Introduction
THE FAMILIARITY OF STRANGE PLACES

The comparison can be misleading, but it is a useful one to make for those who are unfamiliar with the general contours of Japanese literature: in the way that American scholars have had to ponder the stature of Edgar Allan Poe, readers of Japanese literature have had to wonder about how best to understand the accomplishments of Izumi Kyōka (1873–1939), another writer whose influence seems out of proportion with the category he has been customarily allotted by literary history. Kyōka’s writing flows from assumptions very different from those that provide the bedrock for Poe’s dank and desolate creations, but to the extent that the term gothic can hold meaning in a cross-cultural dimension, it is worth applying to both writers, if only to bring attention to the dissonance the category creates. If anything, Kyōka’s writing is a frontal attack on the barbarous and uncouth values to which European gothic supposedly owes its genealogy. Yet Kyōka does share with Poe a decadent romanticism, and this point of sameness leads us to consider how it is possible that writers of the uncanny and the macabre can be highly regarded at all.

The dissonance created by the possibility of “great gothic writers” can be understood on a number of levels. On the plane of literary history, major achievements within minor categories implicate the valid-
ity of the framework itself, as is made clear by the recent accomplishments of feminist criticism. In this case, the challenge is not to the assumption of female inferiority but to a hierarchy of the imagination. Despite the limitations of Poe’s work, for instance, he remains one of the most influential American writers. Consider his importance to Charles Baudelaire and the French symbolists, his pioneering efforts with the short-story form, his place as the originator of ratiocinative narrative, and, by extension, the presently burgeoning world of the mystery novel. Whatever our opinions regarding the quality of such contributions, there is simply too much symbolism, short fiction, and mystery writing still around to allow us to ignore the creator of William Wilson.

Although his impact on subsequent generations is harder to determine, a similar sketch might be drawn of Kyōka. (The Japanese custom is to list surnames before given names and to refer to a writer by the given pen name, if it exists, as it does here.) No one can deny the narrow and obsessive quality of Kyōka’s vision. He had clear ideas about what he wanted to write; and once he had developed a formula that allowed him to make imaginatively present that which he desired, he was largely content to repeat himself. Yet this continuity of focus was also one reason he was able to accomplish so much as an artist: though we might wish for more breadth of subject matter, we hardly question the intensity of his desire or his sincerity. Suffering, like Poe, from the untimely death of his mother, Kyōka sought to memorialize her youthful beauty and maternal gentleness through hundreds of literary excursions into the world of the dead. In a word, this trespass or passing “through reality to gain access to a much greater power,” (28:696) is the essence of Kyōka’s long and productive career.1 This concern determines its fundamental structure, the shape of its moonlit shadows.

The force that powers this trespass is fear, in the dual senses of horror and awe. Had Kyōka been driven only by the former, he would be much closer to Poe in sentiment. As it stands, the latter emotion, a profound reverence for the “two great supernatural forces in this world . . . the Power of Kannon (Kannon ryoku) and the Power of the Evil Gods (Kishin ryoku) . . . before which human beings are utterly helpless” (28:677) provides the crucial difference. Poe confronted death with the insistency of his own will, waging a self-
aggrandizing battle of supposedly absolute and equal powers; he ended in despair. Kyôka, writing within a more polytheistic and animistic cultural context, maintained a more passive acceptance of his surroundings and managed to live to the age of sixty-six despite physical and emotional frailty. Although he nearly threw himself into the blackness of the Kanazawa Castle moat, and though he suffered greatly from depression and disorientation, he was able to survive by acting out his fears through his art and by depending on a small group of those who cared most deeply for him: his father, Izumi Seiji; his mentor, Ozaki Kôyô; his grandmother, Meboso Kôte; his wife, Itô Suzu; and a few loyal friends, especially Sasakawa Rinpû, educator and editor, and the artists Kaburaki Kiyokata and Komura Settai.

In his writings, Kyôka found hope through the careful and insistent deployment of salutary figures. Most frequently they are women, archetypal heroines of beauty, wit, and grace. Reflective of his longing for his young mother, his heroines both seduce and save, tempt and chasten Kyôka’s male characters as they wander in mountainous and watery territories of mystery and awe. By projecting the image of his mother onto these gallant though often unfortunate women, he was able to visit and revisit deprivation in a way that allowed him to find a measure of relief from dread and to vent his disdain for the crass, unfeeling world of risshin shusse, the Meiji-period (1868–1912) ethic of “success at all costs.” Never doubting the miracle of a pure heart or the power of language and literature, he delivered himself from his many anxieties by establishing a fictive purgatory that is often precious and bizarre, though always genuine despite its melodramatic formality. This is a small and idiosyncratic world. However, Kyôka went deep enough in his search to find that place which is connected with all others, and the world of his imagining provides us with vistas of emotional territories that expand in every direction.

Akutagawa Ryûnosuke (1892–1927), the brilliant novelist of the generation that followed, coined the term “Kyôka’s world” (Kyôka no sekai) for this eccentric place. As the coinage suggests, Kyôka’s position within the modern tradition is not easy to describe. His originality is a synthesis of unexpected components, made both possible and suspect by the prevailing expectations of the era in which he worked. His rhythms and themes, his images and structures owe much to oral and performative traditions—folktales and legends, professional story-
tellers, traveling theatrical troupes, and kabuki and nō—as well as to the written texts of *gesaku* or “frivolous scribblings” that prevailed during the latter half of the Edo period (1600–1868) and into the first two decades of the Meiji period. *Gesaku’s* supernatural and melodramatic elements were all the more relevant for Kyōka because of their clash with the positivism of the day. Given his own desire to commune with the dead, it is understandable that he should resist the agenda of those who called for methods that would preclude all but the most rational and realistic approaches to the world about him. Kyōka wanted to believe in and write about metamorphosis at a time when the antifigural force of modern language reform precluded the reality of ghosts and monsters. To dismiss this interest in the supernatural as simply retrogressive or anachronistic is, however, to misunderstand the significance of Kyōka’s choices as a modern Japanese artist and to ignore the variety of narrative that was being produced in this age of the realistic novel.

The tendency to disregard nonrealistic forms of narrative follows from a still prevalent model of modernity. Contrary to the orthodox view, the birth of modern consciousness in Japan goes back at least as far as the character studies of Ihara Saikaku (1642–1692) and Ejima Kiseki (1667?–1736) and owes little in its earliest stages to Western paradigms. The “progressiveness” of Meiji Japan came, then, as a second flowering of bourgeois culture, at a stage when the dynamism and brilliance of Edo-period writing was already winding down. The Restoration of 1868 occurred at a point when the emergence of the individual had already begun, and the foundations of capitalism had already been laid.

This view is not articulated often enough by the critical literature on modernity, which tends to be poorly informed about life under the Tokugawa regime. Whereas the visual and theatrical accomplishments of Edo merchant culture are well known, the study and translation of its literary works have progressed more slowly, largely for the same reasons that marginalized Kyōka during his own day. Seeing itself as an improvement over what preceded, modernity tends to erase the past or reconfigure it as a traditional (and inferior) Other. That the present emergence of Kyōka’s work in English translation should coincide so closely with an increased interest in late-Edo *gesaku* is not an accident. For it is, in part, the dissatisfaction with and unraveling
of modern hegemonic systems that has led to an increased appreciation of what has up to now been dismissed as fractured, frivolous, and superficial. Indeed, the general effect of the poststructuralist critique has been to reconsider old categories and to usher in an age of Japanese literary criticism that resonates with the wider attempt to understand artifacts of culture on their own terms.

Perhaps Kyōka’s greatest contribution will be to force his readers to consider what those terms might be. A sympathetic critique of his “traditionalism” tends to cast doubt upon critical methods that have prevailed throughout the colonialist era. Ultimately, his concerns are highly personal, embedded in a life of deprivation and emotional trauma. Yet because of the manner in which he sought to express the drama in his heart, borrowing openly and shamelessly from outmoded methods in order to articulate a very modern self-absorption, his work becomes a controversial site that provides, for one side of the debate, an important link between early-modern and postmodern Japan. Depending on how much importance we give to Kyōka’s work, the “Western,” late-modern phase of Japan’s cultural development, from about 1880 to 1970, comes to look more and more like a curiously prominent bend in a surprisingly straight river. The meander formed when Western influence was at its greatest and came about because the traditional symbiosis of word and picture that had long supported the Japanese literary tradition deteriorated. It was at this time that the visual impulse of Japanese narrative yielded to the logocentric and phonocentric concerns of representational discourse as modern novelists tried to accommodate the new episteme of psychological realism. That Japan did not yield enough is the position of the historian Maruyama Masao who, being trained in the European tradition, held that modern Japan, upon abandoning democratic institutions and disintegrating into an absolutist state, never successfully established the primacy of individual rights or the subjectivity of a thinking, historically conscious people. Today, it might be argued, Japan suffers less from absolutism than from affluence and the insatiable contentments of consumer culture (though it is hard, in the end, to set the one against the other). It can also be said that Japan’s phenomenal economic success is a precondition for the vitality of, especially, technologically driven visual display and its undeniable link to the present reevaluation of Kyōka’s work.
The so-called Kyōka boom began in the 1970s, with the staging of those of his plays that were simply too “far out” to have been performed a moment earlier. As before, the author’s wider reputation still depends on performances of his work, most of them based on stage and screen adaptations written by others. Were it not for the quality of the original texts, though, Kyōka would not be so frequently mediated by performance and translation. And were it not for the seductive power of the original language, our need to revise literary history in order to explain his disquieting synthesis of early- and late-modern elements would not be as strongly felt, despite growing critical interest in, for instance, the dominance of kusazōshi (popular illustrated fiction) on the front end of the late-modern period and the explosion of manga (comic books) on the other.

Ultimately, the strength of Kyōka’s work remains its own attraction. His encoded seduction of red and white is still powerful enough to lead us to places where we might not have otherwise chosen to venture. And his “marvelous but largely untranslatable gift of language” was no doubt the reason for Edward Seidensticker’s excellent translation of “A Tale of Three Who Were Blind,” a brief but involving piece of writing that has, over the years, captivated many. Despite the obvious difficulties, the virtuosity of Kyōka’s prose has more recently drawn others to the task of rendering “Kyōka’s world” into the stubborn abstraction and visual poverty of an alphabetic language such as English.

The lasting vividness of this eccentric place also explains why numerous Japanese writers who followed in Kyōka’s wake have not only acknowledged his achievement but have felt compelled to offer their interpretation of its historical significance. Consider, for example, Mishima Yukio’s (1925–1970) appraisal of Kyōka, whom he held to be perhaps the only true genius among modern Japanese writers.

Kyōka was a genius. He rose above his time to deify his own individuality. With a dangerously playful style of Japanese, he cultivated a garden of peonies that steadily blossomed amidst the anemic desert of modern Japanese literature. His accomplishment did not arise from a sense of intellectual superiority nor from any sort of aristocratic pretense; neither did it derive from a contempt for the masses nor from any theory of aestheticism. Bound always to the ordinary
sentiment of the people, Kyōka was a pioneer of language, one who raised the Japanese idiom to its most extravagant level, to its highest potential. Using the narrative methods of popular historical stories [kōdan] and human-nature stories [ninjū banashi], he drew from a vocabulary as rich as the sea to craft sentences of lasting stone and to plunge into the deep forest of Japanese mysticism and symbolism.

His style, which revived the renga-like leaps of association and the imagistic splendor of the Japanese language that modern Japanese literature had forgotten, was not the result of an intellectually contrived anachronism. He himself became a mirror of the artist’s timeless spirit. Fervently believing both in words and in spirits, he ranks with E. T. A. Hoffmann in the pureness of his romanticism.5

Mishima, who felt that a novel was not properly a novel unless it connected the reader with the supernatural, had obvious reasons to sympathize with Kyōka. Here, he accurately locates the source of Kyōka’s power in his regard for language while going on to attribute to him even national significance. “Kyōka . . . raised the Japanese idiom to its most extravagant level, to its highest potential.” Characterized in this way, as a mystic and a symbolist, Kyōka was exceptional because he was able to revive the leaps of association essential to renga, or linked verse, and the “imagistic splendor of the Japanese language that modern Japanese literature had forgotten.”

We are left to wonder what the “highest potential” of the Japanese language might be. Given Shimazaki Tōson’s (1872–1948) more balanced characterization of the same tradition (“Japanese writers are essentially impressionists. This is both our strength and our weakness.”)6 we cannot easily say that the leaps of association and the imagistic potential admired by Mishima were uniformly appreciated. Indeed, Mishima’s sense of modern Japanese literature having “forgotten” these aspects of the language is misleading. The writings of Tsubouchi Shōyō (1859–1935), Tayama Katai (1871–1930), and many others tell us that the abandonment of the “renge-like” was not a passive forgetfulness but an active attempt to reform the Japanese language so it would be sufficiently transparent to express a more positivistic worldview based on observation and on the ability to describe accurately.
To the extent that realism actually came to dominate Japan’s literary culture, Kyōka, though recognized as a gifted writer even during his own time, eventually became marginalized and, in the estimation of Tanizaki Jun’ichirō (1886–1965), even neglected.

Quite frankly, I believe that during the final years of his life, Izumi Kyōka was largely left behind and forgotten. But I also think that because he had accomplished so much as an artist he was not particularly bothered by this neglect. To me, it doesn’t seem as though he suffered from loneliness, although we cannot deny that the aging Kyōka was excluded from the mainstream of the bun DAN. Now that he has passed away, however, a new historical significance and classical luster should accrue to his writings. We should read Kyōka in the way we read Chikamatsu or Saikaku, exploring the unique world of this great writer whose life spanned the Meiji, Taishō, and Shōwa periods.

I use the word “unique” for a purpose. Truly, few other authors have spent their lives within a world so strikingly different from any other. Great artists resemble each other in their extreme individuality. . . . Sōseki, Ōgai, and Kōyō—each of these authors lived in his own world. But the difference among these men is less than that which separates Kyōka from them all. . . .

Often mystical, bizarre, and obscure, his writing is essentially bright, florid, elegant, even artless. Its most laudable quality is its pure “Japaneseness.” Though Kyōka lived during the high tide of Western influence, his work is purely Japanese. All the values that appear in it—the beautiful, the ugly, the moral, the immoral, the chivalrous, the elegant—are native-born, borrowed neither from the West nor from China. . . . He is at once the most outstanding and the most local writer that our homeland has produced. Shouldn’t we, then, boast of this writer who couldn’t possibly have come from any other country?

The chauvinistic tone of Tanizaki’s encomium, written in 1940, the first anniversary of Kyōka’s death, is perhaps understandable in the context of Japan’s increasing commitment to national aggression: the announcement by Premier Konoe of the New National Order (Shintaisei), the formulation of the Tripartite Alliance with Germany
and Italy, and the inauguration of the Imperial Rule Assistance Association. Whatever the depth of Tanizaki's patriotism, its force here clearly weakens the argument he seems to be making. If it is true that great writers are extreme in their individuality, why place upon Kyōka's shoulders the mantle of Japan's identity? Indeed, to return to my original point and to reformulate a second, more immediate level of reading “great gothic writers,” authors such as Poe and Kyōka are understandable across differences of time and space because, though they might speak eloquently of their particular cultures, their concerns transcend national circumstance.

To the extent that these two levels of reading, historical and personal, influence each other, it is not clear whether history requires greatness or whether greatness requires history. Perhaps this is why literary history gravitates toward measured rhythms and well-defined categories even when attempting to give order to the agitation caused by a beam of light upon a sleeping eye, or to the erotic pull of pale skin against a crimson lining. There is ultimately something both familiar and familial about gothic writers. Our appreciation of them springs from a bothersome genealogy, a closeness not always easy to admit. They are affected uncles and conceited cousins, more easily admired from a distance than invited regularly to the dinner table, even when we know they have given us something of themselves that is also something of value. In the end, it is as difficult to fault the giver of a perfect gift as it is to deny the familiarity of strange places.

NOTES


4. The story can be found in Donald Keene, ed., Modern Japanese Literature (New York: Grove Press, 1956).
