5 In Search of Beauty

The writers to be considered in this chapter belonged, alongside the Shirakabaha, to the anti-naturalist camp in the bundan. Unlike the Shirakabaha, however, they did not have any real quarrel with the naturalistic view of life as such. What they objected to was the ‘artless’ technique of the I-novel. They refused to praise a simple description of life as the ‘spirit of prose’. They could not accept the naturalistic belief that the essence of art lies in the chronicle of one’s personal experience. They believed that a work of art should possess a life of its own, independent from the reality of the artist’s life. Thus they stressed the importance of artistic method and structure in the work of literature, and aimed at a mastery of that method that would enable them to create works of perfect beauty, appealing to the imagination and senses of the readers. Stimulating subjects and fascinating imagery, that would be matched by an artistically perfect style, were the ideal they pursued. For that reason they are referred to as ‘aestheticists’ (tanbi-ha) or, in Itō Sei’s slightly broader terminology as ‘methodologists’ (hōōsha).

The methodologists were more concerned with structural form and the beauty of artistic expression than their own way of life. In the Taishō period there were Tanizaki Jun’ichirō, Satō Haruo, Nagai Kafū, and Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, and they were followed in the Shōwa period by Yokomitsu Riichi, Kawabata Yasunari, and others. Their activities concentrated round the three coterie magazines that appeared at the end of the Meiji and continued into the Taishō period: Subaru, Mita bungaku and Shinshicho. They also had their own literary club in the down-town area of Tokyo called ‘Pan-no Kai’ (Pan Society), where most of them met. Bored with the uncompromising stance and the narrow scope of the I-novel, they tried to depict the reality of modern Japan in a logically and aesthetically satisfying manner. They hoped that this new artistic method would enable them to express the consciousness of modern man objectively as was done by modern European writers. At the
same time it had to be a method which would fulfil their requirement of artistic perfection. This double aim made the Taishō aestheticists seek inspiration in two considerably different literary models, the writings of Mori Ōgai and Izumi Kyōka (1873–1939).

Mori Ōgai (who with the novelist Ueda Bin was the co-founder of the magazine Subaru) was a natural precursor of the Japanese methodologists. He represented the European method, which operated by the application of logic to the subject of description. The material was organised in a structural way, and a logical analysis of the hero’s thoughts and actions was aimed at. By this method the writer’s personal views appeared only in a disguised and conceptualised form. Ōgai’s efforts contributed to the establishment of an independent base for imaginative literature in Japan.

Although the bundan aestheticists inherited Ōgai’s interest in the literary ‘method’, their views on art were diametrically opposed to those of Ōgai and other writers of rational and harmonious orientation who envisaged the role of art to be one of active engagement in the cause of the progress of human kind. The aestheticists were dedicated to the idea of the supremacy of art, which was close to the European concept of ‘art for art’s sake’. They were strongly influenced by the views of Oscar Wilde who emphasised the aesthetic and non-utilitarian aspects of art. Here beauty of form and the artist’s skill mattered more than content. The ‘art-for-art’s-sake’ artists believed that art should transcend the reality of life and nature—in their search for perfect beauty they withdrew from realism and explored the world of fantasy. They also believed that a work of art should be judged by aesthetic criteria alone—there was no room for moral considerations as art transcended morality. In fact, most of them discovered or came near to discovering that beauty was often an accomplice of evil and the artist a devil’s disciple, as his tireless pursuit of artistic perfection could cause him to forget the principles of common humanity.

All these elements can be traced in the works of the Japanese aestheticists. At the same time, the Japanese ideal of the ‘supremacy of art’ acquired characteristic features of its own due to the circumstances under which it evolved in Meiji Japan. For example, it emphasised the idea that the establishment and development of the individual could be accomplished through art, reflecting thus the general confidence of Meiji Japanese in individual freedom and personal achievement as the means of advancement in life (a