monogatari Asaki Yume Mishi* (2000), HORIKAWA Tonkō's *Sennen no Koi: Hikaru Genji Monogatari* (2001), TSURUHASHI Yasuo's *Genji Monogatari: Sennen no Nazo* (2011).

*Genji* may not correspond to Confucian or Buddhist concepts of good and evil. Then, what is good or evil in the realm of human psychology and ethics according to *The Tale of Genji*? Generally speaking, those who know the meaning of the sorrow of human existence, that is, those who are in sympathy and harmony with human sentiments, are regarded as good; and those who are not aware of the poignancy of human existence, that is those who are not in sympathy and harmony with human sentiments, are regarded as bad. (508)

For Norinaga “the sorrow of human existence” or *mono no aware* (written もののあはれ, もののあわれ, or 物の哀れ and loosely meaning, “the pathos of things”) is the key to understanding not just *The Tale of Genji* but ancient Japanese literature as a whole. One might naturally suppose that Murasaki Shikibu took the theme of the suffering of human existence from the Buddhist influences so prominent in the Heian period, but Norinaga denies this. For Norinaga, a sense of *mono no aware* is more basic than anything taught in Buddhist doctrine. *Mono* means things, events, or person considered concretely. *No* is a genitive particle. *Aware* is more complex. In its modern reading, it has the meanings like personal sorrow and grief or pity and compassion for others, but Norinaga saw it as a spontaneous *cri de coeur* expressing a deeply felt response to the world itself. Moved by the world, one naturally cries out, “Ah!” and “Hare!” which were then contracted to form the word *aware*. Hence *mono no aware* as a whole is a naturally arising empathetic response to the world comparable to grief, pity, or compassion.

In “Personal Views of Poetry” (1763), Norinaga explains

what “to know *mono no aware*” means is that every living creature in the world possesses a feeling heart (*kokoro*). When there is a heart, by coming into contact with things, one necessarily thinks. Therefore, every single living creature possesses the ability to sing (*uta*). Because, among all living creatures, man excels over a myriad of beings, when he thinks straight and with a clear heart, his thoughts become extremely deep. ... When we ask the question why human thoughts are so deep, I can only say that it is because they know *mono no aware*. Whenever a man performs an action, every time he comes into contact with this action, his heart is moved and is unable to stand still. (Marra, *Poetics*, 172)

In other words, *mono no aware* is a spontaneously felt empathetic insight into the heart of the things around us. One with proper comportment cannot help but feel into the world around. The cultivation of aesthetic experience requires a heart

open to compassionate identification with others. As Norinaga puts it in “A Little Boat Breaking a Path Through the Reeds” (1757),

When a man who knows *mono no aware* encounters something that is *aware*, he may try not to think about it, but he cannot prevent himself from feeling the *aware*. It is like a man who, though he tries not to hear the thunder hears it and is afraid. (506–7)

Moreover, Norinaga claims, the purpose of the arts is to take this sheer aesthetic experience and give it outward expression in a form that can be shared with others. Similar to Tolstoy’s theory in *What is Art?* or Aristotle’s theory of catharsis, Norinaga’s theory is that the fundamental purpose of art is to take these moments of private insight and publicize them by sharing one’s feelings with another. He writes in “A Little Boat,”

A poem is not merely something composed to describe one’s feelings when one can no longer bear the *mono no aware*. When one’s feelings are extremely deep, one’s heart still feels dissatisfied and unresigned, even after having composed a poem. In order to feel comfort, one must read the poem to someone else. If the other person hearing the poem finds it has *aware*, this will greatly comfort the poet. (507)

Sharing our innermost feelings with others is the only way to tame those feelings and bring meaning to the world.

Norinaga’s interpretation of ancient Japanese literature is idiosyncratic but not without internal support from the texts themselves. In the case of *The Tale of Genji*, an important bit of evidence for the attitude of its author is the defense of fiction given in chapter 25, *Hotaru* 螢 (“Firefly”). In it, Genji finds his adopted daughter Tamakazura engrossed in works of fiction. At first, he critically remarks, “Women are obviously born to be duped without a murmur of protest” (Murasaki, 1:461), but he quickly softens his position,

“I have been very rude to speak so ill of tales! They record what has gone on ever since the Age of the Gods. *The Chronicles of Japan* and so on give only a part of the story. It is tales that contain the truly rewarding particulars.” He laughed. “Not that the tales accurately describe any particular person; rather, the telling begins when all those things the teller longs to have pass on to future generations—whatever there is about the way people live their lives, for better or worse, that is a sight to see or a wonder to hear—overflow the

teller's heart. To put someone in a good light one brings out the good only, and to please other people one favors the oddly wicked, but none of this, good or bad is, is removed from life as we know it." (1:461)

Genji is claiming that tales express in concrete particulars the universal values that cut across our experiences. It is only by giving particular expression to these values that we can hope to start a conversation with history about the meanings of things. From this passage, it is reasonable to conclude that Murasaki Shikibu's motivations for writing were similar. She felt that she needed to record for posterity something about the feelings that had moved her heart. She felt a need to publicize her private experiences of the good and bad parts of life and give them new significance through the retelling.

Entry 73 of Murasaki Shikibu's diary expresses a related sentiment:

I want to reveal all to you, the good and bad, worldly matters and private sorrows, things I cannot really go on discussing in this letter, but no matter how objectionable the person one is describing, perhaps one should never tell all. (Bowring, 141)

In other words, the circumstances of social life prevent Murasaki from truly venting all of her judgments, feelings, and observations in public. Part of the attraction of fiction for Murasaki must have been the freedom it gave her to show the whole world, warts and all, without concern for whose feelings she might hurt otherwise.

I believe this evidence shows that Norinaga was correct to emphasize the importance of self-expression for works of ancient Japanese literature like *Genji*. Nevertheless, he went too far in his attempt to remove the Buddhist elements from the tale. For example, in entry 72 of Murasaki's diary, she expresses a desire to become a nun and entrust her life to the Buddha Amitābha (Bowring, 139–41). Whether this was meant seriously or only hyperbolically, in any event, the strong influence of Buddhism on her thinking and writing is undeniable.

Watsuji considers Norinaga's claims himself in his short essay "On *Mono no Aware*."<sup>104</sup> Watsuji hails Norinaga's emphasis on *mono no aware* as the "root implication" (*hon'i* 本意) of literature as a singular achievement (WTZ 4:144). Norinaga was able to take literature and make it an "independent world" apart from the worlds of metaphysics or morality (WTZ 4:145). Still, the foundation of this independent world remains to be established. Norinaga claims that the feeling of *mono no aware* is able to heighten and purify our understanding of the world. If this is so, *mono no aware* cannot be just any feeling whatsoever, but it must be a particular kind of feeling that we *ought* to feel given certain circumstances. This leaves the question of normativity unsettled. As Watsuji asks, "is the real truth of what he calls the innermost depths of humanity (*jinkei* 人性) also a *Sollen* (German, 'ought') as well as a *Sein* (German, 'is')? Norinaga does not answer this question" (WTZ 4:148).

Watsuji attempts to posit an answer on Norinaga's behalf. As Watsuji sees it,

What he calls "a pure heart" (*magokoro* まごころ) is something that *is* and also something that *was*, but never something that entirely *appears* before one's eyes. It is then a request for something to appear. It follows that this can be seen in a certain sense as an ideal. (WTZ 4:148–9)

*Mono no aware* is the anticipation of a presence ever deferred. It is a desire for the absolute that never make itself fully apparent but can only ever show itself in partial and particular forms. Because of the intrinsic futurity of this desire, it is possible for it to be prescriptive as well as descriptive. "When he explains the innermost depths of humanity, they are a true existential reality (*shinjitsuzai* 真実在) as well as an ought (*tōi* 当為)" (WTZ 4:149).

Seen in this light, the feeling of *mono no aware* that Norinaga saw as the cornerstone of ancient Japanese literature alone can be found in other historical eras of

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<sup>104</sup>. "On *Mono no Aware*" is '*Mono no Aware*' ni Tsuite 「もののあはれ」について (WTZ 4:144–55) part of *Study of the History of the Japanese Spirit, Nihon Seishin-Shi Kenkyū* 日本精神史研究 (1926).

artistic development but with important differences in how that feeling expresses itself in particularity (WTZ 4:149). Each historical milieu must work out for itself such a concrete expression of the meaning of its world, and these concrete expressions must be as varied as the eras they embody. It is impossible that one genius should bring a conclusion to aesthetics once and for all.

Watsuji further believes that Norinaga's interpretation of the *mono* ("things") of *mono no aware* should be sharpened. We must pay attention to the objectively pathos-filled world as well as the pure heart of subject who know that pathos. What are these things moving us to pity and why are they so sorrowful? Because Norinaga is polemically opposed to Buddhism, he chooses to overlook this aspect of *mono no aware*, but even without committing ourselves to a fully Buddhist metaphysics, we can see that objects emerge with subjects to temporarily preserve themselves against loss before vanishing. As such, there is a natural pathos to the process by which things emerge only to return to their origin. This pathos is not just the particular pathos of particular things but also the eternal pathos of all things whatsoever. Hence the *mono* of *mono no aware* refers both to the particular stimuli that causes an individual to feel pathos and the universal aspect of things in general that provokes this pathos. It is a universal that shows itself as a particular. Hence, Watsuji writes,

In the end, *mono no aware* must be a yearning for this eternal source. By including joy, sorrow, and all other emotions within this yearning, it becomes itself for the first time. Whether conscious or not, everything grounded on "exclamation" is such a yearning. All amusements think of eternity, and all loves pine for it. For this reason, love is sorrow. (WTZ 4:150)

Accordingly, we should not think of *mono no aware* as being a unique emotion particular to one period in time and space only. If Murasaki truly was a genius, she must have aimed at something beyond the bounds of her particular era, even if she could only express it from within a particular era. Like the many forms

of love and compassion that have been identified over the centuries from *agapé* to *jihī* 慈悲, *mono no aware* is a feeling both highly culturally specific and utterly universal.

Therefore, the reason that *mono no aware* has the tendency, Norinaga identified, to purify and heighten experience is that

*Mono no aware* is an infinite emotion possessing in itself an inclination to purification and catharsis. That is, it is a movement inside of us that aims to return to the origin of ourselves. Literature expresses this in a concrete form to a heightened degree. Thereby, through the things (*mono*) that one goes beyond, we come into contact with the eternal light of things (*mono*) one cannot go beyond, amongst the things that one goes beyond. (WTZ 4:151)

Transcending the bounds of the ordinary and creating a new world full of new possibilities as genius does is possible only in and through a thorough attentiveness to the world there is. Thereby we open up the interiority of that world and expose it as an embodiment of those values that go beyond what can be said. *The Tale of Genji* is such a work of genius and its author is to be remembered for the way she crystallized the world around her as an expression of her own personality. As Watsuji puts it, “*Mono no aware* is a flower that bloomed in a woman’s heart” (WTZ 4:154).

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to perform a hermeneutic deconstruction of the aesthetics of genius. We have seen that the genius and the critic are not antagonists, but two sides of a single process. Private values are nurtured by the genius and spread through out the public by the critic. Over time, these values become hardened, and it becomes the task of a new genius to smash them open in search of a more beautiful expression of the absolute. *The Tale of Genji* is one such work of genius, notable in particular for the pervading sense of *mono no aware* or “the pathos of things” present in it. Its author, Murasaki Shikibu, captured in a highly

culturally particular form a feeling that is shared throughout the human condition in general.

Given the questionable use that Watsuji made of the state as a symbol of the absolute, it is interesting to note the threefold role played by *The Tale of Genji* in establishing a sense of Japanese nationalism.<sup>105</sup> First, at the time of its creation, it showed the viability of Japanese vernacular literature versus literary Chinese. Second, it was used by Motoori Norinaga to support the notion of a uniquely Japanese aesthetic insight during the period of national isolation. Third, it was employed by nationalists and Japanophiles in the early twentieth century as an emblem of courtly elegance of Japan on a global stage and a signifier of imperial legitimacy. The trap that many commentators fall into when they see these roles played by *Genji* or some other work is to conclude that the work has no value outside of its employment in coercive, nationalistic projects. The direction of cause and effect is, however, surely the opposite. Because the genius of the work shows itself so clearly, it gets roped into other projects. If it were the case that the nationalistic project ‘created’ the genius of work, then the purported value of work would fall away as soon as the project was abandoned. Still vibrant at one thousand years old, *Genji* has already outlived many dynasties and empires.

In “Art and Ethics in Watsuji Tetsurō’s Philosophy,” Hiroshi Nara objects that Watsuji’s anthropology makes artistic genius impossible because

Art is not an expression of the artist as an individual but of the artist as defined in his affiliation to the larger social and political entity. There would be no art-for-art’s-sake in which art functions as an instrument of personal emancipation. That is, the artist would be in service of the group and, eventually, to the state. (112)

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<sup>105</sup> For an attempt at a non-nationalist interpretation of the *Genji* and critique of past nationalist interpretations see Caddeau, *Appraising Genji*. For an examination of the role of nationalism, orientalism, and colonialism in Arthur Waley’s translation see de Gruchy, *Orienting Arthur Waley*. Though Watsuji gave a positive evaluation of Norinaga’s theory of *mono no aware*, he can hardly be accused of using the *Genji* to bolster nationalistic claims. Watsuji himself found the work to be rich in emotion but lacking in unity (WTZ 4:130–43).



Furthermore, Watsuji's aesthetics leaves art with

no power to give birth to a new form of art which can challenge the status quo of society, including art. This is because moral laws, which artists must abide by, come from the absolute negation of the autonomous self. And only in this way, that is, by means of emptying the self into the totality of the nation, a person can be one with the nation. For an artist, there is no art that is subversive or produced to fulfill personal emancipation in Watsuji's framework. (113)

Nara is correct to claim that for Watsuji the artist emerges out of the social fabric of morality, but he is wrong to claim that employing Watsujian anthropology thereby suppresses all possibility of genius or historical change. If Watsuji were a totalitarian and felt that public values can trump all private values, this would be so, but as I have shown, it is precisely as a moralist that Watsuji feels qualified to speak to the ability of art and genius to subvert present art forms and advance history. Watsuji's anthropology contains a politico-ethical project, but this project ought to be seen as a dynamic aspiration for higher values rather than the reification of a static totality. To the extent that Watsuji himself aided the latter tendency, he should be criticized.

For Watsuji, local ethics follow the local ethos—the local way of life—as particular patterns that give concrete expression to the aspirations toward a truly universal ethics. As the local ethos changes, so too will local ethics. The artist who attempts to fashion an aesthetic experience is naturally limited by the contours of society as it presently exists, since it will be impossible for the artist to facilitate distance and ecstasy in relation to an object if the structure of society does not allow for such the reception of such objects. The paintings of Pollock could never have gained an audience in the salons of the 1850's, for example, which means they would not have provoked an aesthetic experience for anyone at that time. Without the critic Clement Greenberg to champion his work, it is unlikely that Pollock would have become the household name that he is today.<sup>106</sup> When society

has changed or is changing, however, a genius may become aware of the possibilities this creates and express those possibilities in art in such a way that a new category of aesthetic experience opens up. Genius gives the rule to art, but only in those historical and climatic milieux in which genius is nurtured by criticism and the rule can be successfully taken up. Critic and genius—idolator and iconoclast—must work hand in hand to enrich culture and prevent its stagnation and decay.

The feeling captured by the genius of Murasaki Shikibu and given the name *mono no aware* by her critic Motoori Norinaga is an excellent illustration of this point. *Mono no aware* is a kind of emotional openness to things, and its creation and explanation bring us closer to a total deconstruction of genius. We see in *mono no aware* that a cultural particular born out of an individual personality within a specific social milieu has the ability to go beyond the boundaries of its original context and reveal an aspect of aesthetics in its most general form.

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<sup>106</sup> See Frascina, *Pollock and After* for extended discussions of the role of Greenberg in the reception of Pollock.



Watsuji's no fascist:

Before explaining this distinction in detail, I wish to remark on Sakai's criticism of Watsuji concerning his writings about subjectivity:

the reader can hardly ignore the fact the author [Watsuji] also wished to construct a national narrative in which the identity of the Japanese nation could be constituted by means of the observation of cultural differences between Japan and other regions in the world. Consequently, one could conclude after reading the book that all other climates, cultures, and peoples are viewed as moments cumulatively synthesized toward a final objective: the cultural identity of the Japanese nation. (129)

As Kazuhisa Yoshida notes in "Two Faces of Postmodernism," Sakai's criticism reflect a common tendency among so-called "post-colonial" theorists:

Cultural typology is always labeled as a political ideology, because it ultimately contributes to the establishment of the political 'identity' of a modern nation-state by confining diverse, even miscellaneous, aspects of cultural practices within the assumed uniformity of national character. Therefore, only the intervention of "people as singular beings," whatever this mean, can rescue culture from such enforced confinement. (219)

In other words, Sakai is critical of Watsuji's attempt to describe the nature of subjectivity because he feels that this attempt is bound up a larger project of defining the nature of the Japanese people and such a project, perhaps inevitably, reinforces colonial prejudices and repressions. What I feel Sakai's criticisms miss is illustrated by this traditional story from the computer science community:

In the days when Sussman was a novice, Minsky once came to him as he sat hacking at the PDP-6.

"What are you doing?", asked Minsky.

"I am training a randomly wired neural net to play Tic-Tac-Toe" Sussman replied.

"Why is the net wired randomly?", asked Minsky.

"I do not want it to have any preconceptions of how to play", Sussman said.

Minsky then shut his eyes.

"Why do you close your eyes?", Sussman asked his teacher.

"So that the room will be empty."

At that moment, Sussman was enlightened.<sup>107</sup>

The space in which Watsuji was constructing his Japanese subject was not an empty space. Whatever the faults of how Watsuji constructed it, the alternative

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<sup>107</sup>. <http://catb.org/jargon/html/koans.html>

was not a social space without preconceptions. The alternative was a space in which the preconceptions were there but random—or worse, there as designated by colonizers or ultra-nationalists. Watsuji attempted to describe the subject as it seemed to him in his experience as Japanese and in contrast to experience of other cultures in both literature and lived experience. As a result, he should hardly be faulted for the attempt, only for his shortfalls. As Yoshida concludes in relation to Sakai's critique:

just as human nature is *essentially* ubiquitous, so is the diversity of cultural differences that exist in the world. It follows necessarily then that the typological analysis of cultural differences is responsible not so much for exacerbating the existing malaise of nationalism and racism, but, rather, for promoting a better understanding of our common humanity through the comparison of diverse aspects of people's real cultural praxes. (229)

Union Achievement of contact. Unity Primordial state of non-duality.

## **Glossary**

### **Japanese**

おもて がある である なかま まごころ ものがある もののあはれ 一期一会 世 世  
の中 世間 主 主体 主観 主語 主題 五倫 人 人と人との間に 人と人との間柄 人の存  
在 人の間 人性 人格 人間 人間の学としての倫理学 人間の行為的連関 人間存在の  
根本理法 仲 倫 倫理 倫理学 公共性 共同 名物 和 和敬清寂 問い 善 国学 国民 場所  
好き屋 存在 学 学問 客 客観性 幽玄 当為 悟る 感 感性 慈悲 数奇屋 数奇屋 日本人  
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