

## Innocence Abroad : Three *Bildungsromane* Set in Japan

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The appearance of a "tsunami" of recent literary works set in Japan, including novels by Brad Leithauser, Sarah Sheard, Jay McInerney, and John Burnham Schwartz, nonfiction by Michael Shapiro, Gary Katzenstein, and Leila Philip, and poetry by David Mura and Mary Jo Salter, has prompted reviewers to speculate that for the newest generation of writers, Tokyo has become what Paris was for writers of the 1920s and 30s: "*the hip place to go and consider the meaning of life.*"<sup>1</sup>

Whether or not Japan really is the "Paris of the 90s", the question remains of what the sudden appearance of Japan as a literary subject means. As Edward Said pointed out in *Orientalism*, historically, Americans have tended to write *about* Japan, employing the mastering discourse of the social sciences, rather than *of* it :

[The social science approach] is the specifically American contribution to the history of Orientalism and it can be dated roughly from the period immediately following World War II, when the United States found itself in the position recently vacated by Britain and France. The American experience of the Orient prior to that exceptional moment was limited... there was no deeply invested tradition of Orientalism, and consequently in the United States knowledge of the Orient never passed through the refining process... that it went through in Europe. Furthermore, the imaginative investment was never made either, perhaps because the American frontier, the only one that counted, was the westward one. Immediately after World War II, then, the Orient became, not a broad catholic issue as it had been for centuries in Europe, but an administrative one, a matter for policy.<sup>2</sup>

The appearance of this wave of literary works would seem to indicate that

an "imaginative investment" is now beginning to be made. It is my intention here to investigate why Japan, specifically, has become the subject of this interest by examining three recent American novels: Brad Leithauser's *Equal Distance* (1985), Jay McInerney's *Ransom* (1986), and John Burnham Schwartz's *Bicycle Days* (1989).

It is possible to speak of the three novels as a group because they share many stylistic and thematic characteristics: each is a *Bildungsroman*; each also consciously situates itself in the tradition of the expatriate writings of the 1920s and 30s. In addition to their common attraction to Japanese culture (*Equal Distance* and *Ransom* are set in Kyoto; *Bicycle Days*, in Tokyo) the three heroes share many other characteristics: each is middle-class, Ivy-League educated, and the product of a family situation where he is torn between identifying with a sympathetic, but unhappy, mother, and a ruthless, successful father. Caught on the horns of this dilemma, each comes to Japan. Why, specifically, is Japan chosen as the site of their coming of age? How does this choice compare to the earlier generation's preoccupation with Paris?

## I

First of all, it might be useful to sketch the historical differences in the relationship between the United States and France and the United States and Japan. From the time of Benjamin Franklin, the United States has commonly played the role of Rousseauesque "noble savage" to France's "fountainhead of Western Civilization."<sup>3</sup> This relationship can be described as "pastoral" in the sense in which William Empson used the term Empson locates the pastoral in a specific relationship of class domination, which he identifies as the "pastoral stance": namely, "that I am in one way better than you, in other ways, not so good."<sup>4</sup> A certain ironic distance is required to maintain this stance, which perhaps explains why the United States and England, which share a common language, do not have the same sort of relationship. Because of this "double attitude," to be the

subject of pastoral means to be alternately admired and reviled: to be seen, on the one hand, as a source of originary goodness, and on the other, as culturally deficient. How well this attitude has been maintained can be seen in the work of the influential French sociologist Jean Baudrillard, who, in his recent essay, *America*, refers to the United States as "the last remaining primitive culture."<sup>5</sup>

It must be said, however, that Americans themselves had an interest in maintaining this distance. Following the logic of Henry James's apology for the necessity of expatriation ("the flower of art can bloom only where the soil is deep"),<sup>6</sup> one would assume that the country of choice for American literary expatriates would be England, when in fact, it was France. Rather than seeking seeking to immerse themselves in the "thicker soil" of French culture, the expatriate writers of the 1920s and 30s sought merely to free themselves from the influence of American Puritanism, with its attendant emphasis on the pursuit of material interests, which prevented them from expressing themselves freely, and were openly, unapologetically, solipsistic: American writers came to Paris to write about themselves.<sup>7</sup> In *Tropic of Cancer*, Henry Miller writes, with his characteristic bluntness, "it is no accident that propels people like us to Paris. Of itself Paris initiates no dramas. They are begun elsewhere. Paris is simply an obstetrical instrument that tears the living embryo from the womb and puts it in the incubator. Paris is the cradle of artificial births."<sup>8</sup> What interested people like Miller was not the fertility of the Parisian soil, but rather, the tolerance of the Parisian atmosphere. To a large extent, Paris's decline as an international artistic center seems to be due to the gradual worldwide liberalization that followed the Second World War.

The ways in which *Equal Distance*, *Ransom*, and *Bicycle Days* conform to the tradition of the expatriate writers of the 1920s and 30s also serves to highlight the ways in which they differ. Of the writers of the "lost generation," Hemingway, not surprisingly, casts the longest shadow. Near the beginning of *Equal Distance*, Danny Ott, the novel's hero, encounters a

character named Greg Blaising, a self-styled “eighties style Hemingway expatriate,” which means, he says, “I still drink too much, but I don’t suffer in silence” (60). Unlike Danny, Blaising has no interest in learning the language or the customs of the Japanese. He supports a profligate lifestyle by teaching English, and manages to be “cool” in a way that Danny, concerned with fitting in, is not. Thus, for Blaising, Kyoto supplies what Paris supplied the expatriates of the earlier generation: an exotic background and an easy means of getting his living.

Blaising, however, is to some extent a nostalgic portrayal of a style of expatriate who is in the process of being supplanted by another. In a newspaper interview, the author of *Bicycle Days*, John Burnham Schwartz, explained, “People went to Paris wanting to be Writers... times are different. We don’t see ourselves as a movement. We see ourselves as individuals going to Japan to take a good job. And then we write about it.”<sup>9</sup> Schwartz’s main character, Alec Stern, spends a summer in Tokyo working for an American-based computer company; the main character of Leithauser’s novel, Danny Ott, presents his taking of a year’s leave of absence from Harvard Law School in order to work for a professor at Kyoto University as a “smart career move” (4). As Said points out in the passage quoted above, the relationship between the United States and Japan has tended to be most businesslike. As in the case of Hemingway, however, this hard-nosed practicality masks a deeper mysticism.

Of the three protagonists, McInerney’s Ransom, who has arrived in Japan by way of the Khyber Pass, best fits the profile of the Hemingway hero; therefore, it is not surprising that although all three novels show the influence of Hemingway’s earnest, no-nonsense style, it is most strongly in evidence in *Ransom* :

When the water boiled, Ransom removed the kettle from the gas and filled his teapot, pouring the rest into the tin basin in the sink. Made of soapstone, the sink tended to turn green around the edges in summer. He topped the basin with cold water from the tap, then lathered up his shaving brush. With a clean bathtowel he wiped the the mirror over the sink. He shaved his upper

lip first and poured a cup of tea. When he was done, he rinsed out the basin and hung it on the nail over the sink, then poured out another cup of tea. He went into the other room, folded up his futon and stashed it in the closet, from which he took a broom. He opened the sliding doors onto the terrace and swept the tatami, which glowed yellow in the patch of sun. Dust teemed in the light. The sweeping didn't take long. That was one of the advantages of small quarters (40).

Compare this passage to one from the Hemingway short story, "Big Two-Hearted River, Part I":

He started a fire with some chunks of pine he got with the axe from a stump. Over the fire he stuck a wire grill, pushing the four legs down into the ground with his boot. Nick put the frying pan on the grill over the flames. He was hungrier. The beans and spaghetti warmed. Nick stirred them and mixed them together. They began to bubble, making little bubbles that rose with difficulty to the surface. There was a good smell. Nick got out a bottle of tomato catchup and cut four slices of bread. The little bubbles were coming faster now. Nick sat down beside the fire and lifted the frying pan off. He poured about half the contents out into a tin plate. It spread slowly on the plate. Nick knew it was too hot. He poured on some tomato catchup...<sup>10</sup>

Nick Adams's journey past the burned-out town is commonly read as a symbolic narrative of a process of spiritual renewal following the trauma of the First World War.<sup>11</sup> Nick's housewifely attention to detail is an act of meditation; the simple, at times childish-sounding sentences seem to eschew rhetoric. Ransom's performance of the consummately masculine act of shaving his upper lip is described in much the same way. At the beginning of the novel, we find Ransom leading a celibate, monklike existence as a member of a karate *dojo*; similarly, in "Big Two-Hearted River, Part II", Nick Adams decides to linger upstream, with the "male" fish whose insides are "clean and compact, coming out all together" (183), instead of pursuing "tragic adventure" in the more feminine element of the swamp.<sup>12</sup>

In Hemingway, the process of spiritual regeneration and the valorization of manly pursuits is connected. It is this theme in Hemingway's writing to which Leithauser, McInerney, and Schwartz respond, and it is this concern that most radically sets their writing apart

from their Parisian predecessors. While in Kyoto, Danny Ott hopes to learn Japanese, draft an article on international law, and be “initiated into some sort of Eastern enchantment or mystery”; as Danny’s plane flies over the Pacific, the ocean appears to him as a legitimating Emersonian “brimless, abstracted eye” (4). Similarly, Ransom seeks some sort in “initiation”:

When he had begun, trying to learn the basics while keeping his face intact, Ransom used what he had—his relative size and strength. In this he was like Yamada, who was built like a weightlifter. The sensei was always shouting at both of them to stop *boxing*.

Ransom found Yamada and his karate to be congenial, more accessible; but Ito, in his foreignness, came to be his model. The Monk embodied something that Ransom did not understand: a larger set of possibilities than the pursuit of say, football or golf.

Ransom knew that eventually, with practice, he could do what Yamada did, which was a sophisticated form of kick-boxing. But he aspired to that which he did not know he could do. He didn’t just want to be good. He wanted to be transformed (7).

Unlike Henry Miller, who is already knocked up when he leaves the United States, arriving in Paris merely to bring his ideas to term, both Ransom and Danny Ott hope to be impregnated by their Japanese experience: to be “initiated,” and “transformed.” Although Ransom regards them ironically, in the “Asia pilgrims,” the people who have washed up in Japan after travelling through Asia in the wake of the Viet Nam War (15) there is the suggestion that the unexpected outcome of that war gave renewed respectability to the idea of an alternative way of thinking, symbolized by the “set of possibilities” embodied by the Monk.<sup>13</sup> There is the idea that western civilization has somewhere taken a wrong turn, and that it is necessary to make a “pilgrimage” back to the source in order to find out where that was. Greg Blaising, who was born on an army base in Shikoku, and who, like Ransom, has also travelled around the world, satirizes this quest: “and now our pilgrim, though fully aware that the age is long gone when a young man crossed the sea to make his fortune, returns to the land

of his birth, land of the Rising Sun, only to discover it's a humorous mirror, and there really is a country that beats America in a one-on-one crassness competition, in Mammon-chasing, in the pursuit of ugliness" (45).

Later on, at the novel's climax, Danny Ott travels to Hiroshima, where, with the aid of a marijuana cigarette, an epiphany takes place :

Danny *was* thinking clearly as, his tired face looking up at him, he saw without doubt what he had always seen: the Professor's field was a sham, there was no such thing as international law, no such thing as human rights... With nations, as with people, one was either dominating, dominated, or threatened with domination. It was clear that there was only force on one side, luck and cleverness on the other; bullies on the one side, potential victims on the other, scrambling frenziedly for shelter.

Bullies with sticks to root out your eyes, with knives and bombs that rained from the sky, bullies with boots that kicked you in the head as you lay helpless on the playground. Right there was the meaning (he had seen long ago) behind the Professor's laughter at that story about how those salmon which the Russians used to stock their rivers had swum to Japanese waters to spawn. Cosmic justice — or at least the hope that the clever boy must ultimately vanquish the lumbering oversized bully (301).

Here, the "larger set of possibilities" that are the object of both Ransom and Danny Ott's spiritual quests is characterized as the spirit of the "clever boy." From a psychological point of view, his inevitable defeat at the hands of the "lumbering oversized bully" can be seen as representing the necessity of relinquishing childhood innocence, the position of being always a victim, never a victimizer, and accepting the role of the "big man," with its power and attendant responsibilities. The Professor's efforts on behalf of the "clever boy" recalls the Japanese folk-figure, the *bishomen*, the beautiful boy, whose cloying exterior almost always hides a powerful supernatural force.<sup>13</sup> If the Professor's research is a quest for a cosmic, or at least legal, justification for Japan's current prosperity, and thus an assurance of its continuation, then Danny's rejection of the same has both psychosexual and historical significance.<sup>14</sup>

In *Bicycle Days*, the equation of the childhood state of grace with the protagonist's fantasies about Japan is even more obvious :

... the most frequent picture was that of the kitchen table... its length fit snugly against one wall of the large kitchen, leaving just enough room for a wooden stool at each end and two folding chairs along one side... [His brother] Mark had already begun playing team sports after school, leaving Alec to come home alone after classes were done. His mother was almost always in the kitchen, preparing dinner. In between trips to the stove she sat at the table, on Mark's stool, with a couple of magazines open in front of her. The sleeves of her blouse were rolled up, and there were light streaks of flour on her dark green apron. Her blond hair was tied back from her face. She drank lukewarm coffee with milk in it from a grey pottery mug (68).

Into this milky preoedipal paradise intrudes the specter of women's liberation: Alex's mother, claiming that she "needed to get out of the house, too," takes a job teaching piano at a nearby music school, leaving Alex to "come home to an empty apartment three times a week" (69). It is at this point that Alex becomes fascinated with Japan:

One afternoon, [Alec] went with his class on a trip to a children's museum, where a traditional Japanese house had been built... the house was all clean emptiness and he had felt close to it, as if he knew it. The wood was what he thought wood should look like, it wasn't painted or stained. There weren't any pictures, only tall, beautiful flowers in a bowl with white pebbles. The flowers sat on a shelf in the corner where the table was... when he got home that day, Alec told his mother he didn't want to wear shoes inside the house anymore... She never asked him about Japan, so he never told her how often he thought about it... He never mentioned how a family had grown out of the picture of the house he had seen. It was his family -- a second family -- and they lived in Japan, which was his, too, because it looked just the way he thought it should, all wood and reed and tall, beautiful flowers. He had a sister in his new family, and they played cards together. His Japanese parents stayed home most of the time, as if neither of them had a job at all (71).

The simplicity and organic unity of the Japanese house becomes a symbol of the order that is missing from the boy's own life. Just as there is "just enough room" for the stools and chairs that flank the table which metonymically stands for his mother's presence in the kitchen, there is a sense of moral imperative in the spacial arrangement of the Japanese house: it looks like it "should," and therefore the family that grows out of the



picture of the house also behaves as the boy thinks they "should"; that is, according to his desire to have his father in the picture, but out of sight, and his mother all to himself. It is interesting that in his fantasy family, Alex replaces his masculine, competitive older brother with a sister. His fantasy of Japan is a fantasy of escape to the past, to the lost paradise of the pre-Feminism, 1950s-style nuclear family.

Alec does indeed acquire a Japanese family, the Hasegawas, only to find that their problems present a somewhat ludicrous version of the sexual malaise in his own family. Unlike Alec's father, who spends all his free time at his club, where he plays pool and engages in other vaguely sinister activities, Mr. Hasegawa, a small business owner, is indeed home all the time; however, Alec is shocked to discover that he is a frequenter of a special barbershop, "just for company presidents," where the price of a haircut also includes the sexual services of the barber's wife. Likewise, Mrs. Hasegawa does not work outside the home, but Alec discovers her to be an intensely lonely person who appears to take in home-stay visitors because she is ignored by her own family. For Alec, Japanese society had represented a lost ideal where things were organized according to the child's point of view. The shattering of this youthful delusion suggests that he is at last ready to grow up.

## II

Our heroes' nostalgic infatuation with Japan, however earnestly felt, naturally does not prevent them from being critical at the same time. In *Ransom*, this critical posture usually takes the form of humorous observations made for the reader's benefit. In *Equal Distance* and *Bicycle Days*, this attitude is tinged with disillusionment:

Outside, the hills still loomed grayly through a mist of smoke and dirt and fog. Danny was struck... by a freshened perception of the ugliness of this whole Japanese countryside... this was a hideous parody of all those old *sumie* landscapes he'd seen... A delicate mist-hung mountain landscape opening to unveil, faintly, in the distance -- what? A corrugated shed, a

power line, a smokestack, a derrick, a traffic-congested street, a larger-than-man-sized-replica of a bowling pin... Here it was, spread out before him, the absolute refutation of that pervasive Japanese conviction—which he'd so much wanted all year to believe with them—that all things could be assimilated into their remarkable land while leaving its soul intact... To believe in that Japanese pride which continually said, *The commercialism is only superficial, no people on earth love nature and beauty as much as we do*. But that was merely to comfort themselves, lies, the whole packed country was dishonest, for a people who truly loved nature would never have permitted this (292-3).

Danny's feelings towards the scene he surveys from the train window, alternately nostalgic and scornful, can be seen as another version of the pastoral, where, in this case, the observer, while styling himself as an acolyte, a pilgrim in search of knowledge, actually takes a superior position to the observed. From Danny's perspective, the Japanese are at best dishonest, using an "oriental" rhetoric to mask what could be either oriental despotism or western-style capitalist exploitation; at worst, they are primitive, too benighted to understand the implications of their wholesale adoption of western technology. The implication here is that the white, male, western observer is better able to appreciate Japan than the Japanese themselves. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said has shown how this stance has been repeatedly used as a justification for colonial domination.<sup>15</sup>

While both *Equal Distance* and *Ransom* protest against the passing of the Japan of the *sumie* pictures, which, as outsiders, constitutes "their" Japan, it is only Ransom who recognizes that what he is reacting against is in fact the shadow of his own culture on the Japanese landscape:

Yukiko ordered a Coke and asked Ransom why it was that gaijin were inevitably attracted to all the quaint and reactionary aspects of Japanese culture. "Like the martial arts."

"I'm sure you have a theory."

"You know," she said, "I could never understand the route you took between my place and yours. It seemed roundabout. Then I figured out that you were avoiding the McDonald's on Kawaramachi-Imadegawa. It spoiled your idealized Japanese vista—pagodas and misty mountains" (65).

In a sense, the appearance of Japan as the subject of literary discourse

signifies that it has finally "arrived". At the same time, the fact that Japan had been an administrative issue before it became a literary one must necessarily color its literary representation. An American writer taking Japan as his subject cannot do so from a position of political innocence; he must constantly confront the shadow of American cultural hegemony on the landscape. What unites these three novels is their common preoccupation with the collision of pastoral innocence and civilized corruption. Towards the end of *The Great Gatsby*, the narrator conjectures that perhaps all along his had been a "story of the West;" that because the characters were all Westerners, "perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life."<sup>16</sup> The West here represents unblighted nature, the East, blight itself.<sup>17</sup> This opposition, expanded to one between the jejeune United States and "civilized" Europe, lies behind much of the work of Henry James: Daisy Miller, Christopher Newsome, Isabel Archer, all of whom come to grief because they are somehow fundamentally "unadaptable to European life." *The Sun Also Rises*, the 1920s expatriate novel par excellence, was originally titled "The Earth Prevaileth," which points to that novel's hidden message: that no matter how enthusiastically Hemingway's Americans pitched themselves into European-style dissolution, they were possessed of an unshakable innocence.

With the rise of American hegemony that followed the end of the Second World War, American writers continue to see themselves as possessed of an unshakable quality, but what had formerly been seen as innocence has been redefined as heedlessness, while naturalness becomes brutality. While, in the past, America had been seen, and had seen itself, as a source of renewal in relation to its cultural forbears, it is now seen as a source of corruption, violence, disregard for the past, and fast-food hamburgers. In the new world order, the materialism, the dominance of crass commercial interests that drove American writers to Paris has overrun the borders of the United States and taken over the world.

Ironically, Japan functions in the opposite manner that Paris did; rather than being a decadent older civilization against which American writers measured their idealism, Japan has been constructed as an extension of the western frontier, a source of ordinary goodness. For each of the heroes of the novels that we have been discussing, the flight to Japan represents an attempt to prolong childhood innocence. Leithauser and Schwartz's characters eventually accept the loss of their innocence in return for the consolations of adult power; Ransom, who refuses to make this sacrifice, opts out of the situation altogether.

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## NOTES

This essay is dedicated to Barbara Brooks.

- 1) Bob Sipchen, "How Japan Stacks Up: American Writers Find Volumes of Heartbreak and Joy," *Los Angeles Times*, October 1, 1989, Pt. VI, pp. 1-7.
- 2) Edward Said *Orientalism* (London: Peregrine, 1978) 290. All future citations will be incorporated into the text.
- 3) Humphrey Carpenter, *Geniuses Together: American Writers in Paris in the 1920's* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1988) pp. 3-17. See also Jean Meral, *Paris in American Literature* Trans., Laurette Long (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989).
- 4) William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1935) 14. Empson writes: "The pastoral is based on a double attitude of the artist to the worker, of the complex man to the simple one ('I am in one way better, in another not so good')."
- 5) Jean Baudrillard, *America* Trans., Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1989) 7.
- 6) Henry James, in his essay, "Hawthorne," writes that "the flower of art blooms only where the soil is deep... it takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature..." Henry James, *Hawthorne* [1879] (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1956) 2.
- 7) See Joseph H. McMahon, "City for Expatriates," *Yale French Studies* 32 (October 1964).
- 8) Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer* (London: Panther, 1964) 35.
- 9) Sipchen, *Los Angeles Times*, 7.
- 10) Ernest Hemingway, "Big Two-Hearted River: Part I," *The First Forty-Nine Stories* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1944) 171.
- 11) Carpenter, 151.
- 12) Fishing also figures in the narrative of *Bicycle Days*, where the hero spends a weekend in the countryside with an elderly couple, the Kawashimas, where he is instructed in the manly arts of fishing and wood-splitting. See *Bicycle Days*, pp. 134-153.
- 13) Ian Buruma points to the historical figure, Yoshitsune Minamoto, as the most famous illustration of the *bishonen* ideal. He explains that "Japanese audiences are fascinated by the idea of spirit overcoming force, and skill overcoming brawn. Not for nothing is judo a Japanese invention. Little Davids are forever meeting brutish Goliaths in boys' comics, perhaps because many Japanese like to see themselves as spiritual Davids in a world of brutish Goliaths (133). See Buruma, *A Japanese Mirror: Heroes and Villians of Japanese Culture* (New York: Penguin, 1984) 125-35.
- 14) At the rather abrupt climax of *Ransom*, the title character is beheaded in a fight with a fellow martial arts student, the follower of a violent, renegade school. The moral of the story seems to be, as Ransom himself articulates early in the novel "you can run, but you can't hide"(12). Brutality is an inescapable fact of life. Both Danny Ott and Ransom conclude that there is no alternative to the

will to power, that one is either "dominant or dominating," but unlike Danny Ott, who returns to the United States, where a job at a Wall Street law firm awaits him, to become a half-willing participant, Ransom, in what we are supposed to read as a heroic refusal, allows himself to be killed..

15) See especially pp. 31-110.

16) F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribners, 1923) 177.

17) See Frederick Karl, *American Fictions, 1940-1980: A Comprehensive History and Critical Evaluation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985) 42-74, for a discussion of "the persistence of pastoral" in American writing.