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THE ENDURING MIRROR OF JAPAN

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It is because the Far-East holds up the mirror to our own civilization, -- a mirror that like all mirrors gives us back left for right, -- because by her very oddities, as they strike us at first, we learn truly to criticize, examine and realize our own way of doing things, that she is so interesting. It is in this that her great attraction lies. It is for this that men have gone to Japan intending to stay weeks, and have tarried years.

-- Percival Lowell (1886)

The mirror still exists today, but we are more sophisticated than our nineteenth century forebears and would hardly assert, as Western visitors then did, that Japan was literally the antipodes, the land where everything was done backwards, upside down, in reverse. When the Japanese entered a house they removed their shoes, while Americans took off their hats; they lived on the floor in near-vacant rooms, while Victorians sat on chairs in parlors crowded with furniture and knicknacks; their carpenters cut logs by pulling the saw towards them; their houses were built by raising the roof first; their books read from right to left; in their language verbs came at the end of the sentence and pronouns were rarely used; when struck

with sorrow or tragedy, they smiled or even laughed.

The mirror's surface provided entertainment enough, but foreign residents knew that such practices bespoke more profound differences. These were almost impossible to assess, for that surface was dazzling, and crammed with images the Western mind found contradictory. The delicacy and beauty of the silk kimono, cherry blossom and exquisite porcelains, and the politeness of manner that could make the most cultivated American feel boorish and crude, were somehow inseparably linked to bloodthirsty samurai assassins, the fearsome practice of ritual suicide, the young girls literally sold into prostitution by their parents.

More than the odd images in the mirror moved Americans to reflection; it was also the special stake that the U.S. had in Japan. Admiral Perry's diplomatic triumph in opening the long-sealed empire capped our earliest impulse of Manifest Destiny and put a symbolic seal on a Pacific future. Japan was a special ward, our first Asian child, and this view survived despite the fact that the modernizers of the Meiji period considered America only one of many lands from which to learn. They were eclectic enough to take their legal system from France, army and educational system from Germany, railroad and navy from England; only in agriculture and religious missionaries did the United States remain supreme.

Here is an irony. Of all aspects of Western culture, Christianity was least interesting to the Japanese; even tolerance for it was the bitter pill that had to be swallowed with the sweets of modernization. But the American as missionary was more than the

American as Christian. The mission was also the evangelizing of republicanism, individualism and Progress, the secular version of the City on the Hill gone wild. The encounter with Japan is illuminating just because so many Americans have gone there as missionaries, only to find this pagan land raising serious challenges to their mission, values, way of life. To study the American meeting with Japan in the last century is to be struck with a shock of recognition. Both countries have changed drastically in the interim, but the odd mirror relationship that began with Perry remains familiar.

Early visitors had an advantage over us; however quickly Japan was modernizing, remnants of the feudal culture made contrasts between ways of life glaring. Today Japan glitters with hyper-Western technology and the first-time visitor to Tokyo is likely to find it more American than cities like Rome or Paris. (If this is partly due to the urban clearance of our wartime bombing, the Japanese passion for modernization might have achieved the same effect. Unbombed Kyoto now boasts skyscrapers and MacDonaldis too.) But the longer the foreigner resides in Japan the more apparent it becomes that basic values of the society are far different from our own, and these differences stand as a challenge to our imagination.

A good way of approaching such differences is to look at the experiences of Westerners in nineteenth century Japan. Of the many Americans who lived there and wrote perceptively in the last century, three best exemplify the notion of that enduring mirror --

William E. Griffis, Edward S. Morse and Percival Lowell. Unlike the more popular Lafcadio Hearn, in whose pages Japan remains forever mysterious and exotic, these men were advocates of modernization. But they too were attracted by the old culture. Their works show Japan as a challenge to American concepts of morality, aesthetics and self-identity and raise questions which remain familiar to anyone who has resided in modern Japan.

I

Pagan morality -- if such were the word -- was different from that of Christians: William E. Griffis knew that as well as anyone of his era. He had prepared at Rutgers for the ministry in the Dutch Reform Church and the call to Japan as a teacher of science came through church connections. Griffis, at the age of 27, arrived in 1870 at a time when opposition to the restoration government of the Emperor Meiji was still afoot. He taught in the remote domain of Echizen for a year, literally witnessed the abolition of feudalism, and then spent three more years in Tokyo. In the following half century he wrote no less than twelve books and hundreds of articles about Japanese civilization. The most popular was The Mikado's Empire (1876), half history and half journal, a volume which went through twelve editions.

Griffis possessed the mentality of the good missionary out to rescue the heathen from religious, moral and intellectual error, but his mind was unusually open for one of his background.

In The Mikado's Empire he was able to treat Buddhism and Shinto without editorial comment and point out that Japan's centuries of bloody warfare had many parallels in the history of the Christian West. This tolerance came later. He arrived fully expecting pagans to be degenerates and his first weeks in Yokohama confirmed this opinion. Drinking, gambling and prostitution in this Treaty Port might be indulged in by Westerners, but the explanation was that contact with heathen life was responsible for disintegrating their "granite principles of eternal right."

This judgment did not hold. In Echizen, Griffis was confronted by something that startled many American residents, religious or not: the Japanese not only had a strict moral code, but its tenets were not much different from those of Christianity. These pagans were "frank, honest, faithful, kind, gentle, courteous, confiding, affectionate, filial and loyal," and their society contained much less cheating, theft or personal violence that one could find at home. More startling was the fact that they tended to adhere to their morality much more faithfully than Westerners ever did. With no Puritan heritage, the Japanese moral code was neither gloomy nor repressive -- it did not prevent people from letting themselves go, having fun, enjoying the pleasures and pageantry of festivals of two religions. This disturbing revelation led Griffis to doubt the whole idea of Progress, both intellectual and religious: "I often asked myself the question -- why not leave these people alone? They seem happy enough and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow."

Experience of Japan regularly raised such questions for Americans. The usual strategy for answers was to retreat into a feeling that Progress was inevitable; besides, modernization was being welcomed by the Japanese. Some people wondered whether the older morality was suited to a Westernized society. Griffis at first hedged on this. He chided the Japanese for their enjoyment of alcohol, but this seemed a side issue. For an American of his era, the supreme test of a civilization, the way one judged its level, was the treatment of women, their social status and their purity. On these scores Japan was vulnerable. Women had few rights or opportunities and the virtue of chastity was situational, not absolute: it was perfectly acceptable, even laudable, for a young woman to prostitute herself to support her parents.

Griffis was both wholly committed to raising the status of women and too honest an observer to ignore the contradictions in his own viewpoint. For all the social restrictions and acceptance of legalized vice, Japan produced females who were altogether delightful. The young ones were gentle, modest, diligent and never flirtatious, and these young ladies grew up into wives and mothers who seemed so ideal that he guiltily forced his admiration into a dependent clause: "If unvarying obedience, acquiescence, submission, the utter absorption of her personality into that of her husband, constitute the idea of the perfect woman, then the Japanese married woman approach so near that idea as to be practically perfect."

Japanese women shook Griffis' moral foundations and led to judgments that good Christians at home would have found bizarre,

if not insane. He excused the nude public bathing of both sexes together as quite natural and modest in Japanese terms and suggested that the propensity of young women to strip publicly to the waist in hot weather was proof of their innocence, like "Eve before the fall." The Yoshiwara, the quarter for licensed prostitution, seemed a sensible way of geographically containing the "social evil," while the practice of taking multiple wives (indulged in only by the wealthy) in no way prevented the Japanese home from being "morally wholesome."

A society that was so attractive was also a threat. Poised on the brink of a dangerous cultural relativism unknown to his age, Griffis ultimately drew back and insisted -- against all his own evidence -- that Western family and social life, for all its failures, was "immeasurably higher and purer than that of Japan." They might be courteous, reverent, well-behaved, hard-working, simple and happy, but this condition could not survive modernization. It was impossible to adopt Western, enlightened ideas of government, law and society, without embracing their moral root -- Christianity. Japan was in danger of gaining "a glittering veneer of material civilization" and losing its soul. Only Christianity could provide for moral, spiritual and intellectual progress, and unless it were adopted, Japanese civilization would, like that of the American Indians, be destroyed by "the superior aggressive nations of the West."

II

Aesthetics was hardly a major concern of nineteenth century Americans, and Edward S. Morse was no exception to this rule. He was a practical Yankee who as a teenager had shed the Calvinist religion of his father; thereafter he believed only in what he could see, touch, smell, draw, and classify. These attributes led to a successful career as a naturalist. Morse was a member of the National Academy of Science and director of the Peabody Museum in Salem. He arrived in Japan in 1877 at the age of forty with the aim of studying local marine life and stayed on for three years to serve as the first professor of zoology in the new Imperial University. Like Griffis, he spent decades turning the experience into books and articles. The best known was Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings (1885), a work which remains in print today. Broader in subject than architecture, it is full of cultural comparisons that were later spelled out more fully in two volumes of selections from his journal, Japan Day by Day (1917).

Morse was initially impressed with two aspects of Japanese life -- the practicality of many traditional ways (such as the skilled use of tools by carpenters) and the open push for modernization. How good it was to see that Western medicine had swept aside the old "absurd" Chinese system of superstition, and how splendid to lecture on Darwinian evolution without fear of contradiction by the native clergy. Untrained and uninterested in matters of art, religion or philosophy, Morse concentrated his powers of observation on common objects -- tools, footwear, lanterns, hairdoes, utensils, latrines --

and on daily behavior. Quickly it became apparent that such matters led directly to the aesthetic, and he was faced with a fact that startled many Americans: the Japanese did not separate the practical from the artistic.

This showed clearly in home architecture. The nearly vacant rooms were practical because they could be used for multiple purposes (dining, living and bedroom all in one) and were easy to clean. At the same time they were perfect settings for the subtle pleasures of a restrained aesthetic -- the eye was free to enjoy the natural grain of wood pillars, the design of sliding screens, the asymmetrical flower arrangement in its basket or simple earthen vase, the single scroll hanging in the alcove. Appreciation of such art was universal. No matter how poor the household, it boasted some examples of carving, calligraphy or painting; indeed, the very utensils -- pots, washbasins, umbrellas, kettles, latrines -- achieved a level of design and ornamentation unknown in America.

Pervasive as the artistry of design was the passion for natural beauty. To someone from a culture where land, forests and mountains were often seen as obstacles to progress, or objects to be exploited, the Japanese reverence for nature could seem odd in the extreme. But Morse was charmed by the ubiquitous gardens and cultivated landscapes and fascinated to see hordes of normally hard-working people desert jobs to drink, write poetry and party beneath flowering plum or cherry blossom trees. This was only an extension of attitudes that suffused everyday life; the grace of serving girls, the delicacy of movement of both men and women, the

gentle politeness of conversation, the very arrangement of food on plates all bespoke an aesthetic unknown at home. Nor were such attributes the property of a single class; they showed equally among the poorest country folk and members of the old nobility, were exhibited by businessmen who loved to "trade and barter" as well as by university professors.

For all its strong attraction, this extreme aestheticism could not fail to make Morse nervous. In Japan, culture and etiquette were not confined to the sphere of women. Flower arranging, poetry writing, indulging in a love for flowers and trees, behaving with extreme delicacy and courtesy -- all such activities could seem threatening to the identity of the American male. Personally Morse was willing to expand the sphere of male interests; he studied two exquisitely delicate art forms -- tea ceremony and Noh singing. But he also felt it necessary to assert that an interest in such matters did not mean that Japanese males were "effeminate." Like Anglo-Saxons, they exhibited a propensity towards violence and in battle proved to be fearsome warriors, men of "fiery courage" and "reckless bravery."

Morse was remarkably free of beliefs that might keep him from facing the implications of what he observed. The cleanliness, strict morality and love for art and nature of the Japanese led him to the judgment that they were more civilized than his countrymen and he did not hesitate to suggest that Americans "had much to learn" from Japan. But the paradox was that Morse's own behavior showed the difficulty of taking such advice. In personal habits he remained as

informal, blunt, brusque, slovenly and indifferent to family obligations as he had been before going to Japan. His office and home in Salem were the polar opposite of the Japanese rooms he so admired, being heaped, crammed and stuffed with such a profusion of books, papers, journals, specimens, pottery, chairs, desks, tables and pieces of scientific equipment that the normal Victorian household was spartan by comparison. A final irony is that when he put together what is considered one of the finest collections of traditional Japanese pottery in the world (now housed in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts), Morse did something no native would have done -- he arranged works into a classification scheme adapted from natural science. This took into account kiln, family, village and region and wholly left aside aesthetic judgments. The implication was this: you could save traditional Japan only by ignoring or destroying its values.

III

Perhaps it is natural that Percival Lowell was the one to worry most over the relationship between tradition and the identity of the Japanese. To be a Lowell was to belong to tradition; Percival was of the seventh American generation of that family so deeply enmeshed in our history. If Lowells rarely had to struggle for money or social status, those of Percival's generation were not free of the national orientation towards individual success. Younger brother Abbott Lawrence became president of Harvard and baby sister Amy was equally acknowledged for her slender volumes of poetry and

thick cigars. Percival was Harvard, class of '76. After five years of helping to manage family enterprises, he embarked on a trip to Japan in 1883 as something of a lark. The following three trips in the next decade were in response to some inner tug that he wrestled with in three volumes which oscillated between travel and amateur anthropology (with a fourth devoted largely to Korea). When he departed Asia for the last time, forsaking Orientals for astronomy Lowell's most enduring legacy was The Soul of the Far East (1888).

Lowell arrived with the cosmopolitan taste of someone who had spent several years in Europe, was master of half a dozen languages and comfortably at home in highbrow circles on both sides of the Atlantic. Far more sophisticated in intellectual and artistic matters than either Griffis or Morse, he nonetheless reacted to Japan with much the same youthful enthusiasm. His heart was so captured by the people -- always good-humored, graceful, delicate, well-bred and "charming to meet" -- that this worldly traveler judged them "among the happiest on the face of the globe."

Unbound by either job or financial worries, Lowell roamed the cities and countryside in response to personal whims. Something about the uniformity of the civilization soon began to bother him. This showed clearly in the universally high aesthetic standards, at once an indication of the culture's glory and limitations. Japan was a rare land where "art reigns supreme," and the widespread "artistic appreciation of the masses" was astonishing to someone from a country where one expected "immense intellectual differences between man and

man." But this egalitarianism of good taste seemed to be purchased at an excessive cost. If artisanry could not be distinguished from art, if the eye of the cook placing food on a tray or the wife arranging flowers was always unerring, this was because no personal expression was involved. Art in Japan arose from a tradition. Individuals followed old patterns and added no creativity of their own; in fact, the Japanese were "wholly lacking in imagination."

Lowell developed a theory to explain why this was so -- the soul of the Far East was the "impersonality" of the people. Unlike Westerners, the Japanese had no strong sense of self attempting to achieve expression, and without such an individual sense there could be no imagination. Evidence for this lack of personality was everywhere: the language largely eschewed personal pronouns; marriage was no more than a "mercantile transaction" between families; birthdays were not celebrated and everyone turned one year older at New Year; the art contained no tradition of the individual portrait or the nude; the ultimate religious ideal of Buddhism was obliteration of the self.

Impersonality also had social implications. The morality of the people did not depend upon personal choice but was the mere product of a heritage that most individuals were not imaginative enough to violate. The social order produced people of a decent mean, but both genius and its opposite were absent. For Lowell this was a serious shortcoming. Like his contemporaries, he judged the level of a civilization by Progress, and that phenomenon depended upon scientific inventiveness, which had to come from creative

individuals. Yet rejecting the Japanese way was easier in theory than in practice. Lowell had difficulty tearing himself away from this land where impersonality was writ through every fiber of the society. As if needing to ward off the culture's subtle pull; he wondered: "Can it be that the personal, progressive West is wrong, and the impersonal, impassive East is right?" For the assertive, Western ego the answer could only be negative, and Lowell presented a Darwinian gloss to underwrite his position: "Individuality bears the same relation to the development of mind that the differentiation of species does to the evolution of organic life . . . the degree of individualization of a people is the self-recorded measure of its place in the great march of mind."

Theory did more than relegate Japan to an earlier stage of human evolution; it allowed Lowell to render harsh judgments on both past and future. Impersonality had kept East Asia stagnant for centuries and if the arrival of Europeans had led to the beginnings of modernization, future progress was not inevitable. It would only continue if the Japanese were to somehow alter themselves, to become more personal, more like Westerners in their character structure. Giving no recipe for how this was to be achieved, Lowell had no doubt as to what would happen if such an alteration did not occur "If these people continue in their old course, their earthly career is closed. Just as surely as morning passes into afternoon, so surely are these races of the Far East, if unchanged, destined to disappear before the advancing nations of the West."

IV

History has a way of turning the solemn into the fatuous. The predictions of last century now seem silly, for Japan has grown into an industrial giant without either adopting Christianity or losing "impersonality," and her imminent disappearance before more vital Western nations is hardly an issue. If we need not accept the judgments of our forebears as wholly accurate, we can at least see their reactions as in part an expression of those world views by which human beings attempt to make sense out of the messy sprawl of reality, and we should acknowledge the extent to which we share their beliefs. Truly, Griffis, Morse and Lowell need no apologists. After all these years their works continue to provide a useful introduction to Japanese civilization. For the modern reader, The Mikado's Empire, Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings and The Soul of the Far East can explain more about the traditional values of modern Japan than many more recent volumes.

Because those values are still alive, contemporary Japan continues to attract and mystify Americans. Travel poster images of cherry blossoms, Mount Fuji and women in kimono remain, but the samurai has given way to the banker, the electronics engineer and the Red Army terrorist. American attitudes towards Christianity, Progress, morality, aesthetics and individualism have no doubt altered in the last century, but we still find the notion of believing in two religions a trifle odd and American businessmen are often bothered by the situational ethics of their Japanese counterparts. Japanese attitudes towards separate social spheres for men and women,

the lack of a chivalric tradition, the arranged marriages, the different conception of masculinity and the importance of the aesthetic ritual also can disturb our ideas of normality. Perhaps the notion of "impersonality" remains most unsettling. Today we refer to it as "groupism," that belief that the individual is less important than the social entities -- family, village, company -- to which he belongs. Now we deem it less a fatal flaw to progress than a source of humor -- how funny to watch Japanese in tour groups following a leader holding a flag, or to learn that employees of large corporations gather each morning to sing the company anthem. But such solidarity cannot be divorced from the high rate of productivity which has recently been given the United States such an economic pain.

Today we are in a position to see that the challenge of Japan has always arisen from an odd combination of the familiar and the exotic. The Japanese have shared our passionate devotion to the new, and their zeal for achievement has matched our own. What the nineteenth century failed to understand was that embracing modernism did not for them mean forsaking tradition. Industrialism was grafted onto the old value system without much altering it. The results of this merger have been so astonishing that recently scholars like Edwin O. Reischauer and Ezra F. Vogel have suggested that it is time to reverse the flow of history: Americans must begin to learn from the Japanese, for they alone seem to have completed the process of modernization without suffering the social disorganization that plagues all other advanced industrial societies. What can really be learned remains problematic, and the career of Edward S. Morse

provides little encouragement on this score. But the idea that we pay more attention to Japan needs emphasizing. She is one of those important exceptions, a social order which gives the lie to the idea that modernization need obliterate tradition. The aspects of the culture which captivated Griffis, Morse and Lowell are alive at the heart of the industrial monster. Japan remains a mirror in which we can discover the peculiarities of our own social reality.