“Not a song like any other,” the title of this collection, is a phrase from the second chapter of The Improvisatore, a novel written by Hans Christian Andersen in 1835 and a considerable favorite in Europe for the rest of the nineteenth century:

A little square-built fellow, whose whole dress consisted of a shirt, and short leather britches, which hung loose and unbuttoned at the knees, sat with a guitar, and twanged the strings merrily. Now he sang a song, now he played, and all the peasants clapped their hands. My mother remained standing; and I now listened to a song which seized upon me quite in an extraordinary way, for it was not a song like any other which I had heard.1

Mori Ōgai loved this novel and spent a number of years, in the midst of his own busy career, creating his own beautiful translation into Japanese, which remained a classic for many decades.

Indeed, Ōgai’s work as a translator alone (almost always from German originals) would have given him an important position in the history of modern Japanese literature and culture during the period of his lifetime, beginning in 1862, just before the country was opened to the West, until 1922, ten years after the death of the Emperor Meiji. For it was Ōgai who introduced a number of Europe’s significant writers to Japanese readers and writers, stimulating a virtual renaissance in the expansion of the possibilities of treating the realities of contemporary society in Japanese literature. One might say, in a homely figure of speech, that during his years in Europe Ōgai “heard” what was for him a song unlike any other and proceeded to domesticate what was for him a fabulous new melody. He did so in one way or another for the rest of his career.

Along with his slightly younger contemporary, the novelist Natsume Soseki (1867–1916), Ōgai continues to be considered in his own country as one of the towering figures in the world of Japanese literature and

1. This English translation is taken from the version by Mary Howitt published by Houghton Mifflin & Company, p. 17. The publication date is not given, but it is presumed to be around 1890.
thought of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is perhaps difficult for readers in the Anglo-American tradition to fully appreciate or even altogether sympathize with the range of Ōgai’s efforts and accomplishments, since they are somewhat at variance with our often unarticulated preconceptions concerning the appropriate province of a writer of fiction. Ōgai was to become, both by temperament and experience, a kind of universal man who took an interest in many areas of intellectual and artistic endeavor. He did not hesitate to experiment. In this sense he resembles many German and French intellectuals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who, far from considering themselves specialists, worked toward creating grand intellectual schemes that took in disparate fields of learning and inquiry. Ōgai’s aims were more modest than, say, those of a Max Weber, Mircea Eliade, or Jean-Paul Sartre. But he did, more than any other in his generation, attempt to seek out the connections between things and articulate the often hidden assumptions that underlay the social and cultural forces of the period in which he lived. Like Sartre, he used a variety of forms: theoretical essay, drama, poetry, autobiography, fiction, polemic. Few Japanese writers or thinkers were able to follow in his footsteps, in the literary field at least, but such later figures as the anthropologist Yanagida Kunio (1875–1962), the literary scholar Tsuda Sōkichi (1873–1961), the philosopher Watsuji Tetsurō (1889–1960), and universalist Marxist writers and thinkers such as Miki Kiyoshi (1897–1945) were also dedicated to searching out broader and deeper patterns in the society in which they lived. Perhaps, in the postwar years, only the critic and writer Kato Shūichi (born in 1919) would qualify for such a role. Indeed it might be said that the conditions which permitted the rise of such figures do not really exist any more in the younger generations, either in Europe or in Japan. Ōgai would not necessarily have shared many of the specific stances and opinions of all these men, but he would have been one with them in their determined attempts to grasp and then articulate the larger themes of their times as they witnessed them.

The astonishing range of Ōgai’s intellectual activities may not have originally been altogether willed on his part. As the various parts of this book make clear, Ōgai lived at a time of tremendous shifts in attitude, social structure, and artistic forms. His knowledge and innate mastery of the European models, which he learned at first hand, were such that he
was able to summon the imagination to grasp how any particular set of these attitudes, or artistic traditions, might be called upon. If many others saw them as well, Ōgai was one of the few writers who rose to the challenge of voicing them. Nor was he afraid to make comparisons. The European arts, from literature and theater to poetry and painting, were in a period of high creativity during Ōgai’s years in Europe (1884–1888), and the stimulus of these years was such that he kept himself informed about new developments in Europe, particularly in Germany, for the rest of his career. Thus, it seems to me, it was virtually inevitable that the works he created in Japan were, in his view, merely first attempts at bridging the cultures. Certainly this was true for the plays and poetry he wrote, and in many ways a number of the same elements can be found as well in his novels and short stories, for which no prior models existed in the Japanese tradition.

Two elements, I believe, are important in examining the scope and accomplishment of Ōgai’s contributions to Japanese literature and culture. Both distance him from the kind of writing still most favored by readers in the West and in contemporary Japan as well. The first of these elements involves his deep commitment to seek out the relations between thought and action. In his late historical stories, such as “Ōshio Heihachirō,” found in this volume, it is his vision of the inexorable relationship between ideas and their political and emotional consequences that drives the narrative forward. In order to delineate the play of these forces, Ōgai, both by temperament and by strategy, drew back, emotionally speaking, and presented his material from a consistent and objective distance. He observes and records his reasoned observations so that (in a fashion not unlike Brecht with his “alienation effect”) the reader is urged not only to feel but to think about the narrative being presented. In this it might well be supposed that Ōgai (and Brecht alike) may be drawing on certain traditions in German literature and thought, but I myself am not sufficiently learned in the German literary or intellectual traditions to identify them. In any case, as some of the essays in this volume make clear, this aesthetic distance (defined by Ōgai himself at one point as a kind of “Apollonian stance”) put him at a considerable

remove from the naturalist writers of his generation, writers such as Tayama Katai (1872–1930) and Masamune Hakuko (1879–1962), whose work was intensely personal and often without reference to much outside the realm of author’s own sense of a sometimes uncertain, even degraded, self.

There are other Japanese writers in the first half of the twentieth century who like Ōgai retained an intense commitment to historical fact. I am thinking in particular of Before the Dawn (Yoake mae) by Shimazaki Tōson (1872–1943), published between the years 1932 and 1935, for which he used his own family records in order to create an accurate, absorbing, and often grim pageant chronicling the shifts in Japanese society from the Tokugawa era to the Meiji period. Ōgai never found—nor indeed, given his professional and medical duties, could he have found—the time to attempt a chronicle on Tōson’s vast scale. But there nevertheless remain certain resemblances between the uses of history by both writers for a larger artistic vision in order to show with precision, and compassion, the way in which national crises impinge on the lives, both physical and spiritual, of individuals.

The purpose of this present collection, then, is to reveal something of Mori Ōgai in the full range of his creative endeavor. To this end the volume is divided into seven parts. Part I, “The Author Himself,” concerns a number of comments the author made about himself at one time or another during the course of his career. Laconic, ironic, detached, they reveal but also conceal. Part II, “In Germany,” offers important insights into Ōgai’s responses to living in Germany, where he witnessed with some displeasure the way in which his country was being interpreted from the outside. Part III, “The World of Politics,” chronicles Ōgai’s responses to society at a later phase in his career. Although by then already in a high government position, that of surgeon general of the Japanese army, Ōgai was to observe contemporary developments in Japanese society with some asperity and a certain disquiet. Part IV, “The Visual Arts,” provides some of the first information available in English translation concerning Ōgai’s lifelong interest in painting and other aspects of the contemporary visual arts in the Japan of his day. His theatrical experiments are briefly chronicled in Part V, “The Contemporary Japanese Theater.” Part VI, “Four Unusual Stories,” offers new evidence of the range of this writer’s interests and ambitions. And finally, in Part
VII, "The Art of Poetry," we have some of the first extended translations of Ógai's verse to be made available in English.

I owe many heartfelt thanks to my various colleagues who, in their enthusiasm, have contributed to this collection's range and depth. The fact that this is a group endeavor also suggests, I think, that there is no one person among us who work in the field of Japanese studies who possesses the requisite knowledge and intellectual background necessary to complete all of these translations single-handedly. Not only is Ógai's language difficult to translate, particularly in the earliest works, when the state of written Japanese was still in flux, but his range and erudition are truly startling. It is indeed precisely through the availability of these various essays, stories, plays, and other documents that the questing and questioning nature of this remarkable writer can be fully sensed for the first time by readers outside Japan. It was for such purposes that we assembled this volume, and it is the hope of each of us that these contributions will help explain the unique and lasting nature of Mori Ógai's accomplishments.

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