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THE POWER OF THE OTHER: EDWARD S. MORSE
AND THE CHALLENGE OF JAPAN

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Abstract

This is a case study which shows how Japan as the Other (defined as "all those elements of the culture which eluded words and yet impinged upon and helped to shape discourse") affected the career and beliefs of one of America's first generation of Japan experts. Edward S. Morse, a nineteenth-century naturalist who became the first professor of zoology at the Imperial University in Tokyo, was a scientist who before going to the Orient had little interest in art, philosophy or social questions. The experience of Japan served to raise his consciousness in all these realms, turned him into a gentle critic of American life and values and led him to a brief, unsuccessful attempt to share the mindset of Japan (to become the Other). His struggles to maintain the ways of his own culture while sharing those of the Other may be seen as representative of a larger group of Americans who faced the challenge of Japan.

The purpose of all interpretation is to conquer a remoteness, a distance between the past cultural epoch and the interpreter himself. By overcoming this distance . . . the exegete can appropriate its meaning to himself; foreign, he makes it familiar, that is, he makes it his own. It is thus the growth of his own understanding of himself that he pursues through his understanding of the other. Every hermeneutics is thus, explicitly or implicitly, self-understanding by means of understanding others.

-- Paul Ricoeur

The study of the West's Journey to the East is a study of the West; it is of the soul of the West that one learns, rather than that of the East.

-- Robert S. Ellwood ¹

If there ever was a quintessential Yankee, he was Edward S. Morse, a nineteenth-century naturalist who became one of America's first experts on Japan. He was self-made, practical, down-to-earth, democratic, and little interested in matters aesthetic, historical or philosophical. Having shed the Calvinism of his ancestors at an early age, he always remained captive of a secular Puritanism. Work was clearly the center of Morse's existence. Family, love, idle pleasure and friendship were all less important to him than the pursuit of his profession. In the realm of science he was no dreamer, no theoretician. Morse was content to believe in things he could see, touch, smell, dissect and sketch. Everything which would not be described by such activities -- and this came to include God -- was of no interest to him. There was no pleasure or gain to be taken in the unseen and unknowable. To be interested in such matters was to waste time, and for the unreligious Morse, time-wasting was a cardinal sin.²

All this which was true before Morse arrived in Japan at the age of forty was almost as true afterwards. But one must stress the word "almost." Something in the experience of the Orient served to alter both Morse's career and his mentality. The former is easiest to see. Three years of living there made Morse so interested in the culture that during the second half of his life studies of Japan took

precedence over scientific pursuits. At the same time this alien social order, full of veiled invitations towards other ways of being, upset his lifelong beliefs. To combat its strong and subtle pull he was forced to cling tightly to previously established intellectual patterns. This meant that Morse's Japan scholarship was more than a way of explaining that nation; it was also a process of warding off its attractions, of reaffirming his old self by neatly separating subject and object and reducing the strangeness of experience by confining it to familiar categories.

Were this Morse's response alone, it might be no more than an interesting historical footnote to the encounter of East and West. But extensive investigation of the careers of Americans who resided in Meiji Japan shows that he was hardly unique. Many of those who left written records -- and this is especially true of that first generation of Japan experts -- show significant signs of disturbance to their psychological, philosophical and social equilibrium.³ As in Morse, such shifts are not confronted directly, but combatted by reliance on categories -- analytic, taxonomic, theoretical -- imported from home. This pattern suggests that there was something more to the experience than could be encompassed in

words. Japan as a totality remained unknown and uncapturable; it was glimpsed only in bits and pieces, in fragments, in flashes and momentary illuminations. Good nineteenth-century positivists, these Americans were as unconscious of this partiality as of the unconscious itself. To us today the notion of the limitation of words seems more familiar. There is even a concept to suggest the power over us of that which cannot be fully conceptualized: we call it the Other.

To claim that, for nineteenth-century Americans, Japan was the Other, is to grow neither poetic nor mystical. It is merely to make an attempt to label all those elements of the culture which eluded words and yet impinged upon and helped to shape discourse. It is to see that Morse and the other early Japan experts were faced with a broad if obscure challenge that they could experience but never define. How they met this challenge is one of the untold parts of the confrontation between the United States and Japan. To investigate it is to expand not only our knowledge of history but also to open a window on a problem which still endures -- that is, how to accept and deal with that which is alien. For this purpose, Edward S. Morse is a perfect subject. Of all his contemporaries, none went to the Orient with a mind so uncluttered by racial stereotypes and cultural prejudgments. Successful, stable and mature, not given to

easy whim or sudden passion, he may serve as a tentative touchstone. That Morse was significantly altered by exposure to Japan suggests that in his experience we may find a path towards understanding that culture's perennial effect upon Americans.

I

Little in Edward S. Morse's life prepared him to appreciate the culture of Japan, but some factors made him unusually receptive to it. Basically he was an openminded man who had few social, religious or political reservations about alien societies. This attitude sprang from Morse's most enduring passion, his major way of relating to reality. From an early age his deepest love was to collect, classify and compare things. Pursued with single-minded fervor, such activity helped to turn him into a scientist and brought him to the Orient in 1877. There he continued to act in the same manner he had at home, observing things carefully, sketching their shape and contour, noting their salient characteristics in words. In theory, this process involved no judgment of the behavior of what was being studied. What was necessary was to distance oneself from reality enough so that emotional reactions did not color one's observations.

It would not be accurate to say that Morse was a man without feelings, but only that he managed to keep them under tight control. Few flights of imagination ever disturbed his consciousness, and any sense of romance or adventure was channeled into a singleminded pursuit of accuracy in the world of natural history. This was true from his earliest days. In 1850, at the age of twelve, he was already a collector, on the hunt for tiny, shelled creatures in the woods and river banks and at the seashore near his hometown of Portland, Maine. Other young people, or even adults, might lust after the shimmering beauty of those large, colorful shells found off the coast of Latin America or in the South Seas and brought back by sailors to the Portland wharves, but Ned did not respond to them. His dreams were more mundane; his aim was to make a complete collection of local land shells. These tended to be tiny, unattractive, and of little value to stores, but Ned's interests were neither aesthetic nor monetary. Satisfaction came from the process itself, from studying shells through a three-dollar microscope, drawing them, arranging them neatly in the drawers of his cabinet.

This was a democratic kind of science, well suited to nineteenth-century America where, as De Tocqueville had claimed in the forties, there was not the kind of leisure class necessary to produce men of genius. Natural history, in fact, was the only scientific discipline in which

Americans of that era excelled. No doubt this was because the abundant plant and animal life of the continent, even in long-settled regions like New England, was still dimly known. An amateur like Morse could make a mark in such a realm. All that was necessary was intelligence, persistence, energy and a good set of eyes. Ned possessed all of these. At the age of seventeen he was overseer of the scientific collection of the Portland Society of Natural History. By the time he reached twenty his name had been listed three times in the Proceedings of the Boston Society of Natural History as discoverer of a new species.

The road from Portland to recognition as a scientist was shorter than one might imagine. Morse lived a version of the national myth which Benjamin Franklin had made of his own life, that rags-to-riches -- in his case obscurity to fame -- story which so fixated the consciousness of the nineteenth-century American middle class. Normally the tale was one of diligence flavored with a little luck. The first characteristic Morse had in abundance; the second he knew how to capitalize upon. Luck in his case was inseparable from talent and hard work. That early recognition by the BSNH was the springboard to success. In 1859 he came to the attention of Swiss-born Louis Agassiz, then considered by many to be the leading natural scientist in the world. Publicist and promoter as well as researcher, Agassiz was just on the eve of his greatest triumph,

building at Harvard the largest Museum of Comparative Zoology in the world. Morse impressed him enough to be taken on as one of a dozen student assistants to aid in that undertaking; he was the only one of them not to have completed a secondary education.

Two years with Agassiz provided training and contacts enough to last a lifetime. When Morse left the Museum in 1861, he had some theory and an immense amount of practical experience under his belt. As the assistant in charge of mollusks -- one of the four branches of living creatures according to the classification system of the time -- he had not only sorted 30,000 specimens into 4,000 species in a single year, but had also started on the track of what would be his most important scientific contribution. His focus was Brachipods, tiny shelled creatures considered mollusks because, like clams and oysters, they were bivalves. Morse was not so sure, and for a decade he tracked Brachipods, living, dead and fossilized. On dredging expeditions he sought them from the coast of North Carolina to the St. Lawrence River. Back to his home laboratory he brought specimens for dissection and study. Years of pouring over shells and internal organs of creatures often only one-eighth of an inch in length led to findings published in 1870: Brachipods were not mollusks, but worms. This conclusion put Morse on the scientific map, drew praise from scientists at home and abroad and brought a complimentary

letter from the giant in the field, Charles Darwin. For a naturalist of the time there could be no sweeter sign of recognition.

That Morse's major achievement should be the result of such routine, pedestrian, even dull labor, the product less of brilliance than of sheer doggedness, says much about the man and his age. Certainly this kind of science suited an ideology of egalitarianism. If Morse himself was an instinctive democrat, the attitude also brought financial reward. In the years after leaving the Museum it was one thing to be elected to the National Academy of Sciences and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, to receive an honorary Ph.D. from Bowdoin, to give an occasional course at Harvard or to deliver the Lowell Lectures in Boston, but daily bread and butter came from more popular activities. The bulk of Morse's income derived from writing for popular journals and delivering lectures to general audiences on topics like "Flowers and their Friends," "Glimpses of Insect Life" and "Glaciers." Beyond mere livelihood, such activity also partook of the American faith in the common people; it was part of a national belief in both the possibility of self-improvement and in science as a practical pursuit. In the introduction to the American Naturalist, a magazine which Morse helped to found, this was expressed with the suggestion that all scientific theories should be "subordinated to the practical advantage as well as to the intellectual

and moral elevation of man . . . our science will be ennobled by publishing those facts and principles which interest alike the philosopher and the day laborer." ⁴

To describe Morse's life primarily in terms of career is to see it through his own eyes. He possessed the mentality of a culture taught to believe the surfaces of the outer world are more important, more real than the experiences of the inner one. Unlike natural phenomena, which could be neatly categorized, emotions were messy and uncontrollable and best avoided. Morse knew this as early as his teenage years. His singleminded pursuit of shells made for a stormy relationship with his father. Johnathan Kimball Morse, deacon of the Baptist Church and a partner in a small business, was a wrathful man who never approved of his son's impractical aims. So disturbed was young Ned by Johnathan's repeated assaults with violent words and even more violent prayers that once he was driven to the edge of suicide. Momentarily that could seem preferable to abandoning shells which, as he confided to his diary, were "the only thing I care to live for. . . ." ⁵

The chilliness of that remark touched all his human relationships. Even his worshipful biographer admits that Morse's heart "burned for science and humanity, rather than for those of his immediate circle." ⁶ To desert the ways of a harsh, narrow-minded father in favor of one's own desires

may be to act in a manner common to generations of young American males, but Morse took the pattern one step farther: literally or symbolically he was always deserting those closest to him. His mother, a lively woman of intellectual bent, provided love and support to counterbalance the influence of his father in those sensitive adolescent years, but Ned was unable to repay her devotion in kind. Nor was he caring with his siblings. After his father's death in 1860, Morse allowed his older brother to shoulder the entire burden of supporting their mother and three sisters. His one lifelong friend, John Gould, received slightly better treatment. They had begun by sharing an enthusiasm for shells, but, responding to the call of practicality, Gould had gone to work in a bank. A cynical observer might suggest that Morse well knew how to choose friends because for years he would shamelessly borrow money from John -- to study with Agassiz, to finance scientific ventures, to go to Japan. Gould's reward was a stream of letters full of Morse's latest accomplishments and explanations as to why he could not yet meet his financial obligations.

Indifference to intimacy and more than a hint of exploitation also marked his fifty-year relationship with Ellen Owen. At twenty Morse had worried that he would never love a woman; for the rest of his life his actions seemed to indicate that he never did. When he met Nellie in 1860, Ned felt himself unworthy and up she went on a

pedestal: "She is the one to whom I will look for advice, one who will lead me to a higher scale of thought, and one I shall love to please by good behavior." So moved was he by some unaccustomed feeling in the heart that for a few weeks he did attempt to share his usual passion with her, hauling Nellie off to the Zoology Museum in Cambridge for private lectures on the animal kingdom, especially mollusks. In theory marriage for Morse was a two-way street, a matter of sharing with someone "who will strive for my happiness in the same way I shall strive for hers."⁷ The reality ran in only one direction. Married life was foreshadowed when, on the eve of the wedding in 1863, Morse invited John Gould to come along and help turn the honeymoon into a snail-collecting expedition, exclaiming: "What a delightful time we should have!"⁸ In the long years after the ceremony Nellie's role was to raise the children, take care of the household and stay out of his way. On many of his extended trips Morse left her and the two children at home.

It was easier to leave human beings behind than to desert the Lord. God the Father was closely linked to Johnathan the father, who insisted that his children follow a devout path. Torn as a teenager by a religious crisis, Ned ended it after attending a revival meeting where the doleful cadences of the minister's gloomy sermon were intoned in a voice that seemed to issue from a coffin. Finally and emphatically he rejected all notions of hellfire

and damnation, but he did not abandon the Almighty. When the controversy over Origin of Species erupted in the early sixties, Morse -- under the sway of Agassiz, who never did accept Darwin's theory -- rejected natural selection because it meant the world was the produce of mere "chance." More unusual and telling was his complaint that "Darwin's chapter on the struggle for existence smacks too strongly of Calvinism, and . . . Darwin's picture looks a good deal like Calvin's drawing of us poor worms. . . ." ⁹ By 1873 Morse had reversed his position, but no more than Darwin himself did he renounce "the wisdom and goodness of the Creator." Still, the theory could be used to further free himself intellectually from the church of his father, for man's "origin from lower forms of life knocks in the head Adam and Eve, hence Original Sin, hence the necessity for vicarious atonement, hence everything that savors of the bad place. . . ." ¹⁰

The shift on Darwin shows off two of Morse's most winning traits; he was both fearless and open-minded. After a decade full of careful study and contacts with other scientists had served to convince him that Darwin was right, he did not hesitate to speak out of what was still a touchy issue. To John Gould's suggestion that he tone down such remarks rather than endanger public support for his lectures, Morse answered sharply: "I should rather come down to one meal a day and lumber along in debt than

follow so humiliating a path. . . ." Not only did the American people need to learn the truth, but he needed to speak it: "My chief care must be to avoid that 'rigidity of mind' that prevents one from remodeling his opinions; there is nothing [more] glorious to my mind than the graceful abandoning of one's position if it be false. . . ." 11

This admirable attitude extended no farther than the realms of science and religion. Nowhere is there any indication that before going to Japan Morse ever questioned or displayed any curiosity about the premises of the social order in which he had been raised. His opinions in the realms of art, politics, history and general culture largely remain a blank. Up to the age of forty such matters rarely impinge upon his detailed diary, and what few entries exist indicate a mentality wholly conventional. This is hardly surprising. He was, after all, a largely self-educated small-town product who, according to his biographer "had never read a book on history, or philosophy, or art. Architecture, music, and sculpture were terra incognita to him."¹² He had resided in Cambridge but was ignorant of the politics and literary works of even such local figures as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Bronson Alcott, Charles Eliot Norton or Julia Ward Howe. In the troubled political times leading up to the Civil War, Morse never

expressed an opinion on either slavery or abolitionism, though when the call to arms came in 1861 he did respond like a good patriot and then was temporarily in despair when poor health barred him from the ranks.

To characterize Morse at the time he left for the Orient as a typical American is to do him, more than his homeland, a disservice. If in personal tastes and priorities he seems to express a national pattern, clearly in talents, energy and professional interests he was unusual. The path from obscurity to fame might be a cultural ideal, but Morse followed it in his own way. Wealth meant nothing to him, though it is easy enough to see the incessant collecting of shells as an odd parallel to an obsession with piling up material possessions. In a small, offbeat sort of way, Morse was a kind of adventurer. The first of Agassiz's students to go out on his own, he for the most part avoided institutional or long-term commitments. His place of residence for sixty years was Salem, Massachusetts, but he was a restless sort, one who liked movement and diversity. More than once he quit good positions. After helping to found the American Naturalist, he left its editorial board; secure as curator of mollusks at the Peabody Academy, he then left the post. His writings included everything from newspaper articles to textbooks. Briefly he served on the faculty of Main State, Bowdoin and Harvard Colleges. He lectured all over the country, from Maine to Mississippi,

from New York to California. In 1874 he had a first taste of Oriental culture in San Francisco's Chinatown; on the same trip he learned that the waters of Japan were loaded with dozens of varieties of brachiopods unknown in the United States. Seized by an immediate and overwhelming desire to study them, he spent three years of hard work attempting to raise the money and arrange the free time for an expedition there. For Morse no price was ever too high nor any distance too great when it was a matter of learning more about creatures who lived in shells.

II

There was a standard way to land in nineteenth-century Japan. From the slightly rolling deck of a ship one's eyes would take in the sunny morning splendors of Tokyo Bay, the Yokohama Bluff full of Western-style residences, the quaint roof shapes of the native quarters, the jutting line of terraced rice paddies and then, floating above all like a cloud, the peerless, snowy shape of Mount Fuji, whose perfection would be declared uncapturable in reams of words that captured little but cliché. Edward S. Morse was considerably more honest and less romantic than the normal traveller. His ship dropped anchor in the dark. On the boat taking passengers to shore he became interested enough in the odd native oarlocks to make them

the subject of his first of many thousands of drawings of Japan.¹³ This action may be taken as symbolic. For most Americans, Japan of that era was nothing if not exotic, a land of strange people, architecture and art, of startling landscapes, mysterious religions and outlandish customs like mixed nude bathing. Morse normally did not dwell upon such things. His daily journal rarely describes the "picturesque" and never makes any attempt to capture the poetry and romance of a feudal order only ten years in the past. When Japan's religions, history or art impinge upon his pages, they always do so in terms of the daily and the commonplace.

The story of his career in Japan is quickly told. Arriving in June 1877 with the aim of doing marine research for a month, Morse was quickly offered a job as the first professor of zoology at the newly-founded Imperial University in Tokyo at a salary so high that even a man uninterested in money could not resist.¹⁴ His first stint lasted until November, then he went home, collected his family and returned in April, 1878. He departed after two school years but came back for five months in 1882 on a trip largely devoted to buying pottery for his own collection and artifacts for the ethnographic section of the Peabody Museum in Salem. During his residency Morse was responsible for a significant number of firsts: At Enoshima he founded the first Japanese marine laboratory; in Tokyo, set up the

first Museum of Natural History; at Omori, began the first archeological excavation. He also initiated the first university press and was instrumental in training Japan's first generation of life scientists.

These accomplishments encompass only the most obvious aspects of Morse's years in the Orient; they provide evidence of what he did for Japan but give little indication of what it did for and to him. There Morse underwent major changes of two sorts, public and private. If from the early eighties onward he devoted far more time to Japan than to zoology, he also underwent a series of alterations at once psychological and philosophical. Exposure to Japan compelled Morse to look for the first time at the United States with the eyes of an outsider or critic; it also raised deep and unanswerable questions about the values and practices of American culture. Unused to dealing with such troubling and elusive matters, Morse rarely confronted them directly and never systematically. But a close reading of his articles and books, journals, letters and diaries, shows just how Japan not only disturbed Morse but also served both to define and permanently alter his attitudes on matters political, social, cultural and aesthetic.

A major reason Japan could have such an effect is that life there was for an American such an odd combination

of the familiar and the exotic. From the first days, Morse liked all those beliefs and ways that reminded him of home. Clearly the Japanese were a progressive people, in the process of abandoning superstitions -- such as Chinese medicine -- and embracing the latest scientific theories and technological methods in an effort to march forward into the camp of advanced nations. They seemed a practical people who cared little for metaphysics or idle speculation, but who knew how to design and utilize superb tools, build functional houses, construct clean and hygenic toilets and work hard and efficiently. As part of both the practical and the progressive, the Japanese were highly committed to schooling at all levels. In the classroom as in adult life they exhibited the virtues of diligence, self-control and seriousness. This flowed from a larger value system which surprised anyone who thought himself there to help civilize the natives. As Morse put it:

A foreigner, after remaining a few months in Japan, slowly begins to realize that, whereas he thought he could teach the Japanese everything, he finds, to his amazement and chagrin, that those virtues or attributes which, under the name of humanity are the burden of our moral teaching at home, the Japanese seem to be born with.¹⁶

Native morality could appear to be Judeo-Christian, but, like all the other apparently familiar aspects of the society, it carried special Japanese flavor. To Morse, the relationship between precept and behavior was the difference. His observations led to a startling conclusion: the Japanese actually practiced what Americans largely preached. Cleanliness of person and household, simplicity, courtesy and consideration were all part of daily life. So were a number of the Ten Commandments. Parents were highly honored and crime was at a minimum. Houses had no locks and owners could leave stores unattended, confident customers would pay for what they took. A traveller like Morse could leave a gold watch and eighty dollars on a tray at an inn and return a week later to find nothing missing. So safe was the land, so law-abiding the people and so rare the existence of "hoodlums," that one could journey to the most remote districts with no pistol for protection. Once Morse noted that in Tokyo eleven murders had been committed in a decade, while in the state of Michigan -- with a smaller population -- eighty-seven had occurred in a single year. Such facts made him assert that "A man is safer in the wilder regions of Japan at any hour, night or day, than in the quiet streets of Salem, or any other city in our country."¹⁷

The familiar helped to make the culture comfortable for an American; the unusual made it interesting. Morse might not be a seeker of the exotic, he was won by some of

the most characteristic native beliefs and behavior patterns. Take the matter of religion. To someone who had battled free of the exclusive, narrow doctrines of Calvinism and who had experienced the sombre, traditional New England Sunday, Japanese attitudes were refreshing in their breadth and tolerance. Here were two religions, Shinto and Buddhism, living together in harmony and mutual respect. People might show little deep faith in either, but they flocked to shrines and temples for colorful festivals that featured food and drink and playful, tipsy behavior. Most happy was the fact that their doctrines in no way ran counter to the findings of science. Darwinism blended nicely into the traditional respect for natural life and reverence for ancestors. This meant that when Morse delivered a public lecture on natural selection, the audience listened with an open mind and no opposition to the theory was raised in the name of dogma.

Far more important than religion was the widespread influence of the aesthetic. Untutored in art Morse might be, but he could not help succumbing to the beauty of line, color, texture and form that suffused the culture. At home he had considered science a kind of democratic pursuit; in Japan he encountered a democracy of the artistic. Not only did people throughout the land -- aristocrats and farmers, villagers and residents of Tokyo -- share a deep appreciation for "artistic designs and the proper execution of them," but the humblest items -- bowls, stone lanterns, utensils,

towels, roof tiles, kettles, umbrellas, toys -- were graced by an exquisite level of design and ornamentation.¹⁸ That the Japanese aesthetic was simple, restrained and asymmetrical made it all the more appealing. Homes might be bare and almost spartan, but rooms possessed a harmony of dimension and a refinement of color that Morse had never before encountered. The same held true for gardens which, in the smallest of areas, could convey significant feelings with only a minimum of plants, trees, rocks or sand. A general reverence for nature also partook of the artistic. The national love affair with seasonal changes, with blossoming plum and cherry trees, flowering lotus and frozen pines, helped push Morse to the judgment that the Japanese "were the greatest lovers of nature and the greatest artists in the world."¹⁹

They were also the best-mannered of people. Indeed, to a good democrat, raised in a land where self-assertion and pushiness were honored in myth and rewarded in life, the elaborate courtesy of the Japanese could seem like a caricature of all that was effete in the abandoned aristocratic traditions of Europe. Yet Morse loved it all, the ceremonial bowing, ritual gift-giving and formal patterns of speech. Perhaps this was because here, too, Japan was a kind of democracy. Class distinctions there were, but good manners were the possession of rich and poor alike. Ex-samurai, rickshaw men, shopkeepers, laborers, artists, professors and tea house girls all struck him as polite, orderly, modest

and self-effacing in speech and action. This was a revelation. It indicated that mass behavior did not have to sink to some low common denominator but might in fact level upwards to patterns of high refinement.

A nation is ultimately people, and if Morse had never displayed much interest in the topic, Japan forced him to consider the varieties of human behavior and social roles. Like all Westerners he was smitten by the charms of Japanese women. The perpetual public cheerfulness, grace and reticence of the young ones made them delightful company, and as caring, devoted wives and mothers they were without equal. Nor were they immodest, as some foreigners claimed. Touring a series of public baths with thermometer in hand to measure the average temperature of the scalding water, he reported that the Japanese did not stare at each other, but if an outsider hazarded a peak, the women quickly covered their nakedness. Even geisha did not draw his disapproval. Morse reported with a kind of calculated innocence that these women who entertained at parties were no more than the counterpart of young ladies at home, invited to dinner as a kind of social lubricant, "for the purpose of having things go off pleasantly." The difference here was that geisha were professionals, and thus "far more entertaining than the usual run of girls and women. . . ." ²⁰

Given his background as someone who neither cared nor thought much about women, it is hardly surprising to

find Morse more disturbed by the behavior of Japanese males. To American eyes, this could seem odd in the extreme. As youngsters they shared the characteristics of girls, being polite, neat, well-behaved and yet playful. An appreciative Morse never tired of expressing wonder that in the classroom from elementary school through college they could be so orderly and attentive. But such good behavior also made him suspicious. More than once he was moved to raise the ominous question, "Are they effeminate?"²¹ The same could be asked about adults. After all, they wore robes, moved with grace, were soft spoken and courteous, had difficulty saying "No," to a direct question, enjoyed playing apparently childish games and displayed an inordinate passion for matters artistic. Japanese men wrote poetry, arranged flowers, performed tea ceremony, painted pictures, dwarfed trees and were capable of going into raptures of joy over the perfection of a single cherry blossom. To combat the disturbing implications of all this, Morse had to continually remind himself that they were also intrepid warriors, men who in battle displayed "the fiercest courage and fighting valor."²²

Not everything in Japan pleased Morse, and a few native practices drew his criticism. Like so many foreigners baffled by the complexity of the language, especially its written form, he longed for the Japanese to abandon it in favor of English, arguing that this "would

add greatly to their development along our lines."²³ He also found the use of nightsoil to fertilize crops unhygienic, the kneeling of servants undemocratic, the lack of chivalry towards women unromantic and the persistence of popular superstition unmodern. But he did not judge such practices harshly. Obvious remnants of an earlier age, they might be expected to vanish as the nation continued to modernize. Only two aspects of the culture struck him as hopelessly behind redemption; traditional music and the attitude towards time. The combined sounds of koto, samisen and Japanese voice sounded so dismal and monotonous that he was led to ask, "Is this music?"²⁴ As for the propensity to mix work and pleasure, to drink endless cups of tea and discuss everything but the business at hand, he found this practice horrendous. Free of the Yankee concern with dollars and the Puritan fear of God, Morse was still enough of his culture to think that if time was neither money nor the Lord's, it was still something best filled up with work, not play.

III

That Japan intrigued and pleased Edward S. Morse was only the beginning point for the disturbance which changed his view of the world. The most significant evidence of this alteration is his drastic career shift. In

the forty-four years following his third trip to the Orient, Morse became widely known as a Japan expert. Much of his lecturing, many of his writings, both popular and scholarly -- including all his important publications -- and the major institutional positions he enjoyed -- curator of Oriental pottery at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and Director of the Peabody Museum in Salem -- were all the result of his experience there.²⁵ Were it not for Japan, Morse would be no more than the most minor of footnotes in the annals of American natural history.

Inklings of the shift came during Morse's first visit, but the flowering of his passion for Japan occurred during the second and longest sojourn, when he travelled extensively, traversing the country from Hokkaido to Kagoshima. It began when his attention was drawn to the shell heaps at Omori, initially spied from a railway car between Yokohama and Tokyo. Having seen fellow scientists investigate such sites in New England, he correctly guessed them to be kitchen middens of a prehistoric people. The excavation that he directed at Omori put Morse in touch for the first time with artifacts of a primitive people. From this it was but a short step to an interest in other still little known aspects of the Japanese tradition such as early burial tombs, roof tiles, customs of the Ainu, methods of arrow release, latrines and forms of architecture.²⁶

Such topics may have diverted Morse from his pursuit

of shelled creatures, but the place in his heart reserved for Brachiopods was filled by something only the Japanese consider a high art form: stoneware pottery. Six months into the second stay he began to take an interest in this common ware, then virtually unknown outside the island empire, and soon he was involved in collecting it.

Acquaintances introduced him to more serious examples of such work and shared their knowledge of the tea ceremony aesthetic that for almost three centuries had guided the native potter's hand. If the words wabi, sabi and shibui, which represent the pinnacle to which such pottery aspires, cannot satisfactorily be rendered into English, Morse could certainly see that restraint, severity and minimal decoration were its overriding characteristics. That was part of the appeal. It is not surprising that the boy and man who had spent decades investigating the most unadorned of shell creatures gravitated to this humble ware rather than to Japan's more famous, brightly-colored porcelains.

A later generation may see that tea ceremony pottery exhibits a kind of exquisite, reverse snobbism, an aesthetic that approaches decadence in its adulation of the accidental, the deformed, the simple. Morse never acknowledged this. His principles of collecting harked back to an earlier period of life, and were different from that of any Japanese. Natives might collect pottery for beauty, but Morse's aim was completeness of kiln, lineage, region. Here his natural

history background was crucial. An eye trained to see marginal differentiations of shells quickly came to recognize the marks of hundreds of potters and the clay, glazes and styles of many traditions. Before the end of his second stay a proud Morse could report that in contests with connoisseurs, he could more than hold his own identifying the origin of previously unseen pieces. When he sold the collection to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in the mid-nineties it was considered one of the most complete in the world. The two-volume catalogue he published as a guide to the collection splendidly classified the production of the Japanese potters, but, characteristically enough, wholly avoided making any aesthetic judgments.²⁷

This passion for pottery marked more than a career shift; it was also a way of coming to grips with the lure of Japan, with Japan as the Other. Collecting stoneware was for years neither useful nor profitable, personally, financially or intellectually. It occupied much time and energy, drew Morse away from his major field of expertise, did nothing to enhance his reputation or income as a lecturer and writer, wiped out the profits he had hoped to make from teaching in Japan and caused him to disappoint his wife by absorbing money he had promised would go for redecorating their dilapidated, threadbare home. That it satisfied a lifelong impulse to collect, compare and classify is only a partial explanation of his behavior. More important was the fact that pottery offered him a means of dealing with

--perhaps mastering -- the strong pull of this alien social order. To collect stoneware was to approach the unfamiliar in a familiar way, to ward off attraction by simultaneously drawing close to and yet separating himself from the Other. By classifying such apparently humble objects scientifically, one could be aesthetic without giving in to aestheticism; it meant that Morse could spend hours enjoying the subtle beauty of a crackled, hairline glaze on a three-hundred-year old teabowl without having to face the accusation -- either from others or oneself -- that to do so was to indulge in a love for the sensuous and a taste for the delicacy, even effeminacy, of high art.

Collecting pottery was not enough wholly to contain the attractions of Japan. When after two years Morse refused a contract renewal and returned to the United States, he was hoping both to capitalize on the Oriental experience and return to natural history. But his former life soon proved to be too routine, colorless, boring. For the first time in his life Morse simply could not settle down to work. Long-planned projects -- a further study of Brachiopods, a book on evolution, another zoology text or even a volume on Japan -- remained in abeyance. Two years of unproductive restlessness led to a decision to return to the Orient. The ostensible reasons were a need to fill out the pottery collection and to gather ethnographic materials for the Peabody Museum. Certainly these were the most important

professional activities during five months of travel, but for Morse they were not enough. Japan had created a deep dissatisfaction in him, one not easily banished. To deal with it he now undertook a most uncharacteristic approach. The man who had all his life kept reality separated from the self by a wall of concepts now made a brief attempt to become Japanese.

The activities which provide evidence of this significant move are his study of two traditional art forms: tea ceremony and Noh Drama singing. Not only are these, especially the latter, a trifle esoteric even to natives, but they also run directly against Morse's prior judgments and values. Tea ceremony, an elaborate, meticulous ritual in the service of the simplest of tasks, may be said to have as its chief aim a way of artistically wasting time. Nowhere did a hint of this pass Morse's pen when he bragged of being the "first foreigner" ever to undertake its study and practice. Non singing, full of sounds that Morse had once refused even to consider music, now provided deep pleasure as he sat on his knees for hours and tried unsuccessfully to imitate his teacher's "rich and sonorous" voice. In such a short time he could not hope to master either of these difficult forms. But his aim was something different: "It is by taking actual lessons in tea ceremony and in singing that I may learn many things from the Japanese standpoint."²⁸

Coming from a man who liked the Japanese for being

progressive and practical, who cheered their abandonment of ancient ways, who disliked their attitudes towards time, and who believed it would be a good thing if they forsook their native language in favor of English, these are significant words indeed. They show how much Morse was touched by the ineffable side of this culture. The wish to see and feel the world from the Japanese standpoint was an attempt to narrow a gap between what he was and what he wished to feel, to become that which was so appealing. His words and actions may be seen as no less than an act of love towards a nation that had disturbed and enriched him in ways he could neither fully understand nor express. They represent the farthest Morse could go towards narrowing an unbridgeable gap, the closest he could get towards denying his heritage and self in an effort to share the consciousness of the Other.

For Morse -- perhaps for anybody who makes one -- this kind of move was doomed to failure. When he departed Japan in November, 1882, it was for the last time. During the next forty-four years he would publish extensively on Japanese culture, become an acknowledged expert on its pottery and twice be decorated by the Emperor for meritorious service to the nation. In this period he undertook several trips to Europe, whose society and art were less pleasing to him than those of Japan. Seeing Paris through eyes accustomed to Tokyo, he could comment disdainfully, "The

lavish appeal to the senses shows how far the Parisian has departed from enjoyment of simple things." After viewing the art collections in Dresden, he flatly stated, "Japanese pictorial art has ruined my appreciation for this stuff."²⁹ Given his growing fame, the Japanese propensity to honor foreigners who have aided them and his increased financial security after selling the pottery collection to the BMFA for \$73,000, there is little reason to suppose Morse could not have easily undertaken another journey to the Far East. That he did not do so, that after 1882 he chose to view Japan from afar and only through a study of her artifacts, surely says something about the pain -- sweet though it might be -- of his last venture there.

Morse might not be able to return to the Orient, but the entire second half of his life was colored by his experience there. Japan drove him back to his native land with a different mindset; the Other provided a new perspective on himself and his homeland. The man who had never voiced an opinion on social or aesthetic matters now became a critic of American practices. To read Morse's works on Japan is to be faced with an endless series of contrasts between two civilizations. So many of the attractive aspects of Japan raised doubts about things at home. Their politeness highlighted American coarseness and crudity; their honesty and self-control, American theft, disorderliness

and random violence; their well-behaved youngsters, America's ill-mannered ones; their simplicity and elegance of taste in home and garden, America's ugly, dreadfully crowded counterparts. Japan even suggested a lesson that surely was strange to any American raised on a diet of republicanism and economic opportunity; this was that one could judge a civilization by its manners. Here Morse was moved to call on Edmund Burke to express what he felt: "Manners are more important than laws . . . they vex or soothe, corrupt or purify, exalt or debase, barbarize or refine. . . ." ³⁰

The alterations of mindset did not only concern social phenomena; they also included the self. Japan provided a broader definition of human potential, of masculine and feminine behavior. It encouraged Morse to indulge impulses stifled at home, to allow the aesthetic, the feminine, the unpractical become part of life. If this could only be temporary, if the support systems for tea ceremony or Noh singing did not exist in America, if most of the time such impulses were hidden by the preoccupation with analysis and classification of pottery, one must still imagine that in the realm of experience where no payoff can accurately be measured, even a temporary or partial indulgence allowed Morse to feel a larger and more complete sense of selfhood. No doubt this underlay the broadened sphere of American topics on which he could write. In the post-Oriental years Morse did not hesitate to speak out on matters

artistic, literary, social and political.³¹

Frustration was also part of the legacy from Japan. Take the matter of all those delightful practices that Morse so admired. It was natural enough for him to assert "We have much to learn from Japanese life," and to write on the need for better manners or a heightened sensitivity to the aesthetic, but it was virtually impossible to be specific about how Americans might incorporate such things into the national life. This was also a problem on the personal level. After coming home Morse little altered his way of living or his habits. Always he had been brusque, slovenly, informal and outspoken, and the polished society of Japan did nothing to alter these characteristics. Nor did he attempt to make either his home or working space become more like the spare, simple rooms he had admired. Morse's study remained a crowded mess, his tables heaped with shells, papers, books and ashtrays overflowing with half-smoked cigars. For years after returning from the Orient thousands of pieces of pottery were stacked on sagging shelves built along the walls in a manner that would have horrified any Japanese. But to keep the collection hidden away and to display it one piece at a time, as a native would have done, would have run counter to the deepest of his lifetime patterns.

The tension between ideal and reality that such conflicts embody says something larger about the Japan experience. That culture seemed to hold out a promise --

perhaps a series of promises -- that could never be fulfilled. If Morse could never again view his homeland with the eyes of innocence that had been his before the age of forty, he could also never fully banish the new feelings which had been raised. Ultimately Japan left him in a state of discomfort that could fade but never wholly vanish. It had showed him the attractions of the Other, provided ways of sharing the feelings of the Other, but finally frustrated any desire to blend with the Other. The experience was like that of an unconsummated love affair in which Morse was perpetually on the brink of possessing that which finally cannot be possessed. Or perhaps it would be more correct to say that, except for those religious few whose lives are a successful quest to blend with the One, consummation is never more than temporary, and that when the fires of passion grow dim we are larger for having had the experience of the Other but nonetheless remain separate and alone with ourselves.

Such an experience of Japan was not Morse's alone. Similar hopes and conflicts pervade the lives of many Americans who lived there either in the nineteenth century or in later periods, including today. To encounter Japan is not only to be reminded of the strength and continuity of culture, tradition and history, it is to learn that as human beings we can expand ourselves ineffably by touching the Other and letting it touch us. Of course one need not journey to the Orient to find the Other; it is available

daily in those unknown and unknowable aspects of acquaintances, friends, lovers and mates. The difference is that Japan, in its odd blend of the familiar and the exotic, has been capable of penetrating defenses designed to deny the alien aspects that underlie everyday life. By upsetting the common definitions of reality it drives us back to reexamine our own ways, which is to say ourselves. This was the importance of the Other in the life of Edward S. Morse, who, insofar as he is part of us, may stand as a representative of America facing the perennial challenge of Japan.

FOOTNOTES

1. Paul Ricoeur, The Conflict of Interpretations (Evanston, Ill.; 1974), 16-17; Robert S. Ellwood, "Percival Lowell's Journey to the East," The Sewanee Review, 78 (1970), 285.
2. For the basic outline but not the interpretation of Morse's life, this article follows Dorothy Wayman, Edward Sylvester Morse (Cambridge, Mass.; 1942). Though admiring and uncritical, the work can be trusted for the overall picture; it also contains significant extracts from his unpublished journals. Other biographical accounts include the following: J. S. Kingsley, "Edward Sylvester Morse," Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Vol. 61 (Boston, 1926), 549-555; Leland O. Howard, "Biographical Memoir of Edward Sylvester Morse," Biographical Memoires, National Academy of Sciences, Vol. 17 (Washington, D.C., 1937), 3-29; Merrill E. Champion, "Edward Sylvester Morse, With a Bibliography and a Catalogue of His Species," Occasional Papers on Mollusks, (Harvard University Museum of Comparative Zoology) 1 (Sept. 20, 1947), 129-144.
3. Evidence of this disturbance is shown -- in my article "Learning from Those Imitative Japanese: Another Side of the American Experience in the Mikado's Empire," American Historical Review,

(June, 1980), . It is a theme which I expect to explore more fully in future articles.

4. The American Naturalist, 1 (1868), 2.
5. Entry for April 27, 1858, quoted in Wayman, Morse, 24-5.
6. Wayman, Morse, 427.
7. Diary entries, Oct. 31 and Dec. 31, 1860, quoted in Wayman, Morse, 145, 155.
8. Letter to John Gould, March 29, 1863, quoted in Wayman, Morse, 201
9. Letter to John Gould, March 11, 1860, quoted in Wayman, Morse, 226.
10. Letter to John Gould, Oct. 25, 1873, quoted in Wayman, Morse, 225.
11. Ibid.
12. Wayman, Morse, 104.
13. The sketch may be seen in Edward S. Morse, Japan Day by Day, 2 vols. (Boston and New York, 1917), 1: 2.
14. The salary was \$5000 in gold a year, plus a house and stable and

transportation both ways for him and his family. See Morse letter to John Gould, July 11, 1877, in Wayman, Morse, 238.

15. Japan Day by Day, a nine-hundred page selection from his journals is the most important source for Morse's time in Japan. Also useful are Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings (Portland, 1885), and, by way of contrast with another Oriental culture, Glimpses of China and Chinese Homes (Boston, 1903).
16. Japan Day by Day, 1: 44.
17. Ibid., II; 426, I: 112.
18. Japanese Homes, 172.
19. Japan Day by Day, 1: 253.
20. Ibid., 2: 353.
21. See, for example, Ibid., 1: 297, 2:277.
22. Ibid., 1:297
23. Ibid., 2: 115
24. Ibid., 1: 401-2

25. The only bibliography of Morse's writing is an unpublished one compiled by Albert P. Morse and in the possession of the Peabody Museum, Salem, Mass. Of 558 items listed there, more than 200 are in some way connected to the Japan experience.
26. Some of his important works prompted by Japan "Latrines of the East," American Architect, (March 18, 1893), 1-18; "On the So-called Bow-Pullers of Antiquity," Bulletin of the Essex Institute, 26 (1894), 141-166; "Terra-Cotta Roofing Tiles," Bulletin of the Essex Institute 24 (1892), 1-72; "Old Satsuma," Harper's New Monthly Magazine, (), 512-28; "Ancient and Modern Methods of Arrow-Release," Bulletin of the Essex Institute, 17 (1885), 3-56; "Was Middle America Peopled from Asia," Appleton's Popular Science Monthly, (1898), 1-16;
27. Catalogue of the Morse Collection of Japanese Pottery, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1901).
28. Japan Day by Day, 2: 401-402.
29. Diary entries, May 19, 1889, and Oct. 17, 1887, quoted in Wayman, Morse, 353,344.
30. Morse quotes Burke in On the Importance of Good Manners (Boston, 1894), 23-24. This was a published version of a Founder's Day address which he delivered at Vassar College.

31. Much of this was in newspaper articles, letters to the editor, and public lectures. Clippings detailing his views can be found in the Peabody Museum archives. More easily obtainable are such works as Museums of Art and Their Influences (); "If Public Libraries, why not Public Museums?" Atlantic Monthly, (July, 1893), 112-119; Can City Life be Made Endurable (Worcester, Mass., 1900); "Natural Selection and Crime," Appleton's Popular Science Monthly (1892) ; The Steam Whistle a Menace to Public Health (Salem, Mass., 1905).