Mori Ōgai’s Resentful Narrator: Trauma and the National Subject in “The Dancing Girl”

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The career of Mori Ōgai, in its most common interpretation, appears to be a symbol of the contradictions of Japan in the Meiji period (1868–1912). Typically paired with Natsume Sōseki as the archetypal Meiji writer, Ōgai was not only a novelist and poet of Apollonian aesthetics but also an erudite and scathing critic, an army doctor, and a “combative enlightener” (tatakau keimōka) associated with authoritarian reformers in the middle and late Meiji periods. Critics consider Ōgai’s early romantic fiction and trenchant criticism to have played a central role in the establishment of modern literature (kindai bungaku) in Japan, the psychological, depoliticized fiction that succeeded the Meiji political novel after the demise of the Freedom and Popular Rights Movement (jiyū minken undō) in the 1880s. Ōgai’s first published story, “The Dancing Girl” (“Maihime”) (1890), indeed was a significant intervention in the transformation of literature under way in the mid-Meiji decades. In contrast to the strained allegories of Meiji political
fiction and the loose, wandering form of Futabatei Shimei’s unfinished tale *The Drifting Cloud* [*Ukigumo*] (1886–1889), often cited as the first “modern” Japanese novel, “The Dancing Girl” is a brooding story with a tightly crafted aesthetic vision.

Far from solely concerned with the advancement of literature, however, “The Dancing Girl” incorporates a political argument of its own that critics frequently ignore: the necessity, according to Ōgai, of nationality as a primary form of subjective identification and the illegitimacy of alternative identities. Regardless of its literary innovations—or, as I will argue, by virtue of them—“The Dancing Girl” was a forceful contribution to efforts to transform the populace of the Japanese archipelago into a “nation” mobilized with a commonly held purpose. The story, which perhaps ranks only behind Sōseki’s novel *Kokoro* (1914) as the work of Meiji-era writers most widely taught in Anglophone classrooms, demands to be reread in light of such close engagement with contemporary politics. “The Dancing Girl” has as its climax a choice by the protagonist, a student studying in Germany, to return to Japan or remain in Europe. Ōgai stages the choice as one between identity as Japanese and a purely negative (i.e., nonnational) cosmopolitanism. While Ōta, the protagonist, chooses the former, he confesses to suffering from a lasting resentment as a consequence. Pursuing a line of analysis made possible by the gendered quality of the choice—to return to Japan Ōta must abandon the young German woman of the title—I will show that the dilemma Ōta faces poses the possibility that he will lose all subjective definition. From this perspective, resentment emerges as a constitutive characteristic of the national subject: not a secondary malady but, rather, what makes the formation of such a subject possible. As Ōta confesses the events leading to his condition, the first-person narrative revealingly breaks down precisely when such a damaged national subject takes shape. The narrative aporia, I will argue, ultimately serves to cordon off alternative identities that might compete with nationality in the Meiji-era project to transform popular consciousness.

The work to create a nation for the new Japanese state that began after the nominal restoration of the emperor to power in 1868 faced what can be described as twin obstacles, one arising from the “people” and the other from the Meiji government’s response to European and North American imperialism. Such an imbrication of local and global conditions in the construction
of national identity in Japan closely resembles the situation in other countries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where the nation-state as a political form and the nation as a form of community served mediating roles (between the global and the local) in the integration of world markets and the international state system. Countries in the European core such as France, Germany, and Italy, as well as then peripheral countries such as the United States, confronted a persistent if spectral fear of dissolution against the background of a broadly heterogeneous population. While the following analysis of “The Dancing Girl” focuses closely on conditions in Meiji-era Japan, it takes the growing body of internationally minded, comparative scholarship on such problems of national identity as its touchstone and assumes that national identity in Japan, too, may be usefully examined from such a comparative perspective.

A host of identities derived from geography and social status or caste (mi-bun) persisted in Japan after the fall of the Tokugawa government. For efforts to create a homogeneous national identity to succeed, it was incumbent on the handful of oligarchs leading the Meiji government and on liberal sympathizers such as the members of the Meiji Six Society (Meirokusha) to dismantle, persecute, or destroy such nonnational identities, which as competitors with nationality held out the possibility of alternative definitions of community. At the same time that the government faced a problem of internal diversity, the avowedly universalistic stance of civilization and enlightenment (bunmei kaika) thought, which the Restoration government had warily embraced in programs to create new educational and political systems and the institutions of a capitalist economy, posed a second problem of differentiating Japan from Europe. Proponents of civilization and enlightenment such as Fukuzawa Yukichi offered the countries of Europe (especially England) as the immediate exemplar, if not the definitive form, of a “civilization” attainable by all countries. Yet even proposing Europe as a temporary model presented the possibility that the nation “Japan” would no longer be especially Japanese by the time it joined the ranks of civilized universality. If the nation was to be the agent of civilization, measures had to be taken to ensure that it would not lose its particularity in pursuit of the universal. Above all this meant that as individuals were extricated from the purported backwardness of their local identities, they had to be deterred
from embracing cosmopolitanism, rather than nationality, in their encounter with the world. “The Dancing Girl” occupies precisely this intersection of the cosmopolitan and the national that so preoccupied mid-Meiji thought.

Japanese writers such as Tsubouchi Shōyō who championed the reform of literature in the 1880s were keenly engaged with contemporary debates on nation building. Drawing on the evolutionary schemes that flourished in civilization and enlightenment thought, Shōyō’s manifesto *The Essence of the Novel* [Shōsetsushinzui] (1885–1886) declares that the development of literature is a product of the movement of civilization (bun’un). The Japanese novel, however, has dawdled on the path of progress and become mired in moral didacticism: according to Shōyō the novel could be “the flower of the nation” (or of the state, kokka no hana) but has failed to achieve its potential because of writers’ ignorance and indolence. Shōyō’s famous call for writers to cast off moralism in favor of depicting human emotions and worldly conditions (ninjō setai) is thus an open call for literature to contribute to the nation’s general advance toward civilization through innovations in literary content and form. Shōyō’s views of the novel lend evidence to the well-known argument advanced by Homi Bhabha, among many others, that prose narrative made an essential contribution to the propagation of national identities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In light of the tendency to reduce the phenomenon that Bhabha observes to the emergence of a national content for narrative, however, I must stress that changes in form were equally important because formal strategies for the deployment of multiple subplots, for example, allowed the production of what Benedict Anderson calls narrative “simultaneity,” and through it a sense of commonality among the subjects of a given nation. Indeed Shōyō for one did not urge anything so simple as a series of literary hurrahs for the national project but, rather, in the slogan “human emotions and worldly conditions” positioned the novel at the intersection of individual subjectivity and social relations. It is no coincidence that this is precisely the point where nationality, as a mediation between the individual and the social, is articulated. The critical terms that Shōyō establishes in his call for a modern literature thus parallel the dilemmas of identity that Ōgai’s “The Dancing Girl” elaborates in its plot.
Critics typically point to *The Essence of the Novel* as the theoretical origin of modern literature in Japan, with *The Drifting Cloud* by Shōyō’s protégé Futabatei as its first concrete manifestation. Writers of political novels, however, had been at work since the early 1880s on the type of changes that Shōyō advocated. Widely read at the time, the political novel rose and fell with the Freedom and Popular Rights Movement in the late 1870s and 1880s and is now largely neglected. Meiji political novels were much given to political allegories, as suits a genre created by activists. Marriage between lovers of different classes, for example, was the favored trope for the national unity that writers predicted would follow from a democratic political system. Several such instrumentally crafted tales, however, attempted to address a dogged problem that writers faced when they undertook social observation and psychological analysis of the sort that Shōyō championed: what to do with the narrator?

Kamei Hideo, perhaps the most prominent and innovative contemporary critic of Meiji literature, has observed that one obstacle facing writers as they tried to create new literary forms was the talkative speaker (*katarite*) of the fiction of the Edo period (1604–1867). Unlike a Jamesian novel, to choose an extreme example in which the narrator is defined by a strictly observed point of view, Edo fiction was enunciated by a speaker who had an ambiguously fluid relationship to the action. Sometimes it was in the action, sometimes not, and almost always was engaged in wordplay that blurred the distinction between story and narrative discourse. The problem Meiji writers faced was restraining the speaker and transforming it into a narrator whose sole work was description. While they are rarely cited as examples of literary invention, political novels such as Yano Ryūkei’s *Inspiring Instances of Statesmanship* [*Keikoku bidan*] (1883–1884) and Tōkai Sanshi’s long-running *Chance Encounters with Beautiful Women* [*Kajin no kigah*] (1885–1897) address the problem Kamei observes by staging oral narratives within a frame-tale, separated in time from the main story, that fixes the narrator in a specific time and place. Another political novel, Suehiro Tetchō’s *Plum Blossoms in Snow* [*Setchūbai*] (1886), does the same by staging the discovery, again within an external narrative frame, of a novel with the same name. The story thus gains a specific origin and authority. However tenuous and intuitive these
solutions were, they show that political novelists were aware of the formal issues at stake as they tried to create new ways of representing the social.

The involvement of political activists in the literary transformations that brought the nation into the ambit of fiction suggests the extent of contention and strife in the mid-Meiji period over representations of the nation and the individual’s relationship to it. The emergence of the type of narrative for which Shōyō called was no more inevitable than the abandonment of local identities by the subjects of former feudal domains (han). These two apparently separate phenomena, literary and political, were in an important respect aspects of the same battle: a struggle over ways of imagining social relations. “The Dancing Girl” joins battle by linking nationality to the story’s particular narrative form, that of a récit. The story’s narrowly focused, first-person retrospection naturalizes what I will call the protagonist’s accession to nationality by presenting his embrace of an identity as Japanese as the inevitable realization of qualities latent since his youth. The direction of his movement toward mature subjectivity, turbulent at the time, is clear as he looks back. Despite the apparent triumph of the national over the cosmopolitan in the story, however, Ōta’s lasting resentment and the narrative breakdown to which I have earlier alluded remain as traces of the conflict and coercion that marked the establishment of a national identity in Japan during the Meiji period.

Ōgai’s short but complex story, published in Tokutomi Sohō’s journal The Nation’s Friend [Kokumin no tomo] in 1890, is a first-person recollection, written onboard a ship that has paused in Saigon, of Ōta’s affair with a young woman while he was a student in Germany. Under pressure from a friend and from a diplomat, Ōta has abandoned the girl and agreed to return to Japan. Like the other stories of the so-called German trilogy, based on Ōgai’s experiences and observations while studying medicine in Germany from 1884 to 1888, “The Dancing Girl” is written in a faux classical idiom that was a sharp break with contemporary efforts, including Ōgai’s own translations from European literature, to craft a new written style based on oral speech forms.17

The story of “The Dancing Girl” often is traced to events in Ōgai’s life, particularly to his affair with a German woman while abroad and to his family’s alarm when she followed him back to Japan.18 Such parallels to
Mori Ōgai’s life predictably have brought a heavy biographical slant to criticism. Attempts to read “The Dancing Girl” as simply a partisan retelling of an episode from Ōgai’s life are belied, however, not only by evidence that elements of the student-protagonist are modeled on other students whom Ōgai knew in Germany but also by rich intertextual play between the story and the work of Ivan Turgenev, E. T. A. Hoffman, and other European writers and, above all, by the aesthetic complexity to which the interplay contributes. Nonetheless, the accepted interpretation that emerged in the postwar period takes the biographical reading of the story as its point of departure to argue that “The Dancing Girl” is fundamentally concerned with the oppression of the individual (ultimately Ōgai himself) by the state and the family. In this view the story of the protagonist is that of the establishment of the modern ego or self (kindai jiga), presumed to be alienated from society because of such oppression. Such readings typically find the close of the protagonist’s récit to be marked by an ambivalence that is an index of his alienation, a point to which I will return at the end of this essay. Perhaps one reason why such a reading of the story as concerned with the establishment of the modern self endures is that it serves so well the canon of modern Japanese literature, which takes as its master narrative the evolution of methods for representing the self. In its extreme form, such a reading of “The Dancing Girl” positions it as a forerunner of the confessional “I-novel” (watakushi shōsetsu) that dominated Japanese literary practice in the 1920s.

More recent and compelling criticism focuses on the contribution of “The Dancing Girl,” regardless of its intentionally antiquated idiom, to the rapid changes in style and narrative form in the Meiji period. Kamei’s analysis of “The Dancing Girl,” which focuses on the importance of the first-person récit form of the story to the development of new methods of representing sensibility (kansei), is one particularly valuable contribution. The récit form of “The Dancing Girl,” according to Kamei, is an ingenious way of dealing with the problem posed by the floating speaker of Edo fiction because it creates an identity between the style of the narrator (now a writer or kakite) and the sensibility of the protagonist, the narrator’s earlier self. Identifying the two allows description in the story to be focused narrowly on elements that explain the protagonist’s sensibility. The broader implication of Kamei’s argument is that “The Dancing Girl” was an important literary event not
because it contributed to the representation of the modern self (conceived as prior to representation) but, rather, to its textual creation. Kamei moves the self from the world to the practice of writing.23

It is interesting to observe that the frame that Ōgai uses to skirt the problem of the narrator in “The Dancing Girl”—Ôta recounts events in Germany while sitting onboard ship in Saigon—resembles closely the strategies used in political novels such as Inspiring Instances of Statesmanship and Plum Blossoms in Snow. As noted earlier, in these works the narrator also is separated from events by a temporal gap that tames the chatty Edo speaker by pinning it down in a specific time and place. Indeed, Ōgai might easily have borrowed his solution to the problem from Yano or Tetchō. Although Meiji political novels are notably uninterested with psychology, the form of “The Dancing Girl” thus is less of an outright innovation than Kamei suggests. Other aspects of the story also reveal Ōgai enmeshed in issues identical to those of the political novelists and, more broadly, of mid-Meiji social thought. Ōgai appears to have been engaged with the same debates on the form of the polity and, in particular, with the question of the universality of European political and social forms. The period of action of the story, moreover, corresponds to that of the Meiji government’s most stringent efforts to suppress the Freedom and Popular Rights Movement. Given the political environment, the protagonist’s turn in Germany from the study of law and politics to that of history and literature suggests that the failure of the democracy movement forms a significant substratum of his eventual crisis of identity.

Critics who see Ōgai as a paragon of high literary refinement no doubt will find outrageous the claim that the contemporary filiations of “The Dancing Girl” were as much with the Meiji political novel as with the works that have been designated the foundation of modern literature in Japan. Yet while Ōgai’s work shows a greater complexity than that of his activist contemporaries, the story is far more worldly than most critics have been willing to admit. Ōgai’s vociferous participation in his medical career in debates on public hygiene and the organization of the army provides ample evidence of his concern with issues conceived on a national scale. The finely crafted form of “The Dancing Girl” itself constitutes a similar intervention by supporting a narrative of personal history as ineluctable progress toward an accession to nationality. The contribution of “The Dancing Girl” to the
articulation of a national identity in the Meiji period, I argue, lies not simply in its themes but also in its formal elaboration of a temporality that conveys a necessity to the advent of the nation-state and its dominance over the inhabitants of the territory it claims. In its assertion of necessity in history—conceived as national history—the form of “The Dancing Girl” naturalizes nationality as the primary basis of individual identity.

The récit of “The Dancing Girl” opens onboard the ship that is carrying Ōta back to Japan from Germany. Ōta’s traveling companions have decided to pass the night onshore, leaving him alone in the second-class lounge. He muses that on his outbound trip five years ago he devoted thousands of pages to a diary of his observations, but in the twenty days of his return journey the notebooks that he bought have remained blank. Briefly considering whether his silence could come from an attitude of nil admirai that he cultivated abroad, Ōta interjects, “No—there is another reason.” He continues,

Truly, the present I returning to the East is not the I of long ago who sailed to the West. In my soul I am deeply unsatisfied with learning; I have learned the pains of this sad world and the unreliability of people’s hearts, but even more, I have come to understand the caprice of myself and my own heart. What was good yesterday is bad today—to whom would I confide my fleeting sensations? Perhaps this is why I have not written a diary. No—there is another reason.

[Ge ni higashi ni kaeru ima no ware wa, nishi ni kōeshi mukashi no ware narazu, gakumon ni koso nao kokoro ni akitaranu tokoro mo ookare, ukiyo no ukiushū o mo shiritari, hito no kokoro no tanomigataki wa iu mo saranari, waga kokoro sae kawariyasuki o mo satorietari. Kinō no ze wa kyō no hi naru waga shunkan no kashoku o, fude ni utushite dare ni ka misemu. Kore ya nikki no naranu enko naru, arazu, kore ni wa betsu ni yue arī.]

After this second denial Ōta reveals that the cause of his silence is a “hidden resentment” (hitō shiranu urami) that has clouded his heart since he left Germany. An “external” resentment might be dispelled with poetry, he
His resentment is so deeply carved into his heart, however, that everything he reads and sees recalls it. The frame concludes with a resolution on Ōta’s part to set down the outline of his story on this solitary night, when even the cabin boy seems unlikely to interrupt. The story that follows, framed by the scene on ship, begins with Ōta’s early childhood and moves quickly to his first days in Berlin.

The frame of “The Dancing Girl” thus establishes a temporal gap between the narrative present (the night in Saigon) and the narrated present (the events of the inner story). The temporal divide is the basis for a parallel opposition of narrating subject and narrated object (Ōta in Saigon and Ōta in Berlin). The particularity of the récit form, of course, is that subject and object are the same except for a crucial difference in the knowledge held by each. It is a difference of self-knowledge, which explains the particular mode of writing that Ōta adopts on this evening: in contrast to the diary of his outward journey, which was concerned with the world, this account is concerned with his former self. The aim of the narrative is to explain how the present emerged from the past and, in particular, how the present Ōta gained the embittered self-knowledge through which he is able to recount the events of his time in Germany.

Indeed, the significance of all past events, and thus the meaningfulness of the narrative itself, is in their contribution to the formation of the present. In closing the gap between past and present, the narrative traces what is to be an upward and inherently meaningful movement from latency to realization. In “The Dancing Girl” this movement is from latent nationality to a fully realized national self-consciousness in which Ōta embraces nationality as his primary identification.

With some reservations, we can see this movement toward self-consciousness as an example of what Fredric Jameson calls “national allegory” in his much-maligned essay “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism.” In an argument that centers on the work of the Chinese writer Lu Xun and the Senegalese novelist and filmmaker Ousmane Sembène, Jameson maintains that what is common to all cultural production in the “Third World”—which he defines as those areas of the world sharing the “experience of colonialism and imperialism”—is that “all third-world texts are necessarily . . . allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call national allegories.”26 Jameson asserts that because of the
essentially “allegorical nature of Third-World culture,” in Third World literature “the telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of the collectivity itself.”

Aijaz Ahmad has given a detailed and withering critique of Jameson’s essay, of which I will recap only two points here. First, Ahmad points out that Jameson’s thesis depends not only on a relationship of absolute otherness between the First and Third Worlds but also on the homogenization of a vast range of states and societies under the rubric of “Third World” itself. Second, Ahmad points out that Jameson’s conclusion follows quite simply and obviously from his definition of the Third World: by denying his Third World any experience other than that of colonialism and imperialism, the experience to which nationalism was the response, Jameson effectively proves his thesis in advance. Any Third World literature that is not “national allegory” is, following Jameson’s definition, simply not literature.

Ahmad’s critique of the limitations of Jameson’s analysis, particularly his suggestion that Jameson reproduces an imperial perspective on the Third World, is adroit. Nonetheless Ahmad is unwilling to acknowledge that Jameson’s point of departure—his suspicion of the significance of this type of allegorical narrative, regardless of his mistreatment of it—is born out by a host of evidence. During the Meiji period in Japan, for example, texts presenting an individual story as some sort of figure for a “national” story are ubiquitous: Kanagaki Robun’s *By Shank’s Mare to the West* [*Sei’yō dāchā hizakurige*] (1870–1876), Tetchō’s *Plum Blossoms in Snow*, and Futabatei’s *The Drifting Cloud* are cases in point. Such texts also are ubiquitous in the so-called First World, as Ahmad points out. As a narrative problematic, therefore, national allegory would seem to be characteristic not so much of a monolithic Third World as of the wider system of nation-states and capitalist markets. The appearance of such narratives must be connected to the consolidation of that system, as experienced at the metropolitan core as well as on the periphery.

In creating a Third World characterized solely by a nationalist response to imperialism, Jameson fundamentally misunderstands the element of coercion in such a systemic consolidation. Jameson assumes that a nationalist response to imperialism is automatic, but in this he mistakes the national
identifications and nationalist interests of a small group of intellectuals—among them the authors of national allegories—for those of the entire populace of imperialized formations. Examples from Japanese history, such as early Meiji demonstrations against the so-called blood tax of military conscription, in fact suggest that the establishment of a national identity as a response to imperialism entailed coercion of a lesser order. Such national identifications came neither naturally nor immediately with the establishment of nation-states. They had to be propagated and, in some cases, imposed. The very ubiquity of texts elaborating national allegories at the end of the nineteenth century is evidence that the acceptance of such identifications could not be taken for granted. They had to be represented, which is to say vigorously promoted, through precisely this sort of narrative. In this situation the construction of an allegory is an overtly political act. The allegory’s figurative referent is not a story that already exists but, rather, one that is projected onto the populace in an effort to transform it.

The life history that Ōta tells in “The Dancing Girl” reproduces on an individual level a classic Hegelian story in national ideology in which the nation gains self-consciousness. A sketch that Prasenjit Duara offers of this kind of perspective in historiography well characterizes the position of the mature Ōta, who has gained a conviction of his nationality, as he contemplates his earlier life. “The nationalist understanding of history,” Duara observes, “is based upon a conception of history that is linear and progressive, in which the nation as the subject of history gathers self-awareness. The complete unfolding of the self-consciousness of the self-same people must, however, await the nation-state, which alone can guarantee this transparency.” In such a situation of transparency, the nation is not only the agent but also the narrator of history. According to this story, the telos of national development is a Hegelian sublation of subject-object relations in which the nation fully understands and incorporates its own past in a moment of self-presence. Yet the element of resentment in “The Dancing Girl” that accompanies what should be a triumphal arrival at self-understanding points to the coercion that underlies its establishment and must be the focus of any attempt to understand the place of nationality in Ōgai’s representation of the national subject.
By Ōta’s own declaration, the story that commences with his resolution to write is meant to explain his lasting resentment. It passes glancingly over his youth as a single-minded academic prodigy and his early career as an ambitious bureaucrat, when his superiors considered him to have such potential that they sent him to Berlin to study politics and law. (Ōta himself fancies becoming a prominent politician.) He recalls that he spent three years “like a dream” studying in the university, but that he came to feel that having spent his life honoring the will of his deceased father, following the instructions of his mother, and working to please his superiors, he was “nothing but a passive, machine-like character who didn’t know himself.”

Where his mother tried to transform him into a living dictionary, the head of his department wanted to make him into a living compilation of the law. In response he turned to studying not the details but “the spirit of the law” (hō no seisin) and eventually abandoned law completely for the “sweet land” (satōkibi o kamu sakai) of history and literature.

Ostracized by the other Japanese students in Berlin for his diffident attitude, he found solace in a poverty-stricken girl, Ellis, whom he encountered one night while returning home. Ōta writes that his “intercourse” (kōsai) with this girl initially was “pure” (seihaku), limited only to paying for the funeral of her recently deceased father (he thereby saved her from prostitution) and supplementing the income as a chorus girl with which she supports her mother. Soon, however, he began teaching her proper German and German literature—a reverse Orientalist Pygmalion—and drew the envious attention of the other Japanese students. Discharged from his post under a cloud of scandal, he found work as a journalist, at the cost of his studies, and moved into Ellis’s household. With time on his hands, his relationship with Ellis deepened, and one day he discovered she suffered morning sickness. With her pregnancy the narrative begins an inexorable movement toward crisis. The fact that sexual relations with a foreigner and the prospect of an interracial child precipitate the crisis, which in itself centers on national identity, suggests that nationality in “The Dancing Girl” is entwined with formations of gender, a point to which I will return after examining the circumstances of Ōta’s decision to abandon Ellis.

At this critical juncture, Ōta writes, a friend named Aizawa who had helped him find his position as a correspondent suddenly appeared in Berlin as part of the entourage of a diplomat, Count Amagata.
Ôta to Amagata as a translator, saying it was a chance to win back his good name, and pressured him to break off his relationship with Ellis. Ôta recalls that because of his “weak heart” (yowaki kokoro) he did not have the wherewithal to refuse, but he neither acted on Aizawa’s pressure nor told him of Ellis’s pregnancy.\(^3\) He gradually gained the confidence of Amagata, who unexpectedly proposed that Ôta return to Japan in the diplomatic entourage and put his talents to better use. Aizawa had assured the count that Ôta had no dependents, despite his long sojourn in Germany. Ôta writes,

I couldn’t deny what seemed to be the case. I paused for a moment, but it was hard to contradict Aizawa, and the thought that if I didn’t cling to this hand I would lose my homeland and sever the path to reclaiming my honor, that my body might be buried in the sea of people of this vast European metropolis, pierced me heart and soul. Without the least moral character, I answered, “I shall do as you ask.”

Unable to face Ellis with his acquiescence and feeling that he was an “unpardonable criminal” (yurusubekaranu tsumibito), Ôta left Amagata’s hotel and wandered the city streets—it was January—for most of the night. When he returned home, he immediately lapsed into a deep fever. When he awoke, after a blank of several weeks, he discovered Ellis haggard and transformed. He writes that he learned later that Ellis went mad when Aizawa, finding Ôta delirious, revealed his decision to her. The story concludes,

My illness was completely cured. How many times did I cradle Ellis’s living corpse, showering it with tears? When I departed to return to the East with the minister, I consulted with Aizawa and gave Ellis’s mother a scant sum of capital on which she could live, asking her to see to the birth of the child left in the womb of the poor mad girl.
Ah, it would be hard to find another friend in the world as good as Aizawa Kenkichi. But in my mind, there remains even to this day a bit of me that hates him.

[Yo ga yamai wa mattaku ienu. Erisu ga ikeru kagane o idakite chisuji no namida o sosogishi wa ikutabizo. Daijin ni shitagaite kitō no michi ni noborishi toki wa, Aizawa to hakarite Erisu ga haha ni kasukanaru seikei o itonamu ni taru hodo no shihon o atae, awarenaru kyōjo no tainai ni nokoshishi ko no umaremu ori no koto o mo tanomiokinu.

Aa, Aizawa Kenkichi ga gotoki ryōyu wa yo ni mata egatakarubeshi. Saredo waga nōri ni itten no kare o nikumu kokoro konjitsu made me nokorerikeri.]

Opening toward the future with the phrase “even to this day” (konjitsu made mo), Ōta’s final declaration arrives at the present in which he composes his account. With the source of his hidden resentment revealed, he returns to silence. Yet Ōta’s phrasing suggests that far more time has passed than the twenty days spent traveling, and therefore that even though his fever was cured his resentment never will be.

The temporal structure of “The Dancing Girl” thus consists of the invocation of a present—the moment of writing—an abrupt shift to the narrator’s past, and a gradual convergence of this past with the present as he recounts the events of his life. It is important to note, however, that the narrated present never converges with the narrative present completely: they are separated by Ōta’s delirium, which he knows only by hearsay. His awakening marks the beginning of a permanent state that includes the moment of writing (hence the sense of a great passage of time), but the delirium stands between this state and Ōta’s former self. While Ōta’s life history is a narrative of the emergence of the narrating subject, the subject therefore nonetheless remains distinct from its past. The temporal difference between past and present is the basis of several dichotomies: youth versus maturity, irresponsible freedom versus responsible submission to restraint, thus idealism versus realism, and finally cosmopolitanism versus nationality. The first term of each of these dichotomies exists in Ōta’s past. The second terms are latent in the past, waiting to come to fruition, but their latency is visible only from the perspective of its realization.
It is evident from the issues at play in Ōta’s audience with Amagata—the loss of his homeland and the possibility of death in Europe—that the subject that the narrative of “The Dancing Girl” produces is one for whom nationality is the basis of identity. The narrative thus is one of the emergence of consciousness of oneself as national, of the realization of a latent national identity. As Kamei observes, the récit form is the crux of such a narrative of emergence for Ōta. It also is the crux of Ōgai’s allegory. As allegory, the récit constructs a parallel narrative, of the nation coming to self-consciousness, that is told by the nation collectively. In this respect Ōta’s personal narrative could be expected to be triumphal. What was unknown is known; a mission only falteringly understood now is manifest in the very identity of the subject.

The present in which the story is told is a moment of commitment to the national cause. Allegorically, it is a moment of unified national will. Yet this narrative closes on a note of resentment and a sense on Ōta’s part that he has committed an unpardonable crime.

The necessity that Ōta faces of choosing between his homeland and Ellis suggests that the resentment he harbors is connected to his accession to nationality. We must recognize from the outset, however, that the offense in question—at least the offense that he resents—is not against Ellis or the unborn child. Rather, it is an offense against a particular vision of himself and his destiny, against a romantic ideal of self-cultivation. Ellis becomes a part of Ōta’s fantasy only as a disciple whom he can instruct in the ways of culture. While she is centrally involved in this fantasy’s demise—Ōta first introduces himself to Ellis as “dependentless foreigner” (keirui naki gaijin), but she encumbers him with a child—his resentment has a different object. As the story’s closing line shows, Ōta’s bitterness is directed first toward Aizawa, who forced him to reject his ideal in favor of nationality and service to the nation, and then perhaps toward the state, which Aizawa and Amagata as diplomats literally represent. At a deeper level, however, the resentment is directed toward his former self, who acquiesced in the state’s coercion. In this deep narcissism the crime against Ellis is not even recognized as such. When Ōta cradles her “living corpse,” he is cradling no one but himself.

Underlying Ōta’s choice of nationality over self-cultivation is a more complex rejection of a type of universalism that also was at stake in debates during the Meiji era over the nature of the Japanese polity and the status
of European civilization. Ellis becomes pregnant in early winter, late 1888, and thus it is the first part of 1889 when Ōta returns to Japan. His five-year sojourn in Berlin therefore corresponds to the period of the oligarchic government’s greatest persecution of activists in the Freedom and Popular Rights Movement and to its efforts to draft a constitution, ultimately unveiled in February 1889, that centralized power in a strong bureaucratic state. These would have been fresh memories in 1890, when “The Dancing Girl” was published. The politically ambitious Ōta apparently was meant to contribute to this project. He travels to Europe to study the law and politics of Prussia, the model most favored by the oligarchy. The interest in the spirit of the law that stirs in Ōta while he is in Berlin, in contrast, recalls the stress of intellectuals such as Fukuzawa on the “spirit of civilization” (bunmei no seisshin) over its material trappings and, with the echo of Montesquieu, is a clear reference to early Meiji liberalism and its strong belief in civilization as a universal social stage. Such universalism also figures in the romantic study of literature to which Ōta’s interest in spirit leads him: literature as a universal vehicle of self-cultivation that is accessible to all. Hence the pedagogical element in Ōta’s relationship with Ellis: the universality of art allows even Ōta, an Oriental, to lead a poor metropolitan to the “sweet land” of self-refinement that lies beyond culture and class. The choice that Ōta faces, therefore, is between preserving belief in a civilization that transcends its material location and accepting a national identity and national mission that are explicitly tied to the state.

While the retrospective structure of “The Dancing Girl” pushes universalist idealism into the youthful, naive past, Ōta’s mature present is not premised on a simple valorization of the particular over the universal. Rather, the trajectory of Ōta’s life stands as an argument to reject the entire problematic of universalism versus particularism, which is to be replaced by a system of nationalities in which each nation is defined by the path through which it gains self-consciousness. In others words, the nation is to be defined by the process that Ōgai allegorizes in “The Dancing Girl”—by its national history. National history, rather than the universal, becomes the absolute point of reference in this problematic. In such a system the optimistic universalism that characterized the early Meiji period, and that guides Ōta’s romantic quest, becomes a mongrel cosmopolitanism that has no positive content. The
cosmopolitan ideal that Ōta pursues, rather, is characterized only by a lack of nationality. The unborn child is the fruit of this missown seed. In such terms Ōta’s accession to nationality, which brings with it a transparent understanding of his history, could only seem to be positive. And yet, as we have seen, it is marked by resentment.

To fully understand the character of Ōta’s resentment, we must return to the figure that appears in his account of the audience with Amagata, where he writes, “The thought that if I didn’t cling to this hand I would lose my homeland and... that my body might be buried in the sea of people of this vast European metropolis, pierced me heart and soul.” Given the choice that Ōta faces, between cosmopolitanism and nationality, we can read the sea in this passage as a metaphor for the loss of subjective differentiation. Lacking both internal divisions and self-defined external boundaries, the sea signifies the dispersion of individual identity. In a telling extension, the sea in turn is a figure for the modern European city. The European city stood as the symbolic locus of universal civilization in early Meiji thought, and Ōta himself recalls that in his early years in Berlin he had experienced the central area around Unter den Linden as “a sea of light,” or shall we say of enlightenment. In contrast, the metaphor that appears in the crucial scene of “The Dancing Girl” argues a different meaning for the European capital: not as universal but as “cosmopolitan,” in the mongrel sense just defined. From the point of view of Ōta’s mature subjectivity, immersion in the city means not access to the universal but the loss of nationality. By grasping Amagata’s hand, Ōta emerges from the sea with a clearly differentiated subjectivity. The stipulation of the state-sponsored salvation, however, is an offense against himself. Ōta must abandon his universalist ideals, and his rescue therefore brings him lasting resentment and regret.

A brief analysis of the gendered terms in which Ōgai frames such a crisis of nationality helps to explain the role that resentment plays in the formation of Ōta’s mature, nationalized subjectivity and, ultimately, how the story as a whole works to quarantine alternative forms of identity. If love with Ellis was only a vehicle for self-absorbed self-cultivation in Ōta’s early years in Berlin, abandoning her is only a vehicle for an equally narcissistic salvation. The vehicle, however, reveals the conditions of Ōta’s escape: not only nationality but also heterosexism is a fundamental basis of the subject that writes
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The récit. Ōta’s mature subjectivity reveals a homosociality, to borrow an expression from Luce Irigaray, that is based on a libidinal bond among men serving the national cause. Under its terms the universalistic orientation of early Meiji thought and the desire for democratic liberties in the Freedom and Popular Rights Movement, for example, appear as unfocused sexual dissipation that saps the nation’s resolve. As we have seen, such universalism is recast in the mature Ōta’s retrospective view as cosmopolitanism, now pejoratively defined. The libidinal bond among national subjects (who are implicitly male) thus is premised on a ban on cosmopolitan intercourse with the otherly national, here marked as the otherly gendered, that is, as the pregnant dancing girl. While directed against her, such a ban depends on an ontologically prior ban on unmediated homosexual intercourse among male subjects, a point that I take from Judith Butler. Nonetheless the bond among male, national subjects is not a celibate one. Rather, it is consummated by same-sex libidinal exchange through the mediation of the nation. What may be called the “national homosociality” of Ōta’s mature subjectivity thus articulates nationality and heterosexism simultaneously. From his retrospective position, Ōta’s rescue from the sea appears impossible to achieve through Ellis, the obvious alternative available to him, because as both otherly gendered and otherly national, she is the incarnation of all that the state demands he reject. The hand of the state that Amagata offers Ōta comes with the stipulation that he relinquish such difference and embrace a community based on a sameness that encompasses both gender and nationality.

The significance of the work that Ōta’s friend Aizawa does for him while he is unconscious lies in the libidinal stipulations that thus are attached to his rescue. True to his weak nature, Ōta never makes a conscious decision to leave Ellis. He first allows Aizawa to believe that he has followed the advice to break off the relationship and then conveniently falls sick, so that it is Aizawa who tells Ellis that he will return to Japan. The conjoint formations of nationality and gender in “The Dancing Girl” are preconscious and prerational, established by bans on certain forms of intercourse that Aizawa enforces while Ōta is delirious. Ōta is unable to remember the moment when these identifications are established for the same reason: as the moment when the subject that writes the récit took shape, it cannot be objectified for representation. Instead Ōta must resort to hearsay to learn
what happened. Although Ōta is able to fill in the events of his delirium by accepting Aizawa’s explanation (or shall we say, the state’s version of things), he is unable to resurrect them from memory.

The conscious resentment that Ōta reveals in the frame of the story appears with the enforcement of these preconscious bans. (Here the reality of the law proves to be far more powerful than its spirit.) Ultimately the object of the resentment is neither Aizawa nor Ōta’s former self but the bans themselves. Given that Ōta’s mature, nationalized subjectivity is inseparable from the bans, we can say that resentment is a symptom of that nationalized subjectivity, in Slavoj Žižek’s Lacanian meaning of symptom as a “signifying formation which confers on the subject its . . . ontological consistency, enabling it to structure its basic, constitutive relationship toward enjoyment.” In such a view of psychopathology, Žižek notes, “if the symptom is dissolved, the subject itself disintegrates.” Following Žižek’s definition of the symptom as a signifying formation, we can say that a certain kind of history, that is, a certain mode of transforming the past into narrative, is symptomatic of the nationalized subject. We can call this mode “national history,” observing that its forward movement always is accompanied by blanks that are loci of loss. Undoing the blanks would undo the narrative itself and thereby make impossible the subject that tells it.

Reading Ōta’s resentment as a symptom of his nationalized subjectivity differs importantly from—and offers great advantages over—the common reading of Ōta’s story as one of alienation, which focuses on what is said to be a closing tone of ambivalence over the necessity of Ōta’s choice. Implicit in the usual reading is the assumption that an integral, “happy” subject exists prior to any fragmentation as the result of oppression. Read as symptom, Ōta’s resentment suggests on the contrary that the national subject does not exist apart from the trauma of its nationalization. Put another way, in “The Dancing Girl” there is no narrator without the resentment. Stressing the constitutive role of resentment in the formation of Ōta’s subjectivity, and thus in the narrative form of the story, makes visible the relationship in the story’s form between state coercion and the ideology of nation building that seeks to legitimate it.

The narrative temporality that is particular to the retrospective point of view of “The Dancing Girl” is central to the mediation between state coercion
and narratives of national emergence that the story’s form undertakes. It is this temporality that integrates Ōta’s traumatization into a larger process as historical necessity and thus renders the two compatible. “The Dancing Girl” concludes with a strong if unvoiced assertion that Ōta’s choice of service to the nation rather than to his ideals is necessary now but need not always be so. If, to recall the title of a later Ōgai story, Japan is still “Under Reconstruction” (“Fushinchū” (1910)), “The Dancing Girl” holds out the promise of a different future. The temporal structure of the story, which apparently rests on the narrative divide between past and present, thus in fact is tripartite. In addition to the naïveté of youth (the past) and the bitter realism of maturity (the present), an implied third term of the future emerges as the locus of a hypothetical “whole” subjectivity unmarked by fragmentation and resentment. Such a happy state is out of reach for Ōta and his generation but will at some point be reached by the nation as a whole provided that its realization is deferred. The form of “The Dancing Girl” thus temporalizes and disperses Ōta’s constitutive resentment with the assurance that the conditions demanding it will end. Rather than an irruptive, formative moment it becomes one event in a narrative extending from the past into the future.

The structure of the story—not to mention Japanese history—suggests, however, that such a demand for postponement and the call for national mobilization that stands behind it would be perpetual. “Under Reconstruction” appeared twenty years after “The Dancing Girl,” at the end of the Meiji period, showing the durability of this perspective for Ōgai. Other cries for national discipline continued to appear during the brief interlude of the Taishō period (1912–1926) and only became stronger with the rise of fascism. That deferral would be a permanent state rather than a temporary measure already is implicit in the tripartite temporality of “The Dancing Girl.” The dichotomy between present and future, which is the basis of the demand for deferral, reproduces that between past and present, with its moment of unknowable trauma. The promise of the future and of the end of resentment subvert Ōta’s attempt to narrate his past and thus ascribe necessity to it, because the promise is what justifies the necessity. Yet if, as I have argued, Ōta’s resentment cannot be dispelled without the entire narrative disintegrating, the promise of the future that the narrative offers similarly must
be false and prompted by another aim. In fact, the promise of the future in “The Dancing Girl” further obscures the constitutive—and thus irruptive, atemporal—role of resentment in the formation of national subjects, with the paradoxical result of reiterating the necessity of the resentment through the spurious promise of its relief.

As we have seen, however, the moment of Ōta’s trauma cannot be erased: it remains as an unknowable moment that resists narration and can only be remade and displaced as necessary postponement. If “The Dancing Girl” is meant as an allegorical tale of the emergence of national subjectivity, it unintentionally reveals precisely what Jameson misses in his concept of national allegory: the element of coercion that lingers as Ōta’s resentment. Amagata, the representative of the state, poses a choice for Ōta between nationality and the loss of all subjective identity. It is a contrived and politicized choice, because it excludes nonnational identifications as the basis for subjectivity. While the young Ōta is meant to be the epitome of the cosmopolitan intellectual, such alternative identities also would have included those based on region or on the status system of the Edo period, for example. According to the narrative of national history advanced by “The Dancing Girl,” accession to nationality is inevitable as the outcome of every life process. Any other path, any alternative identity, ends in the disintegration of the subject. Allegorically, “The Dancing Girl” asserts that this is true not just for Ōta but for all individuals living in the confines of the nation-state. To the extent that the narrative of national history excludes alternative identities, we therefore must conclude that whatever its local cause, Ōta’s resentment is produced systemically by the narrative itself. His resentment is inseparable from his nationality, and thus the triumphal narrative of accession to nationality carries within it traces of the violence that the nation-state and national culture enact on their competitors.

The prominent place that resentment has in “The Dancing Girl” may seem surprising, given that in his valorization of necessity as maturity Ōgai urges submission to the state and to its demand for the nationalization of identity in the interest of an assertedly national mission. We should recall, however, that Ōta’s resentment is outweighed by his gratitude. A bit of him may hate Aizawa, but he never will have a greater friend. It really is impossible, then, to justify the common reading of “The Dancing Girl” as a critique of the
alienation forced on the individual by the institutions of modern society. In the balance Ōgai affirms what he asserts to be the necessity of “progress” and of the state as its agent. Instead of resorting to such a purely thematic reading, we should consider again the retrospective quality of the narrative through which Ōta explains his resentment, and particularly the delirious blank in which he loses Ellis. This blank is central to Ōgai’s attempt to bring a necessity to the accession to nationality for which resentment is the inseparable obverse.

By asserting that the realization of latent nationality is the outcome of every life process, the narrative of “The Dancing Girl” seeks to naturalize nationality as the primary basis for subjective identity. In such a proposition of the subject, the historicity of nationality as identity (and thus also of the nation-state as political form) disappears. Nationality, the assertion goes, does not originate anywhere or anytime. Rather, it is an essential and inescapable quality of every individual. We should avoid jumping to the conclusion that the emergence or imposition of nationality requires forgetting or erasures from history, however. This is altogether too voluntaristic a point of view. Instead we must consider the possibility that the narrative of national history cannot represent the contingent origins of the nation-state because the proposition of national history itself disallows such representation. The central premise of national history, that history is the story of the realization of ancient but latent qualities of national unity and self-consciousness, does not admit the possibility that the nation is of recent provenance. Under its terms recent events, such as the formal establishment of a state, can only be steps in a longer process of self-realization. Thus what is afoot here is not limited to denying the historicity of the nation-state in the content of historical narrative, by displacing its recent advent to a distant, mythically produced origin, for example. Rather, what is at stake is a denial of the historicity of the nation-state in the mechanisms and conditions of representation.

The narrative of national history cannot simply banish the historicity of the nation-state and nationality from representation. To succeed in naturalizing the nation-state, it must succeed in containing the sedimented identities that persist in the early period of formation of nation-states, as well as the new possibilities that appear in the interstices of the still-unstable nationalized
society. The potential for such containment comes from the quality of narrative as the transformation of singularities into story. The retrospective form of Ōta’s personal history, with the specific type of temporality it supports, is a particularly clear example. In “The Dancing Girl,” alternative identities and politics exist only as memory, something over and done with, that is, as history. Recall that in the numerous dichotomies of the narrative—between cosmopolitanism and nationality, freedom and submission, and so forth—each of the first terms is pushed into the past. The temporal blank of Ōta’s delirium stands between this past and his present. As an unbridgeable rift, it cordons off Ōta’s political “naïveté” from the present in which he has accepted the state’s gift of nationality. To understand the ideological work of Ōta’s delirium, then, we must read this gap literally. In Ōta’s painstaking reconstruction of life history, the moment when alternatives in politics and identity were lost quite simply cannot be remembered. The destruction of such alternatives, which in “The Dancing Girl” takes place through Aizawa’s enforcement of the taboos of national homosociality, cannot be made into history. If this blank is a trace of the inadmissible coercion of the nationalization of subjectivity, then, it is also a trace of the equally inadmissible historicity of the nation-state. Analysis of “The Dancing Girl” suggests that far from indicating a breakdown in narrative, the unrepresentability of such gaps is fundamental to the naturalization of the nation-state, as a prophylaxis against the contamination of the present by nonnational alternatives that now are transformed into an unrepeatable past.

If these alternatives are contained, they still must be overcome, and here the political significance of the récit form in “The Dancing Girl” becomes most clear. By relegating political alternatives to the status of youthful aberration, the retrospective history of “The Dancing Girl” is able to assert the necessity of their loss as part of the national-historical process itself. In “The Dancing Girl” the narrated present of the story converges inexorably with the narrative present of the frame. Ōgai thus presents the realization of Ōta’s latent nationality as equally inevitable. To the extent that Ōta’s ill-fated detour from the details of the law to its spirit is a critique of early Meiji aspirations to liberal democracy, Ōgai’s authoritarian theme in “The Dancing Girl” is smug. Writing after the unveiling of the constitution in 1889, he already knew that aspirations of the sort nurtured by the young Ōta had no future.
We must not read the story as too narrowly rooted in the events of its time, however. What is at stake, as in national ideology in general, is the continual containment of nonnational forms of identity and political action. In the end, such containment is not carried out through the details of the story (such as the oblique references to the Freedom and Popular Rights Movement) but in a form that is both retrospective and systemically disjunctive.

From the perspective of Japanese literary history, reading the dialectic between coercion and resentment in the form of “The Dancing Girl” offers the possibility of reconsidering the apparent depoliticization of literature that followed the suppression of the Freedom and Popular Rights Movement. The unveiling of the Meiji Constitution in no way accomplished the end of dissent. While politics appears to exit literature with the demise of the political novel, we therefore can expect to continue to find both resistance and containment persisting in literary form in the Meiji era and after. Ōgai’s story, I have argued, is a concerted intervention in mid-Meiji campaigns to nationalize the populace of Japan that bears comparison to parallel efforts in other countries, and indeed it can help us see that such campaigns always were embedded not simply in local but also in global conditions. Reading the story in these terms, and thus putting “The Dancing Girl” back into its political context, also opens the prospect of a basic and more sweeping reassessment of the role of literature in the transformation of social and political relations in Japan and the world.

Notes

This analysis of the politics of literary form in “The Dancing Girl” was presented as a talk at the Reischauer Institute, Harvard University, in February 2000. Versions of the argument appear in chapter 4 of my dissertation, “National History and the World of Nations: Writing Japan, France, the United States, 1870–1900” (Columbia University, 1999), and in “Ideologies of Novelty and Agedness: Narrating the Origins of the Meiji Nation,” New Directions in the Study of Meiji Japan, ed. Helen Hardacre and Adam L. Kern (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 549–561. I would like to thank the anonymous readers for positions and those who attended the talk at the Reischauer Institute for their comments.

1 For interpretations of Ōgai as an icon of the era, see Kobori Keiichirō, Wakaki ki no Mori Ōgai [The young Mori Ōgai] (Tokyo: Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai, 1969), and Hirakawa Sukehiro, “Wakon yōai” no keifu—uchi to soto kara no Meiji Nihon [The genealogy of “Japanese spirit,
Western knowledge”: Meiji Japan from inside and out (Tokyo: Kawade Shobō Shinsha, 1971). In English the basic work on Ōgai, Richard Bowring’s Mori Ōgai and the Modernization of Japanese Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), follows this line but injects a note of contempt: Ōgai is a modernizer whose literary work is of questionable value. In response to Bowring, Dennis Washburn defends Ōgai’s achievements in “Manly Virtue and the Quest for Self: The Bildungsroman of Mori Ōgai,” Journal of Japanese Studies 21, no. 1 (winter 1995): 1–32, but in my opinion does not seriously question the common proposition that Ōgai’s work consisted of a negotiation between native “tradition” and the “West.” Thomas Lamarre gives a more trenchant critique in “Bacterial Cultures and Linguistic Colonies: Mori Rintarō’s Experiments with History, Science, and Language,” positions 6, no. 3 (winter 1998): 597–635, by stressing the importance of Ōgai’s medical research both in his literary production and in Japanese imperialist advances in East Asia. See especially 597–601.

2 The writer Satō Haruo, for example, wrote that modern Japanese literature began in 1884 when Ōgai traveled to Germany to study medicine, where he was able to read widely in German literature and criticism. See “Mori Ōgai no romanchishizumu” [The romanticism of Mori Ōgai], Gunzō [The group] 4, no. 9 (1949), cited in Yoshiyuki Nakai, “Mori Ōgai’s German Trilogy: A Japanese Parody of Les Contes d’Hoffman,” Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies 38, no. 2 (December 1978): 381.

3 Among the most important efforts to examine the formation of national identities from the point of view of global economic and political conditions are the essays by Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein in Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities (London: Verso, 1991), Frederick Buell, in National Culture and the New Global System (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), and Neil Lazarus, in Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), have applied such a perspective to specific countries, each author focusing on the era of decolonization. While Liah Greenfeld, Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), is richly researched and often offered as an example of a comparative study of nationalism, unlike the works just cited it does not approach nationalism as a properly transnational phenomenon that emerges in response to systemic global conditions. Greenfeld’s causality instead is chronological: England is the “first” nation, and others (France, Germany, Russia, and the United States, in her study) are forced to respond to its example.

4 The now-classic theoretical examinations of the formation of national identity in such situations of domestic heterogeneity are Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism (London: Verso, 1983), and the essays in Homi Bhabha, ed., Nation and Narration (London: Routledge, 1990). Other recent studies that have been helpful in my analysis of “The Dancing Girl” include Amy Kaplan, “Nation, Region, and Empire,” in The Columbia History of the American Novel, ed. Emory Elliott (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 240–266; Priscilla Wald, Constituting Americans: Cultural
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6 The Tokugawa system consisted of a shogunal government (bakufu) in Edo (now Tokyo) exercising loose hegemony over feudal domains (han) with varying degrees of independence. (Although some domains were tied to the shogunate by kinship, others’ allegiance had to be maintained politically, and a few, in distant areas, were generally hostile to Tokugawa rule. Several of the latter were instrumental in the Restoration of 1868.) The primary allegiance of samurai was to the domainal lord. Nonsamurai often identified themselves by their historical province or region, whose limits did not necessarily correspond to the political boundaries of the domain, and by their position in the hierarchical caste system of the Tokugawa regime’s Neo-Confucian ideology, that is, as samurai, farmer, artisan, or merchant. John Whitney Hall provides the institutional history of the political system, in “The Bakuhan System,” in Cambridge History of Japan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 4:128–182. Gilbert Rozman examines the breakdown in the nineteenth century of the hierarchical social order that the political system enforced, in “Social Change,” in Cambridge History of Japan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 5:499–568.

7 Prasenjit Duara discusses the persistence of such sedimented identities and the difficulty of reconciling them with triumphal national histories, in Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 54–56. Jeffrey Hanes examines the Meiji government’s response to the problem, focusing on attempts to create uniform measurements and perceptions of time and space, in “Contesting

8 Fukuzawa Yukichi outlines the stages of progress toward civilization, applying equally to all societies, in *Outline of a Theory of Civilization* [*Bunmeiron no gairyaku*] (1875). For Fukuzawa’s explication of the stages see *Bunmeiron no gairyaku*, ed. Matsuzawa Hiroaki (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1995), 26–27. For his argument that Europe should be the goal of Japanese striving because it currently enjoys the most advanced level of civilization in the world see 27–29. The treatise is available in translation as *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization*, trans. David A. Dilworth and Cameron G. Hurst (Tokyo: Sophia University, 1973).


[Setchūbai] (1886), by Suehiro Tetchō, in chapter 4 of my “National History and the World of Nations.” Atsuko Sakaki argues that political novels have fallen out of the canon of modern literature, despite their large readership at the time, because of critics’ failure to historicize the definition of literature that they inherited from Shōyō himself. See “Kajinnokigū: The Meiji Political Novel and the Boundaries of Literature,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 55, no. 1 (spring 2000): 83–108.


16 Kamei examines Futabatei’s response to the problem, to create an anonymous speaker in *The Drifting Cloud* who is in the scene but does not take part in the action, in his ground-breaking study *Kansei no henkaku* [Transformations of sensibility] (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1983), 12–18. (Kamei distinguishes such an anonymous speaker from an omniscient narrator.) I discuss Kamei’s analysis of Ōgai’s approach below. *Kansei no henkaku* will appear in a joint English translation edited by Michael Bourdaghs as *Transformations of Sensibility: The Phenomenology of Meiji Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for Japanese Studies, 2002).


18 Bowring provides the relevant details in *Mori Ōgai and the Modernization of Japanese Culture*, 49–55.

19 Nakai, “Mori Ōgai’s German Trilogy,” 406–414, traces the intertexts of “Maihime.”


21 The assertion is aided by Ōgai’s declaration to critic Ishibashi Ningetsu that “The Dancing Girl” was an “Ich Roman.” See Mori Ōgai, “Maihime ni tsukite Kidoru Hannosuke ni ataru sho” [A note to Kidoru Hannosuke regarding “The Dancing Girl”], in Ōgai zenshū 22 [Collected works of Mori Ōgai] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1973), 168.

22 Kamei, *Kansei no henkaku*, 80–85, 112.


Ōgai, “Maihime,” 41. The meaning of *urami*, which reveals Ōta’s attitude toward the events surrounding his abandonment of the dancing girl of the title, is crucial to the themes of the story. Bowring translates it as *remorse*—a translation that is difficult to justify but provides the Anglophone reader with the comfort of a repentant protagonist. The word is better rendered as *resentment* or *bitterness*, and in contrast to *remorse* suggests not that Ōta has committed an offense but that he has suffered one. The importance of the distinction is apparent in the denouement of the story.


Ibid., 85–86.


Ibid., 98, 102.


Ahmad, “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness,” 110. Ahmad offers the contemporary works of Thomas Pynchon, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Adrienne Rich, and Richard Howard as examples. In the nineteenth century one could point to Stendhal’s *Le rouge et le noir* (1830), Benjamin Disraeli’s *Sybil, or the Two Nations* (1845), and Melville’s “Benito Cereno” (1855), among many other instances.

Jameson has shifted toward this position with his more recent concept of “geopolitical allegory,” which he sees as characteristic of late capitalism. He has not extended this argument to his analyses of earlier periods, however. For a concise discussion of the concept, see Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 1–5. I thank Eric Cazdyn for pointing me to the later work.
33 Partha Chatterjee’s *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) is an insightful analysis of the relationship of such intellectuals in colonial India to the people they sought to transform into a national citizenry.

34 Prasenjit Duara, “Bifurcating Linear History: Nation and Histories in China and India,” *positions* 1, no. 3 (winter 1993), 779.

35 Ōgai, “Maihime,” 43.

36 Ibid.

37 The romanization of the girl’s name (given in the katakana syllabary as “Erisu”) is uncertain. I have adopted “Ellis” following Nakai’s discovery that her character probably is modeled after one of the same name in Turgenev’s 1863 story “The Phantom.” See Nakai, “Mori Ōgai’s German Trilogy,” 408.


40 The count’s name is a transparent reference to Meiji oligarch Yamagata Aritomo, founder of the Japanese army, ardent opponent of the Freedom and Popular Rights Movement, and prime minister at the time “The Dancing Girl” was published.

41 Ōgai, “Maihime,” 54.

42 Ibid., 58.

43 Ibid., 60–61.

44 Here the great difference between rendering urami as remorse and as resentment should be clear.

45 Ibid., 45.

46 This self-absorption also is implicit in the story’s form. Kamei observes that as a first-person récit the narrative necessarily focuses on Ōta and by its nature cannot recognize the subjectivity of the other, in this case Ellis. Instead she is dominated by the narrative. See Kamei, *Kansai no henkaku*, 111–112.

47 I owe this scarcely observed connection of “The Dancing Girl” to contemporary politics to Tanaka Minoru, “Tsōtetski ishiki kōzō no naka no gēkisakusha,” 191.


49 For Fukuzawa’s argument on the importance of the spirit of civilization as opposed to its material trappings, see *Bunmeiron no gairyaku*, 29–33. The reference to Montesquieu seems certain given Ōgai’s wide reading in European philosophy. A portion of Montesquieu’s
L'esprit des lois was translated by Mitsukuri Rinshô, the translator of the French Code civil, and published in 1874 in two issues of Meiji Six Magazine [Meiroku zasshi], the house organ of civilization and enlightenment thinkers. Nani Noriyuki published a complete translation in 1876 under the title Banpô seiri.

It should be clear that however reactionary such a position often may have been in practice, it is not identical to an antimodernist conservatism. Rather, it emerges from a critique of the Eurocentrism of nineteenth-century European universalism, which was marked by an asymmetry in which only the history of Europe enjoyed a positive particularity because it was also the history of the universal. Thus Hiraoka Toshio observes that in the 1890s both Kitamura Tôkoku, a left-leaning poet and critic who was a veteran of the Freedom and Popular Rights Movement, and Kuga Katsunan, the rightist theorist of national purity (kokusuishugi), turned to history as the basis for a nationalism that could negotiate between naive Westernism and chauvinistic nativism. See Hiraoka Toshio, Meiji bungakushi no shûhen [The margins of Meiji literary history] (Tokyo: Yûseido, 1970), 60.

Ôgai, “Maihime,” 58, as quoted earlier; emphasis mine.

Ibid., 45.

For Irigaray’s argument that what she punningly calls an economy of “ho(m)mo-sexuality,” based on a taboo on unmediated sexual exchange among men, is the basis of patriarchal societies, see “Women on the Market” and “Commodities among Themselves,” in This Sex Which Is Not One, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 170–191 and 192–197, respectively. I provide a fuller discussion of these issues in chapter 1 of my “National History and the World of Nations.”

Butler argues in her Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (London: Routledge, 1990) that the social “matrix” of compulsory heterosexuality (a term drawn from Adrienne Rich) is established by a taboo on homosexuality that operates prior to the incest taboo that Freudians see as the basis of identity formation. Together the two prohibitions naturalize contingent links among biological sex, gender, sexual desire, and sexual practice. The prohibitions in this sense are not restrictive but, rather, generative of identity. See 5, 64–65, and 151 n. 6.

Because the priority of such a taboo on same-sex intercourse is ontological rather than chronological, its emergence in the Meiji period as a necessary quality of nationality is not contradicted by historically earlier formations of gender in the Edo period that legitimated desire between older and younger men. On the contrary, the connection of homophobia to narratives of national emergence in the Meiji period made it possible to cast the persecution of earlier same-sex practices as a type of progress from barbarism. On formations of male homosexuality in Japan from the Edo period to the early postwar period, see Gregory M. Pflugfelder, Cartographies of Desire: Male-Male Sexuality in Japanese Discourse, 1600–1950 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). Pflugfelder argues that in the Meiji period legal discourse dominated formations of male homosexuality, in contrast to popular culture
in the Edo period, a shift that is echoed in the role that the state assumes in regulating Ota’s sexual conduct in “The Dancing Girl.”

While I argue here that what is most at stake in this configuration is Ota’s relationship to other men, the story’s treatment of Ellis also obviously includes the suggestion that a woman of the same nationality would be the appropriate object of his desire. Nalini Natarajan gives an insightful analysis of the contribution of such ideas of the “native” woman to narratives of nationality in the South Asian context, in “Woman, Nation, and Narration in Midnight’s Children,” in Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices, ed. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1994), 76–89. For a discussion of why nationalism so easily subsumes the “women’s question” and other issues deriving from inequalities of gender, even though nationalism so poorly serves them, see R. Radhakrishnan, “Nationalism, Gender, and the Narrative of Identity,” in Nationalisms and Sexualities, ed. Mary Russo, Andrew Parker, Doris Summer, and Patricia Yaeger (New York: Routledge, 1992), 77–95.

56 Slavoj Žižek, “Rossellini: Woman As Symptom of Man,” October 54 (fall 1990), 21. Rey Chow further explicates the concept of symptom in her deft application of it to imperialist discourse, in “Where Have All the Natives Gone?” in Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 27–54.