Chapter 1

Ghosts and Spirits in Early Japanology

In the 1890s, Japanese curios filled American living rooms in parallel with a rising cosmopolitanism. This chapter focuses upon how early Japanologists utilize the trendy formulation of an imaginary Japan to contemplate unseen forces in a modernizing world. Ernest Fenollosa, a professor from Salem who taught philosophy at Tokyo University, spent the bulk of his career documenting these curios to reveal the energy behind world “progress.” Lafcadio Hearn was a nomadic journalist who was sent to Japan in 1890 to write about its unfamiliar aspects. Hearn’s writing, though radically different from Fenollosa’s in style, likewise exploits an assortment of Japanese curios to express a supernatural essence within modern life, marked by its absence. Early Japanology thus marks a significant shift in how a discourse of the invisible came to represent Japan. These two authors expose the emptiness beneath Gilded Age artifice while also projecting, through gathered Japanese materials, narratives of other-worldly forces upon an illusory archipelago.

Following Commodore Perry’s mission to the country in 1853 to open its doors to foreign trade, Japan continued to modernize at a rate unheard of previously. In the government’s zeal for Westernization (to “catch up”), doubts concerning modernity arose, on both sides of the Pacific, and figures seized upon the nation as an invaluable case study. Subsequently, on the one hand, it became a place onto which American consumers could project modernization as a successful (and predetermined) phenomenon. On the other hand, discontents could point to the splendor of a culture being meticulously destroyed and lament a romanticized life prior to modernity—which, of course, never
truly existed. Both versions of Japan relied upon specters, be they reassuring or terrifying in consequence.³

This fictional movement “further West” in American discourse contributed to what David Mogen calls the “frontier Gothic.” After the proclaimed closure of the frontier, fictional Japan was the next logical step in a collective wandering outward. Fantasies involving the archipelago consequently inherited the dual sensations associated with “progress”: “An ambivalent sense of destiny, projected into dreadful apprehensions of personal or cosmic apocalypse” (Mogen, 102). Regarding the phantoms behind expansionist politics, Renée L. Bergland adds, “The lore and language of ghostliness are particularly appropriate for describing the encounters that take place within the mysteriously shifting grounds of American cultural frontiers” (Bergland, 93). The fantastic realm of Japan serves as an intersection between the Ghost of everything denied by Enlightenment thought (the Romantic, irrational, intangible) and the Spirit of everything the Enlightenment supposedly promised (global order, the triumph of rationalism, the divine made tangible via materialist “progress”).⁴ As American influence stretched beyond its westernmost boundary, authors re-inscribed ambivalent attitudes toward a nationalized supernatural upon tales adapted from the land of the Rising Sun—a dialectical undertaking I have labeled as the “cosmopolitan Gothic.”

Critic Edward J. Ingebretsen, S.J., charts this spiritual unrest from the time of the Puritans through current trends in popular horror fiction by applying critical maps in order to explain a recurrent search for imperceptible powers: “To remember the Holy as a divine principle is in effect to remember, and in some cases to set, boundaries or limits beyond which the human does not or cannot go” (Ingebretsen, xv). Early Japanology instills a poetic cartography by drawing invented margins. It comes perhaps as no surprise that what Ingebretsen recognizes as a defining ambivalence between the invisible as divine and the invisible as a cause for trembling emerges in initial reflections concerning Japan. After all, he envisions the slippery dichotomy as a long-standing rite in American culture: “It re-presents—makes present again—a familiar pattern of events by which to embody and to make right the relationship between the community and its transcendent possibilities” (177). Hearn and Fenollosa reveal that these literary rituals were not restricted to descriptions of the wilderness, the borderlands of a Puritan mindset, but were in fact disseminated further, into constructions of the Far East.