The Irony of the Sea:
Romantic Disruptions of Japanese Literary Modernity

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Abstract

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“The Irony of the Sea: Romantic Disruptions of Japanese Literary Modernity” uses recent studies on the 19th century European and American sea adventure novel to argue that Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* represents a particular mode of maritime writing that works through a language of contradiction and paradox to reveal the limits of rational modes of thought and knowledge at the heart of Western modernity. It further identifies this form of writing, referred to herein as the “irony of the sea,” as part of a romantic tradition of imagining maritime spaces as counter-spaces to rational modernity. By tracing the movement of the irony of the sea over three key moments in modern Japanese literary history—the 1890s, the 1930s, and the 1950s—this study aims to demonstrate the ways in which romantic thought not only persists throughout the modern period as part of an ongoing response to the experience of modernity, but how it also served as an impediment to and innovative force in the development and the production of literary and artistic forms.
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Introduction

*Moby-Dick* and the Irony of the Sea

“Already we are boldly launched upon the deep; but soon we shall be lost in its unshored, harborless immensities.” – Ishmael, *Moby-Dick*

Herman Melville’s (1819-1891) *Moby-Dick* (1851), that strange and most vexing of works, is a story about limits—of language, knowledge, and thought—that unfolds within another, larger spatial limit—the maritime frontier. This study takes as its subject that frontier—the unshored, harborless immensity—as imagined by Melville, and the challenges that it poses to the discourses of Japanese literary modernity.

With the opening of Japan in 1853, came Western notions of individual freedom and equality, and the Protestant denomination that inspired them. Such thought fundamentally altered the approach to artistic production, especially in the realm of literature, yielding a literary modernity centered around a romantic subject, a stable source of knowledge and sensibility, and a prose style viewed as transcribing that subjectivity. *Moby-Dick* poses numerous challenges to such romantic discourse through a mode of writing that develops out of the form with which Melville began his career—maritime fiction, a narrative of adventure set on the open sea.

As literary scholars like Margaret Cohen and Cesare Casarino have recently argued, the ocean in 19th century English and American sea narratives functions as a dangerous “edge zone” whose powerful elemental forces reveal the limits of systematic, rationalized thought at the core of Western modernity.¹ In *Moby-Dick*, this maritime writing takes the form of irony, a mode of thought that works through paradox and contradiction to reveal the ways in which the modern subject is always limned by language, culture, and ideology. It is this ironic form of writing, what I refer to throughout the dissertation as the “irony of the sea,” that presents the greatest challenge to the prevailing ideologies of Japanese literary modernity.

Over the course of this study, I follow the development of the irony of the sea as it winds its way through specific moments in Japanese literary history—the late 1890s, the mid-1930s, and the late 1950s and early 1960s—in order to demonstrate the ways in which romanticist discourses impeded and impelled the development of literary and artistic forms.
As Margaret Cohen has written, the sea narrative has its beginnings in the logs, journals, and records of mariners in the 17th century and develops into the problem-solving adventure narratives of Daniel Defoe. But by the mid-19th century, advances in technology and navigation had transformed seafaring from the new to the routine, and shifts in the political economies of Europe and America had brought a move from mercantilism to industrial capitalism. The sea adventure novel, a relic of an age that celebrated the glories of the mariner and reveled in his exploits, had gradually become an attenuated mode of representation. But this attenuation did not signal the form’s end, only its transition.

In the 19th century, as the emerging practices of industrial capitalism and developing technologies routinized sea travel, the sea narrative was re-imagined as well. In the hands of writers like Herman Melville and, later, Joseph Conrad, the archaic form of the sea novel began to, as Cesare Casarino writes, “perform according to new narrative structures and to fulfill new cultural imperatives.” Located at the tipping point of modernity, the 19th century sea narrative recorded the vanishing modes of production out which it had been born, and envisioned new ones emerging on the horizon. This conflicting narrative desire, at once forward and at once back, transformed the shape of the sea adventure form into one that explored, not only the maritime frontier, but the limits of language, knowledge, and thought. Dangerously experimental, the mid-19th century maritime fiction prefigures the work of literary modernism. I refer to this figuration throughout the dissertation as the irony of the sea. In Moby-Dick, we find it almost from the very start.

In “Loomings,” the opening chapter of Moby-Dick, Ishmael enumerates his reasons for going to sea. Among them, he offers this:

Why did the Persians hold the sea holy? Why did the Greeks give it a separate deity, and make him the own brother of Jove? Surely all of this is not without meaning. And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all (1:20).
Much of “Loomings” is a meditation on the ocean, an attempt to think through what in this liquid element fascinates mankind so. The story of Narcissus, Ishmael concludes, is “the key to it all.” It tells the tale of what we perceive when we gaze into water or the open expanse of the sea: an image that we feel we should know, somehow made completely other. This image lures us forward, beyond the point of safety, with the promise of an understanding that extends beyond our self. The invocation of Narcissus is an allusion to a tale of irony, that mode of discourse that reveals the limits of thought and language through contradiction and paradox. It is this irony that serves as the underlying logic of Melville’s *Moby-Dick*.

The geometrical form of irony is the circle, and circles abound in *Moby-Dick*, particularly in relation to images of the sea: they permeate the text as whirlpools and vortices in the water; as waterspouts riding the surface: as flocks of wheeling sea-birds: as curved flukes, arching spouts, and arcing rainbows. They range from the smallest of scales—the auger holes that dot the Pequod’s deck to support Ahab’s ivory leg—to the largeness of the whale himself. In the “Etymology” section that opens the book, the Late Consumptive Usher to a Grammar School supplies us with a definition of this imposing creature: “This animal is named from roundness or rolling; for in Dan. hvalt is arched or vaulted” (Etymology: 7). Circles are present from the start of the work to its final moments, when Ishmael is nearly pulled down with the sunken Pequod: “I was then, but slowly, drawn towards the closing vortex. When I reached it, it had subsided to a creamy pool. Round and round, then, and ever contracting towards the button-like black bubble at the axis of that slowly wheeling circle, like another Ixion I did revolve” (Epilogue: 427). But circles in *Moby-Dick* extend beyond the imagistic; they constitute the work’s texture as well.

We can find this irony at work at all levels of Melville’s prose: in his words, which often round one part of speech off into another; in his use of repetition, both phonetic and lexical; and in the syntax and structure of his sentences which often branch left, forcing the reader to move back before going forward. In 1852, a reviewer of *Moby-Dick*’s wrote that “if there are many of our readers who wish to find examples of bad rhetoric, involved syntax, stilted sentiment and incoherent English, we will take the liberty of recommending to them this precious volume of Mr. Melville’s.” Over a
century and a half later, the comments still hold true. But driving this quixotic work at every level—the morphological, phonological, lexical, and syntactical—is ironical mode of thought. We can better understand this irony and its workings through a brief examination of *Moby-Dick*'s language and style.


But in pointing out the ways in which these words blur the distinction between verbs and nouns, Arvin identified a fundamental ironic logic to Melville's language. Melville’s language, on the level of word, shuttles from kinesthetic to static sense and back again. It moves in a circle, the geometric figure of irony.


In *Moby-Dick*, the sense that inheres in one part of speech is made to
circle into another, a fungibility of form that, to borrow from Arvin again, gives *Moby-Dick* its “particular uncomfortable character.” In these ironic movements, we are forced to feel the hardness of a noun, the openness of an adjective, and the kinesis of verb. Within one word we cycle from one sense to another guided along loops of irony. This irony might seem to border on the absurd or the playful, something similar to the language of a poststructural or postmodern novel, but Melville’s intent in these syntactic experiments is not to devolve into absurdity of play. He uses irony to drive deeper, toward that “little lower layer” (36:140).12

We should also note that many of the words produced out of Melville’s verbal inventiveness contain some form of negation, an *un-* or a *-less*, which makes them akin to the negative adjectival phrases or epithets scattered throughout *Moby-Dick*. Some of the most striking include: “unoutgrown” (16:73), “unmanifested” (33:126), “unhooped,” “undeviating” (44:167), “unsuppressable,” “unappeasedly” (44:169), “unshunned” (54:206), “unmerited” (72:255), “unsounded” (72:256), “ uncontaminated” (94:322), “unmanufactured” (98:330), “underived” (106:355), “ unreverenced” (112:369), “unsmoothable” (113:370). In freighting his adjectives with Latin suffixes like *un-* and, less frequently, *in-* Melville emphasizes through negation. It is, for instance, only through negation that the extent of Ahab’s monomaniacal desire can find expression: Ahab, who is defined by his “unsurrenderable wilfulness” (28:109), his “unsleeping, ever-pacing thought” (36:137), his “unquiet heart” (44:168), and “unsurpressable symptoms” (44:169). The whale, too, which resists all forms of hermeneutic penetration, is described as “uninjurable” (77:268), “inexplicable” (87:296), an “unsourced existence” and a symbol of “unspeakable terrors” (104:350).

The tendency to emphasize through negation also plays out in his deployment of litotes, the rhetorical use of double negatives: “Nor did wild rumors fail of all sorts fail to exaggerate, and still the more horrify the true histories of these deadly encounters (41:153); “But this critical act is not always unattended with the saddest and most fatal casualties” (63:235); “Nor is it to be doubted that as such a procedure can do no harm, it may possibly be of no contemptible advantage” (84:288); “The precipitating manner in which Captain Ahab had quieted the Samuel Enderby of London, had not been unattended with some small violence to his own person” (106:354); or Ishmael’s opening line to Chapter 68, “The Blanket”: “I have given no small
attention to that not unvexed subject, the skin of the whale” (68: 245).

Semantically, the double negative should resolve to an understated affirmation. But the more Melville uses them, the less they seem to yield the positive a rhetorical positive. As Sharon Cameron writes, such “sentences identify qualities, expressions, and states, while calling into question the states being identified, which cannot be posited outside the negations, but which retain their residue.” But the process of attaining clarity in *Moby-Dick* is no mean task. These structures, Gayle Smith observes, formally “demand that as readers we keep circling back over the same territory, negating concepts, sometimes only to do so again.” Reading *Moby-Dick* means entering into a dizzying circle that oftentimes casts us back over the same territory with nothing to show for it.

The ironic logic that drives *Moby-Dick* circulates on the level of sentence as well. Take, for instance, the opening of Chapter 51, “The Spirit Spout”:

It was while gliding through these latter waters that one serene and moon light night, when all the waves rolled by like scrolls of silver; and, by their soft, suffusing seethings, made what seemed a silvery silence, not a solitude: on such a silent night a silvery jet was seen far in advance of the white bubbles at the bow. (51: 192)

In reading the passage, one is struck first by the phonetic repetitions: foremost by the *s* that runs throughout the passage, but also the clusters of liquid *l* (e.g., all the waves rolled by like scrolls of silver), dental *th* (e.g., through these [...] that), and the bilabial *b* (i.e., bubbles at the bow) that finally brings the sentence to a close. *Moby-Dick* is not a prose poem, but Melville does exhibit an undeniable interest in elements of verse, including alliteration, assonance, consonance, rhythm, and meter. As numerous critics have observed over the years, entire passages, including the one quoted above, can be rendered in blank verse. Melville is fascinated by where sounds come together and the feelings that rhythms can generate. But behind the sound systems that Melville has forged across this sentence and others like it, is a warped, awkward, and ironic syntax.

The sentence from “The Spirit Spout” opens with a subject and verb (“It was”), but these are almost meaningless, formal placeholders that
ostensibly push us forward to the main clause. But, instead of a main clause, we are given an adverbial one (“while gliding through these latter waters”) that is extended by the interjection of another (“one serene and moon light night”) which then turns us, at the comma, to still another (“when all the waves rolled by”). The syntax of the sentence, that is, works according to hypotaxis: it arranges layers of functionally similar but semantically different constructs that force us to continually retread the same linguistic ground. The sentence branches left and then branches left again in circles of structurally dispensable clauses that, in their very excess, call our attention to the operations of language.

The semi-colon that follows this loop of clauses only adds one more circle. One of Melville’s most-favored tools, the semi-colon joins even as it breaks. When we return from the prolonged pause that interrupts the flow of the sentence we find that we are still trapped in the previous adverbial clause—the pronoun “their,” part of another adverbial clause, refers us back to the “waves.” We might allow ourselves a slight cheer upon arrival at the colon, a punctuation mark that casts the reader forward to a logical consequence or explanation of what precedes it, but, again, the syntax only returns us, hypotactically, to the where we semantically began (“on such a silent night”). It is only after this clause that the sentence finally yields up its subject and predicate, “the silvery jet was seen.” There is, in that sense, a parallel between the syntactical structure of the sentence and the event that it describes. The mysterious jet “far in advance of the white bubbles at the bow” leads us, the reader, on, just as it does the crew of the Pequod who chases after it in vain. This is the basic sentential design in Melville’s *Moby-Dick*.16 It is a design that plays out in the work’s narrative structure as well.

The narrative of Ahab’s hunt for the white whale takes place within the larger framework of Ishmael’s own attempts to know the whale, to make this mysterious sea creature divulge its unearthly secrets. Ishmael cuts into the whale, skins it, studies its head, scans the lines of its brow, probes its skull, and measures its spine. But the more he attempts to own the great leviathan, the more he finds that its essence escapes him. Even when he stands inside a skeleton of a sperm whale, he chides himself for thinking that looking from the inside out will ever result in the complete and total knowledge that he seeks: “How vain and foolish, then, thought I, for timid
untravelled man to try to comprehend aright this wondrous whale, by merely pouring over his dead attenuated skeleton [...] only on the profound unbounded sea, can the fully invested whale be truly and livingly found out” (104:348). Each of Ishmael’s efforts to understand the whale ends in frustration, but each frustration produces another attempt. In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael longs to define the ineffable. All of his attempts fail but in their failure they suggest the very ineffablility that they fail to describe.

All of these registers—morphological, phonological, syntactical, and structural—work together to create a certain roundness to *Moby-Dick*, a roundness that catches the reader in loops of alogic that cycle from end to beginning and back again. “Round the world!” Ishmael declares, “There is much in that sound to inspire proud feelings; but whereto does all that circumnavigation conduct? Only through numberless perils to the very point whence we started, where those that we left behind secure, were all the time before us” (52:195-196). This is the language of *Moby-Dick*. It is a difficult, disorderly, and tortuous one. Above all, it is ironic. Distilled down to a specific mode of thought, it is best described as ironic. Because this form of irony develops in and through maritime space I have chosen to call it the irony of the sea. The irony of the sea is, of course, not unique to Melville, but it does perhaps find its most powerful expression there. I argue that the study of it in its Japanese contexts helps illuminate some of the central intellectual conflicts that unfold over the course of Japanese romantic literary and artistic modernity.

This study has been inspired by two essays: Ōhashi Kenzaburō’s “Melville in Japan: A Perspective and Overview of His Reception” (1983) and Katō Yūji’s more recent “Herman Melville and Modern Japan: A Speculative Re-interpretation of the Critical History” (2006).17 Ōhashi’s essay examines Melville’s reception in its academic and cultural contexts from its beginnings in the 1930s to the late 1970s. He identifies in this rather brief period of time, a complex, and oftentimes tense, fascination with the critique that Melville’s work pose to persistent modern thinking, including the rationalist belief in the authority of the subject as a source of knowledge and action. Katō’s work elaborates upon Ōhashi’s, further arguing that the tensions in the Japanese critical reception of Melville have their basis in a persistent romantic aesthetic that refuses to permit the recognition of any work that deconstructs notions of self-presence and self-sameness around which
Japanese modern literature coalesced in the late Meiji Period. Katō identifies Melville as, in his words, an anti-romantic writer and the Japanese academic literary institution as a beleaguered outpost, stubbornly clinging to what remains of the metaphysical subject. But Katō, I would argue, mistakes what it means to be romantic.

Romanticism is a mode of thinking paradoxical to its core. The term slips the noose of easy definition, but perhaps a trait that we can identify as common to all romantics is a yearning for the impossible. The absolute order that underlies all other orders, the transcendent realm that allows us to escape the divide between self and world, is, romantics acknowledge, a pipe dream; but it is one that they insist we dream nonetheless. Fragmentation and irony, modes of paradox and contradiction, are the privileged means of discourse for the romantics, and the best means of gesturing toward the unattainable, the absolute. Melville, as someone who shares these methods and desires, is far from “anti-romantic”: he is, rather, as romantic as they come.

As Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy have written in their work *The Literary Absolute*, the name itself “is false, in a very general manner, in that it attempts to set something apart—a period, a school, a style, or a conception—that would belong first and foremost to a certain past.” The Japanese Romantic School of the 1930s and 1940s, for whom irony was the privileged mode of critique and expression, were perhaps making the most ironic statement of all when they labeled themselves “Romantic.” In giving themselves the name, they were acknowledging the very inadequacy of the term. As they demonstrated, through their thought and their work, romanticism could not—and cannot—be contained to a past anymore than it can be explicitly defined. It is not a philosophy, a literature, an art, or a music, but a mode—a worldview composed of various attitudes towards language, self, society, and culture.

Romanticism is the desire for a language that can extend beyond the limits of expressivity and unite perception and feeling; for freedom to be able to speak immediately in a voice that one can call one’s own; for a self that is identical with itself on the level of individual and nation; for continuity with past traditions that joins individual perspectives to a national community of shared thought; and, above all, it is the anxiety felt at the perceived impossibility of any one of these objects of desire. These desires and anxieties
do not disappear or fade away with time, but, as I hope to show in the pages to come, stay with us. They constitute something like a romantic unconscious, a set of conventions which we invoke and keep alive even if we are not always fully cognizant of doing so.  

In Japan, romantic thought began to emerge during the late Meiji Period, almost half a century after Melville's publication of *Moby-Dick*. We find its strongest expression in the work of Kitamura Tōkoku (1868-1894), the Meiji poet and essayist and one of the founding figures of modern literature in Japan. In “An Evening View” (*Hito yūkan*, 1893), a short essay composed near the end of his life, Tōkoku dwells on the division that he perceived between his self and the world that it observed. The essay has all the solemnity of prayer, one that Tōkoku chanted so as to heal the division that he perceived between his self and the world that it observed. The essay begins with the Tōkoku figure gazing out of his window: “One evening I lie down next to my window. Outside, my ocean home, the autumn sky on high, and the heavens are made bright; all forms, all things close in around me. As though to laugh at my insincerity. As though to ridicule my smallness. As though to curse my powerlessness, my inadequateness, my inarticulateness, my spiritlessness.”

It is not until the speaker walks to the shore that he finds the salve he has been longing for. “I have walked down to the water’s edge. The waves, white, speak of the ancient past; the water, verdant, houses the color of eternity. Upon folding my arms and gazing into the blue sky, I forget ‘I’: it is like I have slipped out of ‘Time’ as though it were a set of tattered clothes.” Tōkoku is reported to have enjoyed walking along the sea, particularly when its waters were troubled by storm. Tōkoku to set his self adrift in the waters of the sea, seeing reflected in its surface a dream of transcendent being in complete unity with the world. At the heart of his dream was an ironic logic: only in recognizing the fundamental split that divided self and world could he move beyond it. At the end of the essay, Tōkoku leaves the shore and returns to his house and the window from which he had been gazing out onto the heavens and the earth. “Ah, the still world,” he concludes, “the boundless, limitless world. A single page in grand history, in whose presence I am struck, for a time.” Only in the essay’s closing moments does the split threaten to open up once more, as the narrative hints at a gap between the “I’ that feels and the “I” that writes.
It is this gap that Melville explores throughout his work and especially in *Moby-Dick*. This goes beyond the playful jibes at the transcendental moment that Ishmael voices in chapters like “The Mast-Head,” “The Mat-Maker,” and “The Try-Works.” It speaks to a fundamental way in which one is always limned and limited by language. This does not mean that Melville does not yearn for the transcendence of being just as powerfully as Tōkoku: he does. In extending his sentences to the breaking point, he attempts, as Cesare Casarino has observed, “to reach further and further toward an unreachable limit as well as to stretch the very linguistic unit to its furthest limits.” Melville’s tropes and allusions work in a similar way, constantly referencing other temporal, geographical, and cosmological realms, figures, and events. They stretch far in an effort to bring together the widely divergent. The obsession with boundaries and pushing beyond them is further reflected in Melville’s uneasy relationship with his sources—Melville crosses the line of plagiarism, reworking whole passages from the multitude of texts that he consulted. “I try all things,” Ishmael declares, “I achieve what I can” (79:273).

In *Moby-Dick*, Melville’s cannibalizing method is put on full display. The result is a form of writing that constantly references the limitations of its medium even as it attempts to overcome them. It contrasts with the methods of Tōkoku and other late Meiji poets like the young Shimazaki Tōson (1872-1943) and Iwano Hōmei (1873-1920), for whom language and the poetical activity were the only means of reaching the world they perceived as always beyond the self. The desire for the soul to be more than what it was—sundered, split, divided, cut-off—drew them forward into experiments with the received rhythms, images, and tropes of the Japanese literary language. For Melville, however, neither the world nor the soul that moved through it were givens, no more or less, anyway, than the language that gave shape to them. The bounding lines that divided the sensual subject from the objective world beyond it were the same borders that marked the limitations of language. It is these limitations that Melville, in his scene of writing, sought to explore and exploit. Where Tōkoku reaches, Melville over-reaches. But they reach for the same thing. And this is where we find their kinship: that unique bond that brings together two figures active at different times and other places. It is because these bonds of kinship begin to form in the late Meiji Period that I open my consideration of Herman
Melville’s reception there, decades before the Japanese literary community had encountered him or his work.

I begin my dissertation with a discussion of the sea paintings of the late-Meiji artist Aoki Shigeru in order to demonstrate how the sea as irony develops in Japan as a critical response to romantic dreams of cultural difference. Aoki’s paintings, drawn from scenes of Japanese myth set in or near the sea, work ironically through the fragmentation of form to undermine the notion of Japanese cultural uniqueness that they aim to depict. Through the study of Aoki’s works, I demonstrate the ways in which the sea as irony both participates in and works against romanticist discourse.

Abe Tomoji was the first critic in Japan to seriously attempt to engage Melville and the sea as irony. But the close contact that Abe had with Melville and his work grew into a problematic form of kinship. Through analysis of Abe’s criticism and fiction, I argue in the second chapter that Abe’s literary vision, which was shaped by residual elements of romantic thought, limited his willingness to engage Melville’s ironic forms lest he call into question his own worldview.

I follow the changing shapes of romantic discourse in the postwar period by reading the sea works of writers like Mishima Yukio and Uno Kōichirō. In their fiction, the sea as irony traces a conflicted desire: the romantic longing to establish one’s priority through a return to origins, even as the very notion of origin is revealed to be a construct. The romantic discourses of literary modernity took alternate forms in the postwar period, and by reading the sea writings of Mishima and Uno, I bring those forms into relief.

Romantic thought arises in response to the experience of modernity. It forms as an attempt to counter effects of alienation, isolation, and loss produced by modes of capitalist production. It voices the frustration felt at the failure of modern rational thought even as it is consumed by the desire for the transparency that such thought claims. We find it at the start of the 20th century in Japan, in the work of Aoki Shigeru, when the changes wrought by three decades of socio-cultural change threatened to erase all perceived connections with the cultural past. It lingers into the 1930s when Abe Tomoji and the literary community began to search with renewed vigor for alternatives to a modern cultural tradition of translation and
assimilation they inherited. And it persists in the generations of Mishima
Yukio and Uno Kōichirō, both of whom, in the decades after the Second
World War, searched for a space beyond the necessity of history through
moments of violence and rebellion. At each of these instants, we find the
insistent and insistently romantic aspiration to recover in one’s cultural
moment a life of freedom together with the doubt in that desire’s very
possibility. When I use the term romanticism and the other words that one
can form out of it—romantic or romanticist—it is with the intent of invoking
such tensions. It is the irony of the sea, at each of these moments, that brings
these tensions to the surface.

The sea, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, has long been framed
imagined in negative terms, as a space antithetical to notions of stability and
continuity. It was an anarchic realm, boundless, uncontained, beyond control
of pope, emperor, or king. Long considered an absence, a void, an abyss under
whose surface roamed the most unimaginable of creatures, the ocean sea was
that one element that could not be brought to heel. “The sea,” wrote Carl
Schmitt, our most recent jurist-philosopher of the sea, “has no character, in
the original sense of the word, which comes from the Greek charassein,
meaning to engrave, to scratch, to imprint.”29 In the 16th and 17th centuries,
European thinkers could not solve the aporia of the sea: did it belong to no
one (res nullius) or to everyone (res omnium)?30 The rule of law and peace
were oriented for land, not the ocean, which left the sea wholly and
uncomfortably free. It was not until the late 18th century and into the 19th,
that romantic writers, artists, and thinkers claimed this negative vision of
the sea as their own.

I should add that there is no tradition of sea-voyaging literature in
Japan, whether in poetry or prose—at least, not in the sense of the sea
adventure narratives that we find in Europe and America.31 The sea
adventure narrative, which Cohen and Casarino argue Melville reworked to
new modernist ends in Moby-Dick, developed out of a particular
tradition—maritime mercantilism—that never developed in Japan. In the
Edo Period (1600-1868), when such a form would have been most likely to
take shape, the bakufu government forbid the construction of ships beyond a
certain size and heavily regulated contact and trade with foreign entities, a
system of relations now referred to as sakoku (closed country).32 But I would
argue that, even without a tradition of oceanic figuration, a maritime form
akin to Melville’s—what I refer to as the irony of the sea—can and did develop within Japan as part of a romantic response to the experience of modernity.

In 1890s Japan, a number of intellectuals responded to the uneven and alienating effects of early capitalist modernity through an embrace of the maritime frontier. In the expanse of its horizon, they found a limitless space against which they could measure the limits of their own enlightenment. In the obscurity of its depths, they witnessed the falsity of rational thought with its promise of a world made transparent to itself. In its waters, perceived as unchanging, they found a salve that could soothe the cultural fractures produced by a temporal experience increasingly dictated by historical notions of progress and advancement. In the decades to come, artists and writers would continue to respond to their modernity in and through the space of the sea. In so doing they forge a bond of kinship with Herman Melville and *Moby-Dick*, one of the world's major works in the romantic tradition of thinking and imagining the sea.

In *Moby-Dick*’s opening chapter, “Loomings,” Ishmael discourses on his reasons for going to sea. He describes the sea-voyage as his way of “driving off the spleen,” his “substitute for pistol and ball” (1:18). The sea, that is, provides an outlet for potential violence directed both against others and one’s own person. “There is nothing surprising in this,” Ishmael assures us, “If they but knew it, almost all men in their degree, some time or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings towards the ocean with me” (1:18). Ishmael asserts that all people share such feelings towards the ocean. But so many qualifying phrases punctuate his claim (i.e., “almost,” “in their degree,” “some time or other,” “very nearly the same”), underscored by the conditional nature of the entire statement (i.e., “If they but knew it”), that we are left to wonder to what extent, if at all, our feelings towards the ocean reflect his. Contrary to Ishmael’s words, then, there is something very surprising, even unsettling, in “this,” Ishmael’s vision of the sea.

And we should be surprised and unsettled by the sea as it appears in *Moby-Dick*. Over the course of the work it is figured in terms of salvation and ruin, freedom and imprisonment, hypnotic rhythms and brutal violence. The sea vexes us in our attempts understand it. As with the circles that so frequently describe its surface, it leads us round and round and round again. It is also a sea that finds its analogue in Melville’s language, that strange,
demented language that seems to take perverse pleasure in its complexity. It is this sea and those akin to it that I am interested in tracing over the course of this work.

“Loomings,” the opening chapter of *Moby-Dick*, provides us with an introduction to that language, a hint of the forms dimly perceived beyond the horizon. In it, we are invited to leave the safety of the shore. We are invited to go to sea.
Chapter One
The Late Meiji Oceanic Imaginary

The paintings of the Western-style artist Aoki Shigeru (1882-1911) offer an image of the sea as irony decades before the arrival of Herman Melville (1819-1891) or his *Moby-Dick* (1851) in Japan. In the early 1900s, Aoki repeatedly depicted scenes of myth set in or near the sea in an effort to transcend his modern moment and the widespread cultural change that it entailed. In many of his mythical works, the sea serves as a medium whose waters, seen as unchanged from prehistorical times, restore the ahistorical space of myth into the teleologically unfolding present. His paintings, however, also call attention to the operations of this medium through a rough, sketch-like style that animates scenes of myth by leaving them partial and incomplete. They illustrate, in their formal logic, how the sea as irony both participates in and works against romanticist discourse.

Aoki’s mythical sea paintings are a response to late Meiji efforts to define Japanese cultural difference through representations of the ocean. In the third decade of Meiji, romantic thought coalesced around an oceanic elementalism in which the geography of the Japanese archipelago offered intellectuals evidence of a cultural bond between the Japanese people and the sea that extended backwards into primordial times and forward into an inscrutable future. Writers and thinkers like Kōda Rohan (1867-1947), Kimura Takatarō (1870-1931), Saitō Nonohito (1878-1909), and Shimazaki Tōson (1872-1943) envisioned the ocean as a medium that offered access to a mythical horizon of experience from which the forces of history threatened to estrange them. In its waters, they discovered a space of cultural difference that could mediate against the growing pressures of modernity. This narrative, however, wherein the sea served as a repository of native culture and tradition, only became possible through the introduction of modern Western geopolitical conceptions of the sea. The very logic that underwrote the Meiji oceanic vision was, from the beginning, ironic. This irony was, moreover, an unreflected one—neither Rohan, Takatarō, Nonohito, nor Tōson were able to see the contradictions that underwrote their hydrotropic turn. Aoki shares much which these thinkers, but he also offers another vision—one of the sea as irony.

Aoki found in the sea a medium that could unite his world with the
lost mythical one he took as his subject. His works suggest, in contrast to other hydrotropic thinkers of his day, that the spatial bond between sea, race, and nation could only be formed through a carefully calculated fiction. As an artist whose imagination works according to an alogical mode of thought, Aoki finds kinship with Herman Melville. Kinship, here, does not refer to commonality of lineage or ancestry but to a relationship based on parallels in thought and affinities of form.

In the opening chapter, I distill, through an analysis of Aoki and his work, a vision of the sea as irony that binds artists (one literary and one visual) across two separate times and spaces. But this kinship offers more than resemblance; it offers an image of how a particular mode of thinking—the sea as irony—develops within a Japanese context as a critical response to romantic dreams of cultural difference.

Formation of the Meiji Oceanic Imaginary: The Sea and Japanese National Character

The sea in the Meiji Period was modern. Beginning in the mid-Meiji 20s, from 1892 to 1898, a new geopolitical imaginary emerged which viewed the maritime element and control of it as central to the formation of a strong and prosperous nation-state. No one was more responsible for this vision than the American Alfred Thayer Mahan (1860-1914) whose work, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*, captured the imagination of political thinkers around the world—including in Meiji Japan—almost immediately after its publication in 1890.1 Mahan transformed how the sea was conceived in the contemporary geopolitical imaginary. As Christopher Connery writes, he “configured the ocean into a primary spatial entity, [...] one with more strategic substance than the land itself.”2 In the opening chapter of *Influence of Sea Power upon History*, Mahan writes:

The first and most obvious light in which the sea presents itself from the political and social point of view is that of a great highway; or better, perhaps, of a wide common, over which men may pass in all directions, but on which some well-worn paths show that controlling reasons have led them to choose certain lines of travel rather than others. These lines of travel are called trade routes; and the reasons
which have determined them are to be sought in the history of the world.\textsuperscript{3}

In describing the sea as a highway crisscrossed with paths and routes, Mahan figured the sea as a space that, like its tellurian counterpart, could be appropriated and controlled. Mahan was not the first thinker to redraw the spatial order of the earth around the ocean—jurist-philosophers such as Grotius and Hegel had previously figured the sea as a crucial element in their global visions—but with the appearance of Mahan’s work the sea became, for the first time, a definite space that a nation must control and hold through its naval and merchant forces in order to prosper. It was this oceanic elementalism that came to dominate political discussions on the sea in late Meiji Japan.

Mahan’s thought became so widespread in Meiji Japan that by the late 1890s we can hear his voice in political writings, even if he was not directly referenced. Echoes of his voice are audible in Fukuzawa Yukichi’s (1834-1901) public calls for strengthening Japanese naval and merchant forces: “For a maritime nation to lack ships is the same as a person who has lost his legs—you cannot take one step outside.”\textsuperscript{4} For Fukuzawa, one of the leading political thinkers of his day, Japan’s natural geography dictated its national mode of being: as a maritime nation (\textit{kaikoku}) it should move out onto the open space of the sea. “Consider the location of our nation, surrounded on all sides by the sea,” he wrote, “We are in fact a natural trade nation, our rudder free and useful for going to any country, east, west, north, or south.”\textsuperscript{5} Meiji thinkers, drawn to Mahan’s thought, found in the natural geography of Japan the physical evidence for locating their nation within a modern oceanic world order. They read the uneven, ragged lines of Japan’s coasts as though they were the lines of a palm, and in the patterns they saw a fated maritime nation and global power. “Our coastline,” commented the anonymous author of \textit{Japanese of the Sea (Umi no Nihonjin}, 1895), “is complex in its bends, forming both capes and bays, peninsulas and coves. We have numerous large inlets and small ones. Truly, there is nothing to disqualify us from being a maritime nation.”\textsuperscript{6} The elemental oceanic vision that Mahan shaped provided Meiji thinkers with a geopolitical framework through which they conceived a new global order, but it was the geography of the nation that came to define the position that the Japanese nation-state
would occupy within in it.

It was a discussion of Japan’s topographical features with which Sora Genzaburō opened his two-volume *Maritime Nations* (*Kaikoku*, 1892), one of the earliest articulations of Mahan’s thought in Japan.

The grandness of coastlines, the superlativeness of location. Both have made us unsurpassed under heaven. How should we understand this? I ask you, does it not make of us a maritime nation? [...] Does it not make of us the highest ranking of great maritime nations in the world? Ah, it is in this way, indeed, that the heavens have bestowed upon our nation the framework for being the highest ranking of great maritime nations in the world.⁷

As an archipelago, Japan was a geographical space defined by its relation to the sea. But for those influenced by Mahan’s thought, this geographical fact yielded a geopolitical fantasy—that the modern Japanese nation-state had a rightful place within the unfolding oceanic order. The fantasy did not stop there: Mahan’s elemental vision, which also enveloped discussions of race and national character, inspired Meiji hydrotropes to imagine the Japanese as an ocean-going people.

In *Influence of Sea Power upon History*, Mahan ties sea power, its acquisition and development, to race and national character. Of all the maritime nations that he identifies, it is the Dutch and especially the English that he holds in highest esteem. They were the heroes in his oceanic vision and he graced them with terms such as “bold” and “enterprising,” the prized adjectives of mercantilism. Mahan describes their national character in detail:

But these two peoples, radically of the same race, had other qualities, no less important than those just named, which combined with their surroundings to favor their development by sea. They were by nature business-men, traders, producers, negotiators. [...] At home they became great as manufacturers; abroad, where they controlled, the land grew richer continually, products multiplied, and the necessary exchange between home and the settlements called for more ships.⁸
Mahan’s thought, which unites discussions of race and land, was a product of the modern geographical imagination, which understood man as shaping and shaped by the place that he occupied. This imaginary was, at its root, romantic, developing out of the romantic belief in the primordial relatedness of man and nature. The Dutch and English might have had a natural enterprising spirit, but it was the geographical layout of their land and its proximity to the sea that had emboldened them to stretch beyond the limits of their shore and out onto the open space of the sea. Mahan’s Japanese interlocutors absorbed the same language, reshaping it to fit the contours of their own nation and its history.

Adachi Shirōkichi, author of *Past Japanese Maritime Figures* (Kako ni okeru kaijō no Nihonjin, 1897), was one of those who immersed himself in Mahan’s language. In his history of the Japanese people and the sea, he wrote:

> Japan is a maritime nation. In the east, it takes as its pillow the endless Pacific Ocean; in the west, it wraps around the thousand waves of the Japan Sea; it extends from tip of the Bearing Sea to the north, down to just below the equator in south. [...] We can conjecture from our observations of this geographical form, so favorable in the position that it occupies, that the race residing thereupon must needs contain a naturally enterprising and competitive spirit.

Adachi repeats Mahan’s racial gesture, deriving from the geography of the nation the spirit of the Japanese people. His choice of adjectives is intentional, designed to echo Mahan. This discourse was not unique to Adachi alone; he shared it with other hydrotropic thinkers in the late Meiji Period. “How am I able to declare the Japanese race to be a people most suited to this great maritime nation?” the anonymous author from *Japanese of the Sea* asks, “Because the Japanese race is bold. Brave. Daring.” Takahashi Tetsutarō, a geographer turned hydrotrope, writing several years later in his *Treatise on Oceanic Aesthetic Appreciation* (Kaiyō shinbi ron, 1903), continues in the same vain: “Our ancestors were rich in daring, bold, powerful spirits, an enterprising people.” The oceanic elementalism that spread through the intellectual community in the late Meiji Period centered around a romantic logic that viewed national character in terms of geography.
It demanded incidence between the language used to describe the Japanese people and the language that shaped geopolitical discussions on the sea. It produced an ironic fantasy of the Japanese as a maritime people which hydrotropic thinkers traced back to the beginnings of their national history.

All of the major works published on the ocean during the late Meiji Period feature histories or historical discussions of the Japanese people in relation to the sea. *Japanese of the Sea* (*Umi no Nihonjin*, 1895), *Biographies of Great Maritime Nation Figures* (*Kaikoku ijin den*, 1896), *Past Japanese Maritime Figures* (*Kako ni okeru kaijō no Nihonjin*, 1897), *The History of the Sea* (*Umi no rekishi*, 1901), *The Great Japanese History of the Sea* (*Umi no dai Nihon shi*, 1903), and *Treatise on Oceanic Aesthetic Appreciation* (*Kaiyō shinbi ron*, 1903) work together to create a who’s who of Japanese oceanic voyagers, adventurers, and entrepreneurs that date all the way back to the ancient myths recorded in the *Kojiki* (*Record of Ancient Matters*, 712) and *Nihon shoki* (*Chronicles of Japan*, 720), viewed as the sourcebooks of Japanese native tradition. The lineage that these texts traced was part of an effort to record what the modern geographical imagination had made felt: that a particular region of the earth—in this case, the sea—reflected national and cultural identity. But as they rewrote their national history through the ocean, these same thinkers came across an ironic truth—that the bond between sea and people, like an object refracted in water, never lay exactly where they reached.

Those advocates of the Meiji oceanic elementalism invariably found the contemporary Japanese wanting in the same qualities they argued operated so powerfully in their ancestors. “Though our people are rich in the mentality of a maritime nation,” the ideologue Miyake Setsurei (1860-1945) observed in 1902, “they have yet to fully exhibit it.”13 “Our ancestors,” Takahashi Tetsutarō wrote one year later, “were rich in maritime thought, and bravely set out upon the seas but the people of the present day are most lacking in it.”14 Hydrotropic thinkers never questioned the bond between the Japanese people and the sea—they had no reason to. Geographical study of the Japanese archipelago, the examination of the contours of its coasts, told of a people that had always lived in proximity to the sea. Ishii Kendō (1865-1943), a historian fascinated by narratives of fishermen cast adrift, expressed these sentiments in the introduction to his *Biographies of Great Maritime Nation Figures* (*Kaikoku ijin den*, 1896). After describing the
geography of Japan and the oceanic sights that one can take in when gazing east, south, and west, he concludes, “Our topography is thus. How could our history go against it?” 15 The modernity of the sea and the historical consciousness bound up with it contributed to the belief that the Japanese shared an intimate ahistorical relation with the ocean. But the sea also reminded Meiji oceanic thinkers of that with which they had lost touch even as it promised to connect them with that which they had always been. It reminded them, in other words, of their own modernity. This was particularly true when they considered cultural formations such as literature.

Takayama Chogyū (1871-1902), writing in 1900 on the power he felt reading the poetry of Coleridge, Byron, Swinburne, and Heine, asked his readers, “Why is it that in our land, though a maritime nation, no poet of the sea has appeared? Is it because no one has perceived the beauty of the sea? I cannot believe that to be the case.” 16 The puzzlement that Chogyū expressed was only natural. As Takahashi Tetsutarō wrote in his Treatise on Oceanic Aesthetic Appreciation: “literature exists inseparably from geography and history.” 17 Geography and history were two components of a single process—the temporal unfolding of culture within a region of space—but that reality, what Chenxi Tang refers to as a “geographic reality,” did not mesh with the literary one. 18 Both geography and history had, in that sense, betrayed Chogyū. When he considered Japanese literature, all he perceived was his own lateness. European writers had long drawn poetic inspiration from the sea, but no Japanese writer or poet had done the same. Artists and poets in Japan had, of course, brought the ocean into their work before—in the world of pre-modern Japan, the ocean was an object of fear, a gateway to the other world—but none of them had conceived of it as an object of contemplation and wonder. 19 Chogyū was not the only Meiji intellectual who tried to come to terms with this strange twist of geohistorical fate.

Kōda Rohan, one of the most popular writers during the late Meiji Period, struck similarly dejected notes in his essay, “The Sea and Japanese Literature” (Umi to Nihon bungaku to, 1900). 20 He begins: “Our country is completely surrounded by the sea; a large number of our flourishing, prosperous cities, too, line its coast. [...] Considered along these lines, we should also expect our literature to have no small relation to the sea.” 21 Writing on the ocean was not a choice for Rohan but a cultural-geographical
imperative. Like Chogyū, Rohan expected to find some correlation between Japan’s geography and its cultural formations. He had to return to the period of myth where temporal terms such as belatedness had no hold before he could locate the connection that he sought.

In search for some instance of the sea that reflects the importance he invests in it, Rohan briefly explores all the branches of Japanese literature. He begins with waka poetry, the backbone of literary production for centuries, and declares it “unsuited to be the song of a people whose country stands on the sea.” 22 He touches upon all those forms that make up the long pre-modern canon—the Heian narratives, haikai poetry, songs of the noh and jōruri, and more—only to find that those works that do make reference to the sea evoke it solely in the context of trepidation or fear. “There is nothing,” he writes, “that depicts the true state of the ocean and allows the reader to feel or know the sight of the sea.” 23 Rohan blames history for this unfortunate development: first, and most recently, the closed-country policy of the feudal Tokugawa government that limited interactions with other countries and prevented boat construction beyond a certain size; and, before that, the tendency to locate the Japanese capital, the center of cultural production, well inland rather than near the sea. He reevaluates all of recorded history, construing it as a force that has carried Japanese literature off its natural course of development.

Rohan must travel all the way back to the border where history had yet to overtake myth before he finds the literature that he longs for—he returns to the Man’yōshū (Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves, late 8th c.), the first extant collection of Japanese poetry, and to the Nihon shoki and Kojiki. Do these works, Rohan asks, “not definitively prove that we Japanese—that is, we Japanese in times when the bonds of history had yet locked around us—were not always like those Japanese of later generations who only feared the sea?” 24 Only once he shakes off the bonds of history does Rohan find the correlation between sea and race that he had been searching for. The irony is that it was only a modern historical consciousness that could allow Rohan to reevaluate the past in these terms. This same historical consciousness allowed him to imagine a period in the future where history ceased to have control. “We are a bold people and cannot stand to live a peaceful life contained only to an island,” he writes, referencing the language of oceanic elementalism seeded by Mahan’s thought. “We will grow intimate
with the sea as the days and months pass. Some day hereafter a literature suited to be the product of a maritime nation will undoubtedly come.”25 As Rohan brings his essay to a close, he writes of the messianic day when history will yield to the cyclicality of the sacred. He imagines a future that returns to the mythological past and the imagined bond of intimacy that existed there between the Japanese people and the sea. This is the central conceit in the discourse on the sea in the third decade of Meiji—a romantic longing to unite geography with nation and race. Kimura Takatarō, active at the same time, continued the work that Rohan had begun, but went even further.

Rohan longed to find a relation between the Japanese people and the ocean that reflected the geography of the nation-state. In the long space of Japanese history he could find nothing that satisfied this desire so he returned a mythical past to an unwritten future. He holds out hope that the coming literature would, in its return to the sea, recover its status as an expression of what was native to Japanese culture. He reevaluated history through the lens of this desire but refused to rewrite it to fit the shape of his longing. Kimura Takatarō did not share Rohan’s hesitance. In his essay “Japanese Literary History of the Sea” (Umi no Nihon bungaku shi, 1902), Kimura weaves out of all these myths and legends a historical fable about the Japanese people’s relationship to the ocean.

Kimura opens his essay with a discussion of the Kojiki and the important role it has played in archiving the concept of the maritime nation for posterity. He writes:

In ancient times our country was isolated in the eastern seas, possessing no diplomatic or trade relations with any other countries. In spite of the fact that we had no notion of ourselves a maritime nation or as an island empire, in spite of the impossibility [of such a notion], it has been of extreme importance all the way to the present day. The fact that this notion is clearly recorded at the beginning of the Kojiki leads me to believe that the ancient record keepers documented this evidence for us to today.26

Although Kimura observes that the ancients could never have conceived of their land as a maritime nation, he attributes to them the prescience to
record this vision in the *Kojiki* for posterity’s sake. This “self-awareness,” as he calls it, permits the national space of Japan to exist unchanged from the ancient past to the present day, detouring around the *longue durée* in between. Such manipulation of material would characterize Kimura’s entire career as a scholar and earn him the rebuke of his fellow intellectuals. It does not mean, however, that Kimura was in his methods or his desires ahistorical; rather, he was historical in the extreme.

Kimura, throughout his career, exhibited a passion for the archive and for the reconstruction or, more accurately, the creation of sequences of events. But his understanding of history was one inflected by the romantic desire to re-shape and re-present the events of the past so that they reflected a unified legend of the nation. In his work, the nation is pulled out of the causality of history and dispersed across an ever-present, abiding now. His history of Japanese sea literature, as a result, can never fully enter the world written by history: it must instead hover on its edge. In the course of his essay, Kimura touches on the dance between Izanami and Izanagi that formed the Japanese archipelagoes; the story of Yamasachihiko’s journey to the Dragon King’s realm at the bottom of the sea; Emperor Jimmu’s expedition across the Inner Sea and to the eastern lands; and the tale of Princess Tachibana who cast herself into the raging ocean to appease the sea gods angered by Yamato Takeru’s crossing of the Hashirimizu Straits. In his history of sea literature, Kimura merges the mythological with the historical, retaining the former’s transhistorical meaning within the linear structure of the latter.

The sea could make such a logical leap possible because it was seen as unchanging, beyond the transformative powers of history. Through the borderlessness of the sea, a spatialized version of the abiding now, Kimura could trace out the national space of Japan. In that sense, the sea was less a material space and more of a mediating concept that supplied the nation with its own ontological guarantee. In his section on the *norito* prayers, with which his history stops, Kimura writes: “The self-awareness of Japan as a maritime nation existed in the mindset that founded the nation. The gods were, therefore, always aware of the concept of the place that is the sea, and the *norito*, which were recited before the gods, possessed, without a doubt, the deepest of thought with respect to the sea.” Kimura was interested in the ocean only insofar as it could connect him to that which the
experience of modernity deemed he must leave behind. Like the ancient
norito prayers that he wrote on, the sea itself had a magical power
(kotodama) that could propel Kimura around the straight line of history and
unite the time of the gods with his own.28

The sea could not only link the present to the past, but it could also
stretch across spatial distances spanning half the globe. In his massive
two-volume work, The Ancient History of Japan as Based upon Global
Research (Sekai-teki kenkyū ni motozukeru Nihon taiko shi, 1911-1912),
Kimura attempted to trace out the origin of the Japanese people. Comparing
the myths, language, and geography of Japan with those of the ancient West,
he concludes that the Japanese originated as a branch of Greco-Latins that
migrated across the globe before eventually arriving at the islands of Yamato.
One of the words that Kimura offers as evidence of this Greco-Japanese
lineage is umi, “sea.”

“The Greek people believed,” Kimura writes, “that the earth was
round, that at its center was land, and that around that land was the ocean,
formed in the shape of a woman’s breast. The center of that ocean was the
Umbo (umbi) and this they called Umbilicus maris. This term, umbi, was
passed down to us as umi, that is, as the Japanese word umi or umibe.”29 As
shaky as Kimura’s comparative philology is, it points to the power the sound
of a word had. Umi, cutting across space and time, could bring the Japanese
people and the Greeks together into a common lineage. The irony of such a
connection, however, was lost upon Kimura: he did not see that he could only
form a suprahistorical connection between sea and race through his own
historical formulation of it; nor did he see that he could only valorize the
mythical nation-space of Japan by tying it to the historicized navel of
Western civilization.

Kimura was not the only thinker whose interest in the sea carried
over to a fascination with the ancient Greeks. Takayama Chogyū located in
the ancient Greek language the sound that conjured up the essence of the
sea: “Of all the words that mean ‘sea’ the only one that contains the tones
that best suit the thing itself is the Greek thalatta.”30 And Saitō Nonohito,
Chogyū’s younger brother, adopted the Greek sea gods as though they were
Japanese deities. In his essay “The Sea and Human Life” (Umi to jinsei,
1903), he writes:
Ah, the sea! The same now as during the age of the gods. Wherefore the poets who, longing to hear Triton’s horn, crossed the ocean, far into the offing? The poets have long since passed away but do we not still hear Triton’s horn, just as it was in the age of the gods, reverberating between the waves of the tides?³¹

Nonohito goes on to reference the entire Greek hydromythological pantheon: Thaumas, Phorcys, Ceto, Nereus, and Poseidon. For those Meiji intellectuals like Kimura who wanted to raise the cultural space of Japan to the ranks of the Western powers, the ancient Greeks, as the seminal culture in the foundation of Western civilization, were a natural touchstone. But ancient Greece was also located at a time when myth flourished and history had only begun. The repeated invocation of Greek civilization and culture in the late Meiji 20s and Meiji 30s pointed to a collective desire to create a sanctuary for myth and legend in a world increasingly dominated by historical modes of thought.³² Aoki Shigeru, a painter fascinated by the sea, would turn to ancient India for the same reason. The sea was the mediating force that made these encounters possible, breaching the borders of time and dissolving the boundaries between cultures. This may seem at odds with the hydrotropic discourse in which the sea became the source of an unchanging Japanese cultural essence that reinforced the boundaries of the nation, but contradiction and paradox formed the logical grooves in the hydrotropic thought of the late Meiji Period. In the sea, Meiji intellectuals found an edge zone in which tensions and conflicts could be suspended. In its unchanging waters, they discovered a space that retained transhistorical meaning in a historical world.

Nonohito captured this transhistorical vision of the sea in “The Sea and Human Life.” In a hypnotic moment near the beginning of his essay which blends fantasy, myth, and science, Nonohito uses the sea to transport himself to the dawn of the universe.

How many thousands of years has it been since the world began? The gods, man, the fields, the mountains, all lashed by the black whip of Time have, like the falling spring blossoms, no destination nor the means to seek one. For as far as the light of the firmament extends, one sees only the flowing tides. They are unchanged since the age of
the gods, and storm and rage just like the sorrow, pain, and grief of this world. Ah, the sea! Even now its form is as in ages past. When the world began “the land was young, floating like oily and light liquids.” Scholars tell us that this form, owing to changes in the development of the nebulous mists, passed through brilliant, eruptive, radiant tides of fire and eventually arrived at the cooled world of the present day. Even now, in the grand ocean, we can glimpse vestiges of the evolution of the universe, the remains of the world from ancient times [...] that the poets dreamed of, drunk on the light of their ideals, when all was darkness and chaos.\textsuperscript{33}

Nonohito folds together an array of images that includes the poetic, mythic, and cosmological. He refers to the founding of the Japanese isles as recorded in the \textit{Kojiki} and \textit{Nihon shoki} and combines it with the formation of the earth as voiced by Sir George Darwin (1845-1912) in his lectures on the tides, and the moon’s origin and evolution.\textsuperscript{34} The workings of the sea dissolve the difference between these two registers—myth and science—yielding a soluble and smooth whole. It is this power that Nonohito calls upon when confronting history, the black whip of Time that cuts into the primitive bonds that once united man, gods, and nature alike. The experience of time in the modern world, an unwavering march toward an uncertain horizon, severs the individual from any sense of purpose and meaning. But in the sea, Nonohito found the means to heal the ruptures inflicted by the lash. In its waters, unchanged since the earth’s formation, he rediscovered the world before history, when everything existed as a protean mass, chaotic but coherent, unformed but unified. The sea, in other words, transformed the temporal horizon of history into a spatial one that kept forever suspended in view the meaning he found lacking in the modern world. The young Shimazaki Tōson, then a poet, would turn to the sea for the same reasons.

The sea appears in each of Tōson’s four poetry collections as a medium that propels the poet-traveler’s thoughts to a home which he can never work his way back to, no matter how long he journeys. In “Grass Pillow” (Kusamakura), one of the longer poems Tōson included in his first collection, \textit{A Collection of Young Herbs} (\textit{Wakanashū}, 1899), the speaker wanders alone through plains and moors in the dead of winter, eventually arriving at the edge of the sea.
In the morning, I lean back
on a rock at the edge of the sea
and gaze off toward my home, the capital
but only waves come back to me

The setting sun dyes the tides
of the lonely rocky beach

How alone, when the rough waves
break apart against the rocks
How sad, when the winter sun
returns home together with the tide

Gazing into the ocean, the traveler-poet thinks of the home that he has left behind, only to be reminded in the natural images of cyclicity—the waves returning, the tides going out, the ocean sun setting—of a return that he will never be able to make.

But Tōson does not end “Grass Pillow” or any of his other sea poems on this note of futility: he leaves them in states of suspension, pausing before movement can give way to the finality and futility of reality:

I climb on top a high large rock
and gaze out
has spring come? far off
eastern clouds, the sound of tides
the morning sunrise

“Grass Pillow” stops in the midst of transition—the poet senses the approach of spring, dawn has just broken. His yearning for home is also suspended, a temporal version of his spatial gaze that stretches out across the sea.

Two years later, in Tōson’s last poetry collection A Collection of Fallen Plum Blossoms (Rakubaishū, 1901), “Fruit of the Palm” (Yashi no mi) would repeat the same pattern. There, the discovery of a drifting coconut triggers, in the speaker’s mind, thoughts in of a home he has never known:
When I take the coconut, place it to my breast, 
renewed sorrow of drifting

I watch the sun set on the sea 
tears for a foreign home fill my eyes and fall

I think of the eight-layered tides 
When will the day come that I return home?37

Tōson’s poetic alter egos are the sad heroes of modernity, always knowing that they must go forward and can never go back.38 But in the endlessness of their journeys they find the relevance and meaning to sustain them, tangible in the tones of anticipation they express at the coming of spring, the light of dawn, or the feel of a coconut shell. The ironic form of the sea made such endings possible—the limitlessness of its space frees the traveler to recall his home but also reminds him of the distance that prevents him from ever reuniting with it.39

The sea functioned ironically in Tōson’s thought because it represented the home that modernity had cut him off from and which he could never find a way back to. “I am envious of those who were born on the shore,” he once wrote, “I have long desired to be someone born on the edge of the deep blue sea who, from the time that he clung to his mother’s breast, heard in his ears the sounds of the tides.”40 Tōson happened to have been born well inland, in what is now present day Gifu Prefecture, but he imagined himself reborn on the border of sea and land, a distance that he measures through the space dividing an infant’s hands from his mother’s breast. For many thinkers in the Meiji 30s, the sea recovered the space of a national home that never existed. For Tōson, it represented a home that he never had. In spite of the differences between their visions of the sea, Tōson shared with his fellow hydrotopes a fundamental ironic logic. This irony, however, underlies their thought and was never a method that they used to define it. Aoki Shigeru, the late-Meiji Western-style painter would use that irony to its fullest effect in his work.

Aoki Shigeru and the Irony of the Sea
Aoki Shigeru first gained notoriety through his paintings of mythical figures and scenes drawn from the *Nihon shoki* and *Kojiki*. His depiction of moments culled from myth and fable places his work within the genre of historical painting (*rekishiga*), a genre that dominated the Tokyo art world in the 1890s but began to give way to new modes of representation at the turn of the century. Artists working in the historical mode turned to the past, both historical and mythical, in an effort to create a visual narrative of cultural difference in the face of increasing Westernization. The desire for a cultural identity that intellectuals could call their own was, at its heart, a romantic one, and insofar as Aoki embodied this desire, the critical categorization of his work as the crystallization of the Meiji Romantic movement is not incorrect. But there are important ways in which Aoki was and was not a romantic. Aoki’s works, in their return to myth, echo the same longing of other painters in the historical mode, but they distinguish themselves in their form: a rough, sketch-like style that animates scenes of myth by leaving them partial and incomplete. It was in the element of the sea that Aoki discovered this form.

As with many other Meiji oceanic thinkers, Aoki found in the sea a medium that could restore the space of the mythical past in the temporality of the present. But in his desire for mythical return, Aoki plumbed the depths of the ideology at work within the sea. Even as his works express the desire to restore totality of meaning and identity through myth, they cast doubt on this very possibility through their emphasis on division, partiality, and separation. In the process, Aoki makes visible the ironic striations that gave shape to the Meiji sea. In contrast to other contemporary sea thinkers in the late Meiji, this irony does not merely underwrite Aoki’s thought; it is a method that he uses to define it.

Aoki had not yet discovered the sea when he painted *Escape from the Land of the Dead* (*Yomotsuhirasaka*, 1903; Figure 1), but the work already alludes to his fascination with its fluidity. The painting, which won the First Annual White Horse Prize in 1903, takes its subject from the story of Izanagi and Izanami that appears in the *Nihon shoki* and *Kojiki*. The two gods responsible for the creation of the Japanese archipelago, Izanagi and Izanami, were separated when Izanami died in childbirth. Distraught over this loss, Izanagi journeyed to *yomi*, the land of the dead, to bring her back. Aoki’s *Escape from the Land of the Dead* depicts Izanagi in the act of fleeing,
after he has broken his promise to Izanami and looked upon her rotting form. She pursues him, angry and shamed at having been seen, determined to keep Izanagi with her in the land of the dead where she resides with other female spirits (shikome) who have joined her in the chase.

Aoki visually interprets yomi as a watery world: the bodies of the female spirits float up in a twisted chain; and the form of Izanagi, surrounded by light, appears to be refracted, as though viewed through the medium of water. The painting achieves its liquidness through the breakdown of form into color, one of the principal techniques of Impressionism that Kuroda Seiki (1886-1924), the plein-air artist and proponent of Western-style painting in Meiji Japan, introduced while Aoki was a student at the Tokyo School of Art.

As a movement, Impressionism understood objects and their forms to be constituted by the light incident upon their surface. Form was a function of color, but color was only produced in the perception of reflected light as it struck the human eye. As Camille Mauclair, an art critic, Symbolist poet,
and supporter of the Impressionist movement, wrote:

Light reveals the forms, and, playing upon the different states of matter, the substance of leaves, the grain of stones, the fluidity of air in deep layers, gives them dissimilar colouring. If the light disappears, forms and colours vanish together. We only see colours: everything has a colour, and it is by the perception of the different colour surfaces striking our eyes, that we conceive the forms, *i.e.* the outlines of these colours.⁴⁴

Because Impressionist painters broke the light that joined surface to eye down into colors, their work possessed a rough quality that critics frequently interpreted as incompleteness. Although Aoki took his subjects in the world of myth rather than the outdoor scenes of modern life in which the Impressionists found theirs, he shared their methods: in *Escape* the figures are only half-formed, emerging onto the canvas through the play of liquid light and darkness. It is this partiality of form that animates the work, bringing myth to life and raising the dead that Izanagi failed to. But even as *Escape* breathes life into myth, it also stresses the impossibility of ever truly being able to return to it.

According to the *Kojiki*, Izanami could not return to the world of living because she had already eaten the food of *yomi*, binding her to its land. When Izanagi ignores her command and looks upon her countenance, he witnesses this bond in the maggots and other creatures that crawl out of her skin. Izanagi realizes at this moment that they can never be joined again. The structural layout of Aoki’s painting communicates the permanence of this separation by positioning Izanami’s arms in parallel to the lines formed by Izanagi’s left leg and back, the geometry of which emphasizes the fact that they will never touch the object for which they reach. In their unfulfilled touch, Aoki tells his own tale of a modern world that can only move forward and never go back. He reinforces this tale of separation by placing the viewer in the sloping path said to connect the world of the dead and the living—a border space, but one that can never be bridged.⁴⁵

Aoki himself was caught in this border, stuck between his quest to resuscitate myth in the modern world and the knowledge that such a task was impossible, trapped mid-way between the world above, filled with light
and absolute distinctions, and the dark void below, pregnant with significance but ultimately unknowable. The form of thought that gave shape to this vision was ironic. It was the sea that embodied this irony, just as it was the ocean sea that filled the cavernous space of *Escape*—the world of *yomi* was also known as *ne no kuni*, “the land of roots,” imagined to lie deep under the earth but also thought to exist somewhere beyond the horizon, at the bottom of the sea. Escape works like the seawater through which its figures emerge, as a medium that tries to bind the world of history and myth but cannot fully realize its aspirations in solid form. This was the alogical power of the sea that Aoki sensed in *Escape*. He would encounter it for the first time several months later, when he traveled to the Mera coast. Once he did, the methods and ideas at work in *Escape* coalesced around images of the ocean.

Aoki journeyed to the coast of Mera as part of sketching trip in the summer of 1903. During the trip, which lasted until autumn, he became fascinated by the sea and the lives of the fishermen and women who lived on its shore. In a letter he wrote to his friend, Umeno Mitsuo, we can hear the wonder in his voice: “This is the Mera of the *Man’yō*,” he wrote, referring to the portion of the Nara Period (619-794) in which the main body of poems included in the *Man’yōshū* were written, “Fragments of human history that never reached us from times long ago must surely have once been buried on this peninsula, beaten as it absorbs the brunt of the Kuroshio Currents.” The Mera coast formally introduced Aoki to the sea, the power of which he had already made reference to in *Escape*. A beachcomber on its shore, Aoki

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**FIGURE 2. Seascape, the Sea at Mera**  
(*Kaikei, Mera no umi*). 1903. Oil on canvas.
discovered hidden in its sand shards of history that offered up glimpses of a past he had, up to that point, only touched through the tales recorded in books. The fragments that he amassed in his imaginary scavengings come together in a series of seascapes that he painted during his stay.

Aoki’s seascapes continued to employ the Impressionist techniques that marked Escape, breaking form down into fragments of color (Figure 2). In their style and subject, they call to mind the work of Claude Monet (1840-1926), especially his Rocks at Port-Coton, The Lion Rock, Belle-Ile (1886). The temporal gap that separated the two artists’ work belies the interests that joined them: both shared a fascination with the primality of the coastal sea and the jagged rock forms that pierced its surface. In thick shades of earthy, reddish brown, both traced out the hieroglyphic patterns of seams and cracks that tell of the history of the earth. One finds these same rich colors at work in A Good Catch (Umi no sachi, 1904; Figure 3), Aoki’s representative work, which he began working on during his stay at Mera and submitted to the 9th Annual White Horse Competition the following year.

A Good Catch depicts two rows of men marching upshore, from right to left, as they haul their catch in from the sea. In their burnt-colored and roughly hewn bodies they recall the misshapen rocks of Aoki’s seascapes, the sketched lines that over-run their flesh equivalent to the veins of volcanic minerals that scar the stone. Their primal, earthen tones only reinforce the strikingly raw state of their forms: the features of the three men furthest to the right are only vaguely hinted at by the penciled frames that lie beneath the impasto; behind the man in the rear, we can see the faint, sketched outline of another figure, like an echo of his former self tracing his path in time; an extra leg emerges out of the man foremost on the left; the canvas also bleeds through his unpainted head; and a series of five horizontal lines that perhaps marked positions and measured proportions of the figures and their forms still cuts across the entire scene.

Given these qualities it perhaps comes as no surprise that critics at the time judged (and still do judge) A Good Catch to be an incomplete work. Escape was viewed as unfinished as well, but A Good Catch seemed to flaunt its incompleteness. One critic in the Miyako Newspaper wrote, “Yes, Aoki Shigeru’s A Good Catch, praised here and there in magazines and newspapers alike is certainly an interesting work, and the skill of an artist able to paint it is undoubtedly worthy of our attention, but A Good Catch is
not at all a complete work. Anyone looking at it must conclude it to be incomplete." Aoki had known since *Escape* that partiality of form and obscurity of figure could animate the dead. He put that same knowledge to work in *A Good Catch*, leaving form emergent because he dare not give the work the sense of ending that comes with completion. To do so would mean to go against the logic of myth, which denies the possibility of closure through ritual repetition.

Aoki suggests the circularity of myth in *A Good Catch*’s structural design: the fishermen grow steadily more distinct as they move toward the center, only to disintegrate again as they approach and step off the frame. The linearity of the procession, progressing from right to left, belies the circularity of scale, the roundness that Aoki committed himself to when he embraced the world of myth as his subject. But Aoki, in *A Good Catch*, does not only leave off the period that would end the work, he also leaves behind evidence of the process that went into the painting’s production.

The outlines of unformed figures, the remainders of erasings, the violently uneven brushstrokes—all the botches, flaws, and fragments that we find throughout point to the incompleteness of myth, but they also make
visible the process through which Meiji artists, writers, and thinkers—including Aoki himself—staged their return to it. In laying opening the work’s process for view, Aoki exposes the fiction behind it and the effort to create transhistorical meaning in a historical world. *A Good Catch* is, in other words, circular, both in its image and its logic, reaching out to touch the world of myth even as it reveals the falsity behind the desire.

The androgynous face of the young boy who stands fourth from the rear completes the circle. Both feminine and masculine in his features, he occupies neither gender but shuttles between both. His gaze, which draws our own, similarly acts as a “go-between,” as Ōshima Seiji observes, “a connection between the shore of that provisional world and the shore of this one.”

But the boy’s stare must first break the boundary between the viewer and the viewed in order to connect. In his gaze, we encounter a subjectivity, a conscious awareness that disrupts the continuousness of the mythical plane that the painting tries to establish.

In the world of myth, looking is associated with transgression and the acquisition of knowledge best left unknown. When Izanagi looks at Izanami he knows that they can never reunite. In *A Good Catch*, in the act of looking and being looked at we, the viewer, are reminded of the same. The painting, that is, cuts us off from the world of myth even as it reproduces it. We are made aware of our gaze in the stare of the boy that reflects it, and we are made aware of our knowledge in his eyes, which contrast with the unformed sockets of the other men, who continue on, unseeing and unknowing, blind but blissfully so. *A Good Catch* works through this irony, through an irony that can only be termed the irony of the sea.

The sea, whose waves break at the fishermen’s feet, was a place where the living and dead could meet again. In *A Good Catch*, it lies between the sky and shore, its horizon offering another ruled line against which to judge and measure the position and proportion of form. In that sense, it functions as a medium that brings form and figure to life by revealing its falsity. Aoki’s work could only reformulate myth by showing the viewer the distance that separated him from it. Aoki continued to return to myth in the years immediately following *A Good Catch*, but it would not be until 1907 and *Paradise under the Sea* (*Wadatsumi no iroko no miya*; Figure 4) that he returned to the sea.

*Paradise Under the Sea* takes as its subject the legend of
Hikohohodemi no mikoto, also known as Yamasachihiko, who journeyed to the palace of the Dragon King at the bottom of the sea in search for a fish-hook which he had borrowed from his older brother, Umisachihiko, and lost. When he descended to the sea floor, Yamasachihiko encountered Toyotama-hime, the daughter of the Dragon King. Toyotama-hime and Yamasachihiko were drawn to one another at first sight and married shortly thereafter, with the Dragon King’s blessing. Aoki’s painting visualizes the
moment that Yamasachihiko and Toyotama-hime first meet on the ocean floor. Yamasachihiko sits in the tree of the sea palace and Toyotama-hime (the woman in the red gown) offers him a drink from the vessel that she and her servant (the woman in bluish white) have filled with water.

Although it draws its source from myth, just many of Aoki’s previous works did, Iroko no miya signals a significant departure in Aoki’s style. Aoki had garnered a reputation as a painter who did not, or perhaps could not, complete his paintings—a reputation firmly fixed when he submitted A Good Catch in 1904. But in Paradise, he took his work to a level of completion that he had not previously sought. Ishii Hakutei (1882-1952), a Western-style artist and art critic who reviewed the work in the Yomiuri Newspaper, took note of this: “Unlike the works that Aoki has submitted in years past, this one is more complete and, yet, at the same time, it has lost its uninhibited passion: the brushwork brings it to a halt and the use of color diminishes its life.”

Ishii recognized the reciprocal relationship between incompletion and totality, and how it functioned in Aoki's works. His comments suggest that what separates Paradise from Aoki’s earlier style is that it no longer suggests form, but realizes it.

To introduce completion to the realm of myth meant going against the repetition that defines it. It meant that one ironically introduces time to a space that, through the ritual nature of periodic return, had abolished it. Still other ironies, what critics have understood as flaws, fill the work. Ōshima Seiji, with his critical scalpel, cuts neatly into the painting and peels back its outwardly rational surface to expose the botches:

The upper half of Toyotama-hime’s body, from the waist up, does not join its lower half correctly. From the navel up she faces almost completely sideways only to suddenly shift to a forward-facing position. And that is not all. The depiction of Toyotama-hime is concentrated in the profile of her head and her feet, and as a result the balance of her overall portrait collapses. This applies not only to Toyotama-hime but to the entirety of the picture, which is to say that the picture comes together by suturing together individual depictions, leaving scattered throughout the failures and contradictions that result from their interactions.
Contradiction was the method through which Aoki worked, and *Paradise* did not diverge from that. What Ōshima dismisses as flaws emerged out of the tension between *Paradise*’s methods and its aims, between the quest to search for a way back, beyond the modern, and the impossibility of the task. This same tension between method and desire led to another gaff: the gaze between Yamasachihiko and Toyotama-hime which, misaligned, refuses to meet.\(^{59}\)

In the unmet gaze between Yamasachihiko and Toyotama-hime, Aoki hints at the untold moment when they will be driven apart. Toyotama-hime, pregnant with Yamasachihiko’s child, accompanies him when he returns to land and his home. As she prepares to give birth, she forbids Yamasachihiko to look upon her, just as Izanami did of Izanagi. And like Izanagi, Yamasachiko proves to be just as incapable of keeping a promise—he looks and sees her true form—a crocodile (shark?) that, embarrassed at being outed, slides back into the sea, never to return. Yamasachihiko’s story does not only contain echoes of Izanami’s tale; it is another iteration of it. In that sense, *Paradise* figures as, not only part of the larger effort to recover transhistorical meaning through a return to myth, but as a private return to the archetype that began Aoki’s artistic career.

Aoki’s works prior to *Paradise* reproduced myth through a partial and fragmentary method that hinted at an inconclusive realm which transcended the linear time of modernity—but these were only hints. Like the sea to which he continuously returned, Aoki’s artistic method could facilitate contact but not touch, it could reference but not fully reveal. Aoki claims to have taken three years to develop *Paradise*, a period of time during which he repeatedly dove into the sea (including one trip to the seafloor), and studied types and characteristics of seaweed and shellfish.\(^{60}\) It is not a coincidence that, given Aoki’s embrace of such empirical methods, *Paradise* is the one work in which we perceive the atmospheric medium the least. Even though we are deep underwater, the sea appears only in solid forms: bubbles, seaweed, and the languid line that the servant girl’s fabric traces. But in the process of realizing form, Aoki distorted it. Aoki froze these forms in order to capture the totality of myth, but he could only work by first fragmenting them. This conflict between method and desire transformed Aoki’s sketch-like style into a fatal flaw that disrupted his faith in the ability of myth to transcend the time of the profane. The result was torsos that did
not match and eyes that did not meet. Aoki abandoned his historical painting after *Iroko no miya*, but he never abandoned the belief that sea could place him within reach of the totality that myth had so tauntingly promised. He continued, even throughout the last years of his life, to return to scenes of the ocean.

Aoki ventured back to the ocean in works like *Fishermen Returning Home* (*Gyofu banki*, 1908), *Boats at Anchor in Moonlight* (*Gekka taisenzu*, 1908), and *Landscape, Amakusa* (*Amakusa fūkei*, 1909). The scenes that he depicted, however, were no longer inspired from the tales that he found in the *Kojiki* or *Nihon shoki*, but from everyday life. Not even *Fishermen Returning Home*, with its overtones of *A Good Catch* recalls the world of myth—only poverty, labor, and exhaustion. In their subjects—fishermen and women returning with their catch, sailors working to secure their boat for the night, and women shell divers on the shore—they are genre paintings, scenes of common men and women taking part in equally common tasks.

Perhaps it is the ordinariness of the subject matter that has led critics to footnote these paintings in their discussions of Aoki and his career. One calls them “a bore.” Another believes that they are just “not very good.” They all read into them the weariness and languor that appears to have set in as Aoki wandered Kyūshū in the last years of his life. Certainly destitution, loss of name, family, and health are enough to explain the shift in Aoki’s artistic production. But these paintings, in their styles, express Aoki’s desire to work out a compromise between the incompleteness of form that characterized his earlier works and the coherence that he tried to achieve with *Paradise under the Sea*.

*Boats at Anchor in Moonlight* and *Landscape, Amakusa* both make use of Impressionist techniques but, as Dan Kazuo has noted, they all display a level of coherence that contrasts with the violent style that marked Aoki’s early career. The early streaks and slashes of paint and pencil are replaced here with carefully ordered strokes that give shape to desolate scenes. The emptiness of space points to Aoki’s realization that one cannot easily touch that for which one longs. Like Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962), who began to develop his folklore studies in 1900 when he visited rural towns throughout Japan as part of his job with the agricultural administration, Aoki looked to scenes of the folk for hints of the past that threatened to disappear in the drive towards modernization. It was not a coincidence
that the scenes he looked to lay along the coast—the sea continued to offer up fragments of the transhistorical world in the present, and the fishermen and women shell divers dwelled closer to it than anyone else.

Aoki’s final painting before he succumbed to consumption in the spring of 1911 was *Morning Sun* (*Asahi*, 1910; Figure 5). This was Aoki’s last look at the sea. In contrast to the violence of the seascapes that he painted some six years earlier, *Asahi’s* sea is calm and tranquil. The entire painting plays to this emotion, drawing our gaze across the flatness of sea and clouds, and towards the crown of light that emanates from the hypnotic dot that is the sun. The work locates its center there, sheltering itself within that perfect sphere from the transience embodied by the sea, which rolls on, as it always has. In its evocation of the tension between time and its passage, *Asahi* continued the struggle that had defined Aoki’s brief career—between the desire to go beyond one’s historical moment and the knowledge that one must always be bounded by it—and it stopped there, open and unended.

Interest in the sea did not come to end with Aoki and his work. As Ichikawa Masanori has written:

At the start of the Bunten [Salon], which began in 1907, we notice a number of works that depict life along the shore or works that bring the sea into their frame: Nakamura Tsune [1887-1924], Nakazawa Hiromitsu [1874-1964], Minami Kunzō [1883-1950], Imamura Shikō [1880-1916], Tsuchida Bakusen [1887-1936], Ono Chikukyō [1889-1979], and, though its intent differs, even Wada Eisaku's *Nanpū* [South Wind, 1907]. Although they differ in their range, it is possible to regard their roots as the same [....] As the other worldliness of the countryside vanished under the increasing normalization that took place after the Russo-Japanese War [1904-1905], [artists] turned to the sea, which preserved a protean form, and discovered a people that existed on the far side of history, cut off from the vicissitudes of the nation.65

What Ichikawa describes is the discovery of the folk. In the scenes of village life along the shore, artists in the late Meiji and on into the Taishō Period (1912-1926) found living symbols of the nation. The sea is usually placed in the background of these works, sometimes filling it and sometimes only
visible as a thin patch of blue on the horizon. It is always quiet and still.

Takahashi Tetsutarō, in his closing chapter of _Treatise on Oceanic Aesthetic Appreciation_, paints a slightly different scene: “Walk just outside of Tokyo city. The spray from the dark blue waves will be as mist to your eye. Is this not Tokyo Bay? There are speeding warships spewing black smoke, there are merchant vessels. The far off Bōsō peninsula wraps protectively around the scattering of white sails nearby. Suddenly you see—the dancing of small fish between the waves, together with the sprightliness of their sounds.”66 A single white sail may occasionally dot the surface of the sea in paintings from late Meiji and into the Taishō, but it is, generally speaking, a tranquil surface devoid of activity, a far cry from the bustling space that Takahashi describes above. Yanagita Kunio wrote that “after we entered Meiji, the view of the sea shifted into something truly spectacular […] the objects moving over it grew and the objects that held still decreased. Boats that once seemed to sleep away half their lives waiting long days for the wind and the tides now became an unpleasant phenomenon known as mooring.”67 The sea that artists depicted was one that the passage of time had erased. The sea was already modern, its surface filled with warships spewing smoke and merchant vessels ready to ply their trade.

The modernity of the sea was something with which Takahashi and others were all too aware. It was both the root cause of their feelings of belatedness and the potential solution to their fears of being left behind. They knew the role the sea played in the current spectrum of geopolitical

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Oil on canvas.
order, and that Japan's geography placed it squarely in the section of densest power. Uchimura Kanzō (1861-1930), channeling the voice of Hegel, wrote that, “History begins with the mountains, it passes through the plains and moors, and ends in the sea.” Takahashi would have agreed. So, too, would have Rohan, Takatarō, and Nonohito. They were, in that sense, no different from the artists who, in restoring the sea’s horizon to a flattened and empty expanse, yanked themselves out of the forward march of linear time. That the sea could provide both a gateway forward and an escape hatch back is ironic. It was this irony that the paintings of Aoki Shigeru made visible. And it is this irony that Aoki shares with Herman Melville and *Moby-Dick*.

Aoki never encountered *Moby-Dick*. He died over a decade before Melville’s work arrived on Japanese shores. But if he had, he would have immediately recognized in Melville’s artistic imagination a kinship with his own. Both men shared a dualistic philosophy of mind that searched for unity and coherence through paradox and contradiction. Their desires were romantic even if their methods were not. We feel this irony most powerfully in their depictions of the sea. For Aoki, as for Melville, the sea is figured as an edge zone that reveals the limits of experience and knowledge even as its horizon hints at a totality that lies just beyond. It is Aoki’s work, however, which gestures to the logic of mobility that underwrites the sea as irony: in his paintings, the oceanic edge is figured as a border space where the dead and the living come together, if only for a moment, before they are forced once again to part. The sea as irony traces similar patterns of encounter and separation as it travels from one generation to another, from Melville to Aoki and beyond, in strange arabesques of filiation. Decades after Aoki’s death it would find its way to Abe Tomoji (1903-1973), a translator, scholar of British literature, and fiction writer, who became the primary interlocutor of Herman Melville and *Moby-Dick* in 1930s Shōwa Japan.
In 1927 Taketomo Sōfū (1891-1954) published the first essay on Herman Melville (1819-1891) in Japan. A poet and one of the foremost Japanese scholars of British literature at the time, Taketomo joined a trend of European specialists who shared a growing interest in American literature as something other than a poor imitation of its colonial parent, England. Taketomo’s interests, however, did not prevent him from writing of the 19th century American writer as though he should have been a contemporary 20th century Japanese novelist. Regarding *Moby-Dick* (1851), he wrote:

> Though this novel is undoubtedly based on factual experiences, it is finally, in its expression, too much a poem; it leans too far towards ‘Life as it ought to be,’ rather than ‘Life as it is’ [...] What saves the work from near-failure is partially owed to the author’s earnest philosophical attitude and to the fact that a large number of the events included within it were perceived through personal experience.

Taketomo believed that the novel should represent everyday life as the author has directly experienced it in a simple, unadorned prose style reflective of that reality. Scholars like Taketomo had come to believe that this form was the same one practiced by writers in Europe and the standard for all fiction. This autobiographical form, referred to now as the I-novel (*shi-shōsetsu*), continued to hold great sway in 1927, and for Taketomo it was a template against which he judged Melville. In so doing, he managed to remake Melville into an already interpreted object, refusing to meet the challenges that Melville presented. The white whale had arrived on Japanese shores, but circumspectly.

Over the next seven years, the autobiographical form of fiction against which Taketomo held *Moby-Dick* gradually lost its elite position as the dominant mode of writing. It gave way, briefly to proletarian fiction which was in turn buried under the weight of government suppression. The loss of a dominant mode of writing, however, was not the main challenge confronting writers and intellectuals at the time. The challenge, rather, came
in the form of a more fundamental problem: what to do with a language that no longer seemed capable of representing the complexity of modern lived experience.

The literary language that writers had inherited, one which had developed through translation and experiments with new forms of expression in the late 1880s and into the early 1900s, had long been viewed as a transparent means of expressing the world and the authorial subject who observed it. But this romantic understanding of language and the realist literary practices that grew up around it were called into question in the late 1920s. The critic Kobayashi Hideo (1902-1983), for instance, debuted on the literary scene in 1929 with what was, in part, a caution to those who might forget the material nature of language in favor of a realist vision of it as pragmatic utilitarian form. “As their reward people have gained a sense of enlivened social relations,” Kobayashi wrote, “but as punishment, language has usurped their rules and their magic, ruling over them in the form of multiple designs. Now, the poet who dares practice the magic of language is forced to first master it.”

Kobayashi, in his highly stylized mode of critical writing, forced his readers to confront the materiality of language—the designs that he refers to above. In so doing, he helped reveal the realist vision of language, with its emphasis on social utility and unmediated communication, as one which could no longer be sustained. But the rejection of the inherited realist form in turn opened up anxieties about the very ability of language to render the world and the self that moved through it. It cast into doubt the once-assured status of the writer and the practice of literature, producing a crisis that reached its peak in and around the year 1934, the same year that Abe Tomoji (1903-1973) published his critical biography on Herman Melville. It was in the context of this crisis that Abe grasped the American author, and feared him.

Abe Tomoji was the first literary scholar in Japan to seriously test the waters of Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*. Through his criticism and (much later) the act of translation, he did more to introduce Melville to Japan than any other scholar of his generation. But his kinship with Melville was one that was always fraught with tension. Abe, a critic and writer active from the late 1920s through the 1960s, held on to a particular vision of the subject that had grown up out of the romantic-realist past. In confronting
Moby-Dick’s irony of the sea, he discovered a work whose circular logic, which eroded notions of romantic correspondence and transparency of language through paradox and contradiction, had the power not only to question the status of the subject but could easily unravel it. Abe, deeply committed to the belief in the self as an autonomous whole, was not willing to go so far. Through readings of Abe’s criticism and fiction, I argue that Abe sensed the challenges that Melville and the sea as irony posed to the romanticist notions of language and self around which modern Japanese literature had settled, but that he could not critically engage Melville without questioning his own worldview and the romantic assumptions that shaped it.

The Sublime Experience of Moby-Dick: Abe Tomoji and the Early Critical Reception of Herman Melville

In his preface to Melville, Abe wrote of the first time that he read Moby-Dick at his childhood home in Okayama.

I cannot express how deep an impression it left on me. From that day forward, as I continued to read his other works, Melville came to envelop me like the shadow of a great mountain. In all likelihood it will always be this way. It is for that reason that I’m but a small being standing in that shadow. There is no power that could ever adequately illuminate the shape of that spectacular mountain [...] the summit, the deep valleys, the dark woods, and the unfathomable crags are surrounded by heavy clouds and fog, and will not allow people to approach easily (M 1-ii).6

This is Melville as a sublime landscape. A towering mountain that refuses to fully reveal himself, Melville is both intimidating and bewitching, frightening Abe with his unfathomable power and tempting him to come forward and approach. We catch echoes of this language throughout Melville and the numerous other essays that Abe wrote on Melville and Moby-Dick over the course of his life. In Melville’s opening chapter, Abe writes that Melville “is something like a lonely, precipitous mountain that transcends time and space” (M 2). He continues in the same vein when, writing on
Melville’s reception in the 19th century, he comments that readers “were likely too close to the massive mountain that is Melville to be able to fully appreciate his strange and gloom-ridden form” (M 94). In 1969, in one of the last essays he would ever compose on Moby-Dick, Abe wrote: “this [work] has a unique personality, even among some of the world’s greatest novels. It is, in a sense, a great and lonely mountain peak, standing far above the other mountains in the range, displaying its singular, strange, and impressive form.”

In repeatedly figuring Melville and Moby-Dick as a mountainscape, Abe references that which exceeds—and exposes the limits of—representation. He confronts the beyond of representation, that point at which the subject fails in its ability to adequately figure the full form of its sensual experience. The experience of the sublime is, in that sense, always a dangerous and confrontational one: unable to comprehend the object of encounter in its fullness, the subject glimpses the painful potential of its failure. The experience of the sublime, however, does not end there. In confronting the indefiniteness and impossible plurality of that which evokes the sublime, the subject figuratively reduces that overwhelming excess down to a single force. This compensatory move enables the subject to exult in its ability to, as Neil Hertz has written, “think a totality that cannot be taken in through the senses” and ultimately recoup its status as a whole, unitary self. This is the sublime turn, and it explains how Abe’s language in the passage above reverberates so intensely with fascination as well as fear.

In “Dark America” (1934), an essay Abe composed shortly after completing Melville, he reflects on this odd tension that Melville and Moby-Dick evokes in him:

There were a great many monsters in 19th century America. Poe and Whitman were two, but Melville was far more complex than either of them. When I think of a being like this, of works like [Moby-Dick], the place of America appears to me as an incomprehensible land [...] I’m constantly reflecting on why I’m pulled in by such writers. Is it my own weakness? Is it my own pretense? ... Whatever the reason, I’ve come to think that it wouldn’t be all that bad to devote a year, two years, or even five to the study of such a writer and his works.
Melville's freakish form, which Abe tellingly doubles as a metaphor for America itself, functions as another iteration of the sublime. And as sublime, it both scares Abe off and draws him in. The tension between fear and fascination inherent in the sublime would underwrite Abe's entire relationship with Melville. In his criticism of Melville, this tension leads Abe to move from acknowledgment of the potential of Melville's work to reveal the radical negativity of the subject—that is, the way in which the subject is always founded on its inability to represent the object—to the repression of such knowledge in favor of a tragic reading that recoups a residual romantic vision of the self as unitary, transparent, and autonomous. Abe shared this tendency with other scholars of the Melville revival—Raymond Weaver, John Freeman, and Lewis Mumford—whose works he read and whose critical mistakes he repeats.

As William Spanos has argued, Weaver, Freeman, and Mumford came to Melville because they were interested in the critique that Melville's life and his works offered of the Puritan-capitalist dynamic that informed American cultural identity in the mid-19th century. “The revivalist critics,” Spanos writes, “represented Melville’s time (and their own) from an elitist—essentially humanist—perspective that attributed the vulgar materialism of the age to the abstractive, reductionist, and normalizing (that is, antiartistic) essence of Puritanism. They thus also represented Melville’s ‘withdrawal’ from the American literary scene as a consequence of his alienating cultural context.”10 The modernist aesthetics of the revivalists rejected the form of realism that had enjoyed privileged status in the mid- and late-19th century—they “chose to celebrate precisely that differential speculative extravagance of style, form, and content which, in the eyes of Melville’s early critics, interrupted the promise latent in the documentary veracity of his first romances.”11 In the process of rehabilitating Melville and his works, however, the revivalists reinscribed the exact Puritan logic that they sought to repudiate. They wrote of Melville as an autonomous genius, a humanist reconfiguration of the Puritan consecrated self which sought to secure and maintain its sovereignty through the ordering of difference. And they wrote of Moby-Dick as a tragedy, a form that recognized the demoniac forces of modernity only to subsume them in its drive towards the tranquil rest that follows closure. Abe Tomoji did the same.

Abe was first introduced to Melville's work by Edmund Blunden
(1896-1974), a British poet and literary scholar who taught at Tokyo Imperial University when Abe was a student there in the 1920s. According to Abe, Blunden, in one of his lectures, grouped Melville’s *Moby-Dick* with Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* and Shakespeare’s *King Lear* as one of the three greatest tragedies written in the English language. The “great majority of critics during and immediately after the revival,” Spanos writes, “conceptualized tragedy more in visionary terms than as a dramatic genre and thus in applying the name to *Moby-Dick* overlooked or excused its ‘erratic’ form. Despite its structural digressiveness, they found that in the end the novel fulfilled the thematic imperatives of ‘tragic vision.’”12 This tragic vision was, according to Spanos, informed by earlier critics like Matthew Arnold who imagined tragedy in chiefly Apollonian terms. In the hands of critics in the 1920s, it became a form that dissolved dissonance leaving, in its wake, the quiet solace of tranquil harmony. In reading *Moby-Dick* as a tragedy, Blunden joined Melville revivalists like Raymond Weaver in shaping the work to fit this tragic vision.13 Abe repeats this anecdote at the beginning of each of his essays on Melville and *Moby-Dick*. It is the origin story of his encounter with Melville, and it framed his conception of the work. But in following Blunden, Abe repeated the revivalist critics’ problematic reading of Melville and *Moby-Dick*.

For Spanos, reading *Moby-Dick* in these terms is criminal: it leads to deterministic readings that ignore *Moby-Dick*’s errant form in favor of a unified teleological vision that resolves conflicts and willfully affirms a logocentric conception of the world. Spanos, however, is perhaps not generous enough in his critique of the Melville revivalists. In order to make his argument, he deliberately omits discussion of D.H. Lawrence’s *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1929), which exposes the ways in which Melville and other writers of the American renaissance explored the underside of the Western metaphysical tradition. Abe, who turns to Lawrence repeatedly in the course of *Melville*, offers hints throughout that he, too, recognizes such errant elements in *Moby-Dick*. He associates Melville, for instance, with Rabelais, Dante, Blake, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy, indicating, as Katō Yūji has observed, his understanding of Melville’s place in the subversive genealogy of Western literature.14 But insofar as Abe follows the critical tradition that reads Melville—his life and his work—tragically, he also avoids, rather than confronts, the possibilities of
Melville’s text.

Echoing Weaver and Mumford, Abe reads Melville as an outsider who struggles for expression in a world not yet ready for someone with his habit of mind.15 His Melville is lonely and depressed, unhappy in his marriage and in society, but determined to find meaning in life through his works. He repeats the revival narrative of Melville as a writer who gradually grew out of the autobiographical realist mode so favored by the American Puritan tradition, and into a speculative mode of fiction that experimented widely with style, form, and content. Abe identifies the peak of Melville’s writerly powers in *Moby-Dick*, which he introduces as “the coalescence of all elements of Melville’s works [up to this point], and one with far more complexity, depth, and subtlety” (*M* 70). The works that follow in its wake never seem to quite measure up. “At its best” *Pierre: or, the Ambiguities*, which followed *Moby-Dick* in 1852, “achieves deep philosophical mediations like those seen in *Moby-Dick* but, at its worst, is as insipid and inconsistent as a work of popular fiction” (*M* 70). *The Confidence-Man: his Masquerade* (1857) receives mention, but only in passing.

The remainder of Melville’s life, the story of which Abe tells in a chapter tellingly entitled “Purgatory, Pessimism,” is the tale of a solitary man who abandoned hope of ever being understood. “Melville was already fully aware of the fact that he could in no way appeal to a society from which an untraversable abyss separated him. He, the deepest of souls, no longer addressed the world, knowing that, even if he did, society would only point out to him the imperfect shadows in his thinking” (*M* 94). And, in spite of the fact that Melville wrote prolifically throughout his life, Abe traces the overdetermined trajectory of Melville as a writer who all but ceased production after *The Confidence Man*: “After 1857, Melville’s life was a monotonous, long twilight. He would live until 1891, the age of 72, and so only a little over half his life had passed, but hereafter he lived in a world of dimness where nothing remarkable happened” (*M* 116). Finally, Abe rhetorically gestures to the soothing logic of the tragic vision itself when he imagines, at the end of Melville’s life, the blissful closure of reconciliation: “We would like to believe that there was some glimmer of peace at Melville’s end. He died at 104 East 26th Street in New York on September 28, 1891. His wife, two daughters, and a scant number of relatives attended the funeral” (*M* 133). Decades later, in 1958, the literary scholar and intellectual
historian Terada Takehiko (1916-2008) would use a more radical, Dionysian version of tragedy to frame his discussion of Melville, *Moby-Dick*, and *Pierre*. But for Abe, following Weaver and Mumford in 1934, Melville could only exist as the tragic outsider consigned to pursue the alienating demands of his artistic genius.

The critical reading of Melville as a tragic writer in the 1920s was, as Spanos has noted, reflective of a larger interest in tragedy itself. I.A. Richards and other modernist critics such as Herbert Read and Aldous Huxley, all of whom Abe read with keen interest, viewed tragedy as “a cathartic cultural form the dialectical/teleological economy of which enacts [...] a sublimation of the conflicts of actual and immediate individual and collective human experience.” The tragic was, in other words, the one form “capable of recuperating the psychic discordances precipitated by being-in the fragmented modern world.” But tragedy was also that which produced an atmosphere toxic to irony, smoothing over the bumps and knots left behind by any fragmentary or paradoxical work such as *Moby-Dick*. Abe turned to a similar tragic form in his own scene of writing.

As a major critical voice in the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s, Abe joined a chorus of writers and thinkers who argued against the realist forms of fiction—figured chiefly as the autobiographical (I-novel) and socialist novel—that had dominated the literary community for decades. The repudiation of the established modes of expression was, at the same time, a rejection of the literary language at their heart, one which held the promise of direct and unmediated contact with the world of perception and knowledge. This modernist moment gave rise, in turn, to a crisis in representation—a perceived gap between concepts and the truth they were meant to denote, between language and the reality that it was meant to represent. With the breakdown in the bond between language and the world, reality itself appeared to collapse. This collapse assumed various forms, including the perceived loss of the home or native place. Kobayashi Hideo famously described this feeling in his essay, “Literature of the Lost Home” (*Kokyō o u Shinatta bungaku*, 1933), published one year before *Melville*. “It is, in a manner of speaking,” Kobayashi wrote, “as though I were wholly unable to grasp what it means to have been born in Tokyo in spite of having been born in Tokyo; or, again, it is the sort of uneasy feeling that I myself have no home.” For Kobayashi, fictional spaces like the desert in the film *Morocco*
had come to stand in for reality—his native Tokyo—which he believed was already lost. Kobayashi found, in spite of himself, “an unbelievably powerful appeal” in works like \textit{Morocco}, which offered an image of “human lives that played out free of contradiction.”\textsuperscript{22} “And this appeal,” he observed, “awakens feelings of intimacy, not for the landscape of Ginza, but for a Moroccan desert which we have never laid eyes upon.”\textsuperscript{23}

Kobayashi, one of the foremost literary and cultural theorists in the 1930s, responded to the crisis of representation through an inversion of the crisis itself. If language was now revealed as mediative, a crude and imperfect material capable of only artificially bringing forward the things in the world, then he would embrace that artificiality. He and other modernists—Kawabata Yasunari, Yokomitsu Riichi, Kataoka Teppei, and Yasuda Yojūrō, just to name a few—rejected the inherited form of realism, which made the truth claim that representational experiences were those of the real world, in favor of an aestheticized form, the irreducible materiality of which granted access to a realm that transcended representation as the basis for agency and subject formation.\textsuperscript{24} Abe did not follow this same negative paradigm of innovation. This does not mean that Abe was at odds with modernists like Kobayashi—Abe, too, could no longer conceive of a pragmatic, communicative form of language as an organic outgrowth of the self and a stable basis for the representation of reality. His method, in fact, mirrored Kobayashi’s inasmuch as he sought to produce a form that could author a resolution, even if it was an imaginary one, to the divide between the language, world, and self that characterized his time. For Abe, however, this form took the shape of Apollonian tragedy, a mode that, in its enclosed and unifying vision that privileged balance and equilibrium, guaranteed the autonomy of the work of art and the agency of the human subject that produced it. It is this belief in the agency of art and the artist that is key to understanding the tensions that underwrote Abe’s thinking and his relationship with Melville. Abe’s commitment to the agency of the subject meant that even as he rejected the claim of any bond between representation and truth made by his literary predecessors—the socialist and autobiographical modes—he left undisturbed (and in many ways carried forward) the romanticist belief in the centrality of the self around which the inherited literary language had coalesced.\textsuperscript{25} We feel this confused pull between past forms and present desires most powerfully in \textit{A Theory of}
**Intellectual Literature** (Shuchiteki bungaku ron, 1930), Abe’s principal work of criticism.

*A Theory of Intellectual Literature* collects a number of essays that Abe wrote between 1928 and 1930. The essays range from introductions and translations of contemporary British philosophy and literary criticism, to polemical attacks on popular, proletarian, and autobiographical fiction. The current of thought that connects them all is Abe’s belief that a rational intellect offers a positive, meaningful approach to the production, development, and criticism of literature. He referred to this as Intellectualism, and it represented a method of healing the fractures that he perceived in modern life.

Abe believed that all literature which aspired to greatness had to take the world of human emotions as its principal material. But emotions were messy things, caught up as they were in the modern world of fragmentation, and the excess of emotionality he saw in contemporary literature and society indicated a general “malady” the causes of which he traced back to a deficiency in intellectual, rational thinking (*ATz* 10:15). As a literary method, intellectualism had the ability to give order to chaos, to take the contradictions and conflicts of society, and produce from them great art. “Literature,” Abe wrote, “is that which makes the intellect over into method, explores the unknown world of our emotions that spreads out in all directions, provides it with order, and then recreates it” (*ATz* 10:13). For Abe, the end goal in literary production was always “providing order”—this served as the principal role of literature and constituted its worth (*ATz* 10:21). At the center of Abe’s vision of order is the author, the artistic unitary presence whose mind serves as both the focal point upon which contradictions converge and the lens through which they emerge resolved.

The writer or artist who, through his art, gave order to the world of contradiction and conflict required what Abe, borrowing from T.S. Eliot, called the “intense self” (*kyōretsu naru jiga*). This intense self “does not seclude itself in a small shell but boldly goes forth and absorbs phenomenon of all kinds [...] It is a calm and sufficiently objective self-consciousness, an emotional or intellectual power so condensed and centered on itself that it is painful” (*ATz* 10:41). It is hard not to read this constructed self as a prop that provides much-needed stability in the midst of politically and socially unstable times. But this self also has its origins in paradox: it was only able
to come into being through its own annihilation. Absorbing phenomenon of all kinds meant opening oneself to all forms and objects, a move that first requires the “extinction of the self.”27 “Through this extinction, diverse objects and thought are free to enter the artist. And they come together of their own accord, not through the writer’s artificial means” (ATz 10:43). Abe comments on this paradox in detail:

This speaks to one of the mysterious secrets involved in literary production. Creative ability lies in using the strongest of integrative powers to regulate the diffusion that results from our senses when they are at their most unresisting [...] The secret of literature lies in absorbing contradictions and holding them in an extremely precarious state of balance (ATz 10:44).

In order to first rebuild the world, one had to come to terms with how it had come apart. This meant recognizing the paradoxes and contradictions of modernity. It is this recognition that allowed Abe to grasp Melville as no other critic had in Japan up to that time. But, for Abe, contradiction finally had to be subsumed to order. That it was always order that emerged from Abe’s literary formulas only underscores the strength of his desire to search out the unity once promised by the literary form of Japanese realism. Although he repeatedly questioned the realist form, especially as it existed in the socialist and autobiographical modes, he only questioned its methods; he took as self-evident the humanistic subject that underwrote it.

When Abe encountered Moby-Dick, he came up against a work that refused to resolve contradictions. In its unruly prose, he found his own approaches tested and his assumptions about literature challenged. Like the doubloon that Ahab hammers to the Pequod’s mainmast in order to entice the crew to join his hunt, Melville’s prose offered up a surface that dared Abe to read it. When discussing the symbolism of Moby-Dick, Abe likens the work to a prism: “The deepest literary symbols are forever like multi-colored prisms,” he writes, “Possessing an infinite number of surfaces, they cast diverse rays of light in a multitude of directions” (M 85). A prism refracts incident light, dispersing it into a spectral array: what Abe describes is not a prismatic effect but a kaleidoscopic one, where one pattern of colors gives way to another and another. In Moby-Dick, meaning is manifold—each
reader, Abe writes, comes away with a different understanding of the work—and for that reason it is impossible to ever determine \((M 84)\). Abe got lost in *Moby-Dick*’s “queer curvices.” To bring some sense of order to Melville’s ironic circles, Abe read him tragically, as Mumford and Weaver did before him. Abe could go no further than this because his habit of mind would not allow it. Abe was not, strictly speaking, a romantic, but insofar as he continued to express a longing for a mode of writing that could reconcile the discordant qualities of modern life and reinscribe the bond between the authorial voice, truth, and world previously promised by the bankrupted forms based in a realist language, he re-produced the romanticist discourses of Japanese literary modernity.

This tension—between the recognition of the fundamental antimonies of modernity and the desire to sublimate them within a rational epistemological structure—marks Abe’s fiction just as strongly as his criticism. It operates powerfully in *A Winter’s Lodging* (*Fuyu no yado*, 1936), Abe’s most well-known work and the one in which we find the strongest imprint of his kinship with Melville and *Moby-Dick*.

*A Winter’s Lodging* tells the story of a young college student, nearing graduation, who spends a winter living as a border in the house of a financially destitute married couple. Abe makes an indirect allusion to *Moby-Dick* toward the end of the novel, when the student—known to the reader only as “T”—reflects back on the time that he has spent with the couple, the Kirishimas. He likens them to a sinking ship which he aimlessly follows:

> And then I,—I was like a gull that flocks to a ship as it sinks. Day after day, I fly, following the ship across the open ocean, pursuing the scent of food, the scent of people, a place to roost. And because of some happenstance the ship begins to sink down to the bottom of the ocean depths. I fly about it until only the top of the last mast remains above the waves. Once everything has finally vanished into the waves, I rise up, flitting into the sky, and fly away with no particular destination, again in search of a ship floating somewhere on the seas; and I latch on to it, my wanderlust and my apathy symbolized by my long wings and color white (*ATz 2:123*).
For the narrator, the Kirishimas are a ship from which he draws sustenance, both mentally and spiritually. A parasite of sorts, he follows them as long as they offer something, abandoning them only when their destruction imperils his own life. And as they sink into the sea, he rises into the sky, a dislocated self left with nothing to ground him.

This scene has its source in the sinking of the Pequod at the end of *Moby-Dick*. The narrative action in *Moby-Dick*, however, unfolds on a downward plane: as the Pequod sinks into the ocean depths, a sky-hawk tauntingly follows the main-truck down, only to catch its broad wing between the wood of the mast and Tashtego’s furious hammer, which works to reaffix the ship’s flag. Tashtego keeps his hammer frozen fast against the mast, and so the bird goes shrieking down with Ahab’s ship which “would not sink to hell till she had dragged a living part of heaven along with her, and helmeted herself with it.”

The gull to which the student likens himself does not follow the same trajectory—he climbs up, without any particular destination, a move that disperses his voice across open space. The source for this narratorial dispersal, in other words, comes not from the sinking of the Pequod but from the epilogue that immediately follows it: “The drama’s done. Why then here does any one step forth?—Because one did survive the wreck.” Ishmael’s voice rises out of the aftermath of the Pequod’s destruction and recounts the story of his survival in a voice diffused across the spatial plane and distilled from temporal narrative flow. When Abe lifts this ending, he does so because of what it evokes—a cataclysmic moment of destruction followed by quiet dissolution, a moment that Abe himself experienced when the dominant form of realism sank and the subject around which it had coalesced was pulled down with it.

*A Winter’s Lodging* is a response to the crisis of representation. Nearly midway through the work, the narrator directs a question to his professor with whom he is in a heated discussion. “Do you believe,” he begins, “that when a person writes about something, he’s writing the mental state he felt with respect to that thing? Or that the thing itself appears there on the page? Don’t you find such a thing impossible to explain” (*ATz* 2:45)? The narrator poses this question in response to his professor’s accusation that he has, in a short story he has written, belittled a young woman in whom both men have romantic interest. The narrator counters his teacher’s criticism by
challenging him to identify whether or not he has written the woman, Ihara Hamae, or whether he has written, not her, but the woman as she exists for him. The discussion between the two men quickly degenerates into a heated argument that attracts the attention of students passing by, but it is this issue of the psychological subject’s representation of an object, and the relationship between the two that their argument briefly touches upon, that courses throughout the novel.

As a novel narrated in the first person, *A Winter’s Lodging* offers us an ostensibly stable narrative gaze. But the young student, who goes unnamed throughout the novel, is not so much a character endowed with interiority as a simple capacity for perception. He can compose his subjectivity only via mediation with the external world and those that people it. Using a method of visual representation that he refers to as “cross-sectioning,” the narrator renders the people that he encounters as two-dimensional images, images of flat depth which allow him to grasp them as other and thereby create a subject-object dynamic that will found his interiority. The narrator’s method of visual transcription, however, always proves insufficient: only a partial representation of the other, his cross-sections permit contemplation but not comprehension. The tension between the two—seeing and knowing—leaves the narrator’s desire for a stable I unfulfilled and his interiority suspended, resulting in a dispersed self that questions the very status of the subject and its ability to represent.

**Writing Crisis in *A Winter’s Lodging***

The narrator of *A Winter’s Lodging* describes how the method of cross-sectioning functions when he recalls how he came to live with the Kirishima family for one winter, just prior to his graduation from university.

Completely by chance, I was thrown into a house composed of people whose existence I hadn’t been aware of until then. These relations were, I felt, something akin to looking at the cross-sectional diagram [*danmen-zu*] of living creatures. I had no organic relation to their life. Within my own family and among my friends, my position was one of a flesh and blood element in an organic body’s structure; but in a boarding house, no relation exists except in the act of paying a
given amount of money. In spite of that, I watched every aspect of this family’s life far more clearly, vividly and minutely, than I had in my own family. It was the same as looking at a sectional diagram of some dissected creature: here were the entrails; here nerves ran; here the blood vessels diverged—I was able to acquire a cold and precise knowledge, just as I desired (ATz 2:16-17).

Subsumption into the familial structure precludes the narrator from being able to clearly delineate his own existence and found his own subjectivity. In response, he decides to leave home for a foreign household, a move that will provide him with the distance necessary to found his much-desired subject-hood. But lost in this distanced relation to the other is the ability to identify. The cross-sectional diagram presents the other in a cold, hard, scientific light, dissecting and revealing depth, but only by flattening it onto the surface of a single plane. Contemplation, in other words, does not equal comprehension, and any attempt to go beyond the surface meets with sudden resistance. The narrator, then, by moving into the Kirishima household, gains the distance needed to distinguish self from other, but once he has done so any projection onto that other, or attempt to brush up against it, renders him an other as well. The tension in this relationship plays out again and again in his interaction with the characters that he encounters in the course of the novel.

Kamon and Matsuko, the couple that rents a room to the narrator, are the characters whom the narrator’s gaze falls most frequently upon. When Matsuko first shows him the available room, he finds himself captivated by a Matisse painting that hangs on the wall: “a pleasant print, a sketch of a man and woman facing each other, as they lay gently in a meadow in the shade of a sparse forest” (ATz 2:9). The narrator immediately links this image with Kamon and Matsuko, placing their figures onto the flat surface of the painting. Based on the extensive descriptions of the painting in the novel, this is most likely Matisse’s Two Figures Reclining in a Landscape (Figure 1). The painting, acting as a cross-sectional diagram, leaves a pleasant impression on “I” when he initially views it, but several days later, when he moves into the house, it affects him in a strikingly different way:

But now, the forest only looked like a skeletal gathering of barren
trees; a cold wind blew from between the sparse trees; the earth had frozen over; and the man and woman on the grasses looked as though they together lamented some irrecoverable aspect of their past, begrudging one other as they bowed their bodies and tried not to shiver (ATz 2:10).

“T” came to the Kirishima household out of a desire for a new set of relations. In the beginning, his unfamiliarity with Kamon and Matsuko provides that, it allows him to idealize the family in a manner that suits him. The subsequent shift in his perception of the painting forewarns the grounding of this idealization, but it does not alter the way in which the painting functions for “T”: it continues to serve as a physical representation of the cross-sectional diagram, allowing him to flatten and apprehend the couple. He stares at the painting daily, caught up in an act of contemplation that doubles as an act of representation.

What complicates the narrator’s contemplation/representation, however, is his persistent desire to identify with those whom he encounters. This desire wrecks their status as other and the narrator’s stable subjectivity along with it. Vision, in other words, exists in a constant state of tension, for

FIGURE 1. Two Figures Reclining in a Landscape. 1921. Oil on canvas.
those characters who people the narrator’s field of sight only come into focus as other when placed beyond the border of touch (i.e., representation); the existence of such a boundary, however, simultaneously tempts the narrator to break it. At these moments, the self and other threaten to overlap, producing waves of representational interference that undermine the subjectivity the narrator longs to construct. Kamon is the first character with whom the narrator identifies.

The narrator learns early on that Kamon is the one who purchased the Matisse print. With Kamon in his room, “I” points to the print and asks if Kamon likes paintings. “I used to order prints far better than that one from foreign counties and sell them,” Kamon says, referring to the Matisse, “but it was a complete loss. The business aside, though, the paintings were nice. I had a lot left unsold, but they’re all gone now” (ATz 2:16). As soon as the narrator makes the Matisse the subject of their conversation, Kamon steps outside of the painting and joins the narrator in the act of looking at it. The narrative also establishes that Kamon is the official owner of the painting, the one who ordered it and kept it. This effectively disturbs the relationship that the painting had established, one in which the narrator looks on at Kamon and Matsuko, symbolically reducing them to images of flat depth. As “I” listens to Kamon’s licentious stories and jokes, as he drinks, smokes, and gambles with him, he begins to locate a dissolute life that has tremendous appeal, removing the weariness that he had felt in his relationships with others up to that time. Ironically, this means that he must simultaneously lose the ability to view the Kirishima family “clearly, vividly and minutely,” his identification with Kamon collapsing the distance between viewer and viewed, and costing him the very subjectivity that he first sought. It is Kamon’s wanton lifestyle—his irrational indulgence of desire itself—that appeals to the narrator, exactly those characteristics that pit him against Matsuko and, at the same time, break down the gap that “I” had desired to establish between them.

Matsuko differs so drastically from her husband that the reader wonders, along with the narrator, how and why they remain together. Although she proclaims herself to be a Christian, Matsuko is not devoutly religious so much as enamored with the strictures, rules, and rigor that a religion, when taken to its extremes, can provide. The narrator’s antipathy for her rises out of this rigorous and controlling nature. It is this hostility
that colors his view of her, especially his initial willful refusal to recognize her sexuality. Upon first seeing her, he comments that her “entire body suggested to me the luster, hardness, color, and chill of an old piece of pottery” (ATz 2:8). This attitude remains unchanged until Matsuko one evening tells him that a local money lender has advised her to sell her last valuable asset—her body—if she really wants to help her family escape destitution. As he listens to her recount this story, the narrator suddenly becomes aware of his desire for Matsuko as a sexual object. He sees her, for the first time, as an attractive and desirable woman, a shift in perception that collapses the distance he had built up between them. As with Kamon, he can no longer view her from a remove.

This shift, in turn, affects the way in which he relates to the Matisse painting hanging on the wall. Just prior to going to sleep, “I” has a waking dream of the Matisse painting. Matsuko is emplaced there and the narrator emplaces himself there as well, altering the relationship he had previously had with the painting. He doubles his own figure, becoming an “I” that watches himself:

And in that half-dream state, Matsuko appeared to me. Like the woman in the Matisse print that hung on the wall, she had thrown herself down licentiously, wearing thin white clothes. Her face was aglow with youthfulness, her eyes shone brightly, and her half-open lips trembled with her rough and haggard breath. A number of men came out from the depths of the forest and made attempts to pull her back. Someone screamed that anyone could set this woman free. It seemed that I was also there among them. Kamon, with a thickly grown black beard, seemed to be there as well (ATz 2:56).

While the narrator’s identification with Kamon distances him from Matsuko, it is ironically this same identification that awakens sexual desire within him, a desire which quickly directs itself toward Matsuko and transforms the distance between them into a longing for sexual unification. The sexualized image of Matsuko disturbs “I”s relationship to her, driving him to take possession of her (or to at least associate himself with those that try to take possession of her), which in turn disrupts his relationship to the painting. In his dream, he is figured as participant inside the work rather than an
observer outside of it.

It is important to note, however, the uncertainty in the narrator’s assessment of his dream: he \textit{seems (rashi)} to be there among the other men, as does Kamon. Not coincidentally, these two men are also the only ones that actively look at the painting. The use of the tentative marker \textit{rashi} indicates a sudden confusion of their position in relation to the painting, a disruption in the certainty of whether they are actually present or not, of whether they are observers or the observed. This confusion carries over to the narrator and his relation to the outside world. That is, the ongoing conflict between Kamon and Matsuko only externally stages the internal strife occurring within the narrator himself, the conflict between his drive for pleasure and his need for control. “I” eventually becomes aware of this:

And then I suddenly realized [...] It wasn’t the actual Kamon that I adored nor the actual Matsuko that I hated: it was something best named the “Kamon” inside me, something best named the “Matsuko” inside me [...] I adored the voice of the “physical” within me, that which Kamon had come to symbolize; and I despised the voice of oppression within me, that which Matsuko had come to symbolize. This meant that, within me, Matsuko had gotten the best of Kamon [...] The cross-section of this Kirishima house was, in other words, a cross-sectional diagram of the ecology [seita] of my mind. I had been convinced that I was shuttling between Kamon and Matsuko when I was actually only wandering about within my own mind (\textit{ATz} 2:59).

The narrator’s confusion here, between the conflict that takes place outside of him and the conflict within him, has already been visually figured in the context of the Matisse painting: he has excised Kamon from the painting, drawing him out as an observer; and he has placed himself (and re-placed Kamon) into the world of the painting as the observed. The painting as cross-sectional diagram thus occupies a space simultaneously internal and external to the perspective of the narrator, which leaves no evident division between his would-be interiority and the external world, a collapse of boundaries that in effect creates an exteriority since the narrator’s internal conflict now unfolds in the outside world. The narrator’s growing proximity to the Kirishima family has blurred the clean, precise lines that he had,
through his cross-section, initially carved out. This is the danger of representation—pulled in by the promise of knowing the other, the narrator has projected himself onto Kamon and Matsuko, making himself other in the process.

In a world as porous as this, where the external and internal mutually inform each other, identity is always in danger of slipping away. At certain points, “I” seems on the verge of merging with Kamon, a scenario he nightmarishly envisions and violently resists. Imagining Kamon as a large bear-like creature whose thick-furred body threatens to absorb him, the narrator attempts to fight him off: “The thing bore down upon me like a black cloud. I felt as though I was suffocating; I thought I tried to scream, but I couldn’t produce a sound. I withdrew a sharp knife and lunged at the thing’s flank, stabbing it again and again, but my hand simply plunged into the pitch black fur without effect” (ATz 2:90). The “I”’s identification with Kamon leads to a confusion that collapses the borders between them. Having lost the distance necessary to clarify the boundaries of his self, “I” leaves his winter lodging.

Ihara Hamae, whose flatness of character steadily reflects the narrator’s own desires, is the only place that the narrator, in search of fixity, has left to go. In contrast to Matsuko and Kamon, who both externally figure internal drives of the narrator (i.e., sexual expression and repression, respectively), Hamae stands as a blank mirror that reflects the narrator’s image back at him. When he visits her in the sanatorium where she is recuperating, Hamae references his attraction to Matsuko, “the Christian wife.” The reflection of his own illicit desire sends the narrator fleeing from the room and to a nearby inn where he has decided to spend the night. Hamae, however, follows him there, even though she risks her health in doing so. The narrator asks why she has come but she is unable to answer. “I realized that we were enacting the exact opposite dialogue from before,” the narrator recounts, “If my visit to Hamae was akin to a reaction one has while asleep, then her coming here was probably of the same order. Just as I couldn’t know whether I had wanted to see her, Hamae likely had not come out of a desire to see ‘me.’ It was simply that two blind impulses had by chance collided” (ATz 2:100). Their relationship, in fact, consists of mirrored action: she comes to his hotel room him without a particular desire to see him just he visits her without a specific purpose in mind: he also asks her the
same question that she asked him earlier (“Why did you come?”), a question which neither one can answer.

During this moment of mutual reflection they are caught up in an intense wave of passion. They kiss and begin to remove their clothes, embracing each other on the bed. But the embrace is the limit of their reach—they hold each other but are unable to have sex: “Before the flames of desire could rise to the surface of her [Hamae’s] skin, it appeared to cool: it was something like a fire without an outlet, burning at the bottom of ice” (*ATz* 2:102). Hamae is frustrated by this sudden loss of passion, specifically at her own body which “lacks the strength to bring that weak desire seething to the surface of her flesh”; and the narrator is similarly “frustrated at [his] own strength which lacked the power to warm this woman’s body” (*ATz* 2:100). Because they can only touch or embrace, all they are left with are the flat surfaces of their own bodies which always prove, in a mutually reflective way, lacking. The sexual act becomes a symbolic act of auto-identification. However, because Hamae only exists as a mirror that reflects the narrator’s empty interiority back to him, this unification is doomed to end in failure—not only a sexual failure, but a failure of the subject. This failure occurs again in the narrator’s encounter with another character but in an inversion of the role that Hamae plays.

Kō is a true other, particularly for early Shōwa Japan: a young Korean doctor who briefly comes to live with the Kirishimas. He also represents an other that is I. He is, in other words, another mirror image of the “I” narrator. The narrative spatially figures this mirror-contrast by placing him in the room directly opposite “I”’s. His status as reflective other differs from that of Hamae, however, in that he is the only other character that seeks to apprehend “I” just as “I” tries to apprehend him. From the very moment he comes into the household, he poses a threat to the “I” and any hope that he may have for subject-hood.

The antagonism between the two first manifests itself in their respective relations to the Kirishimas. While “I” favors Kamon over Matsuko, Kō sympathizes with Matsuko and detests Kamon. This division leads to them producing labels for one another. Kō refers to “I” as a materialist, aligning him with Kamon, and the narrator in turn refers to Kō as a spiritualist, locating with him with Matsuko. In their initial conversation, these labels only produce a deadlock, one which Kō tries to offer a way out of
but which the narrator, whose only interest lying in locating some way of apprehending Kō, steadfastly refuses.

“Shall we remove our masks?” Kō said.

I was tired of the back and forth of the conversation and so I opened the art history book that was beside my desk to a picture of the roof tiles in the ruins of Rakurō so as to shift the discussion. “I hear you’re from Pyongyang. Rakurō, that is. You know,” I said, “I derive a great deal of pleasure from gazing at photographs of these old tiles.”

“Well, I guess you’re not a materialist after all. Otherwise you wouldn’t be so obsessed with old objects that come out of Korean soil. We find that insulting. You people’s adoration of Rakurō and Kyongju’s ancient arts is just a superiority complex.”

“Now that’s not what I meant. I didn’t say that with the intention of making you feel that way.”

“I realize that” (ATz 2:31-32).

Kō’s initial proposal to remove their respective masks is a gesture of mutual understanding, one which the narrator stubbornly refuses, insisting upon his unilateral comprehension of Kō. He immediately turns to the art book and the Korean roof tiles displayed within as the means by which he can accomplish that. The image of the roof tiles acts in a manner similar to the cross-section, a flat, two-dimensional surface upon which the narrator can project Kō, figuratively flattening him into a comprehensible context. Kō, however, refuses such reduction and rhetorically turns the tables on “I.” Consistently, throughout their conversation, he navigates his way around the narrator’s totalizing gaze, and effectively negates it.

The narrator avoids Kō after this encounter, his dislike for him a thinly disguised fear of an object that threatens the autonomy of the subject. But the narrator is also fascinated by him. After Kō vanishes from the Kirishima household under mysterious circumstances “I” goes out in search of him. All those whom he questions, however, claim not to have seen him. Later, at a dance party the narrator attends, he is convinced that he sees Kō dancing the tango with a young woman. “I tried to follow after the man,” he recounts, “but I never found him again. When the dance ended his partner was standing there dejectedly but there was no sign of the man” (ATz 2:82).
Kō is a doppelganger that skirts the center of “I”’s vision, only later revealing that he has, ever since he vanished, been living under the narrator’s name. The admission of this appropriation of “I”’s name comes in the form of a letter, which, because it is presented in the first-person, also temporarily makes “I”’s voice over into Kō’s. Kō writes:

Throughout the trip, I used your name. And the surprising discovery that I made was that you possess a truly wonderful name. I realized that even in a person’s name, there is something resembling his appearance and character [...] Your name, even when someone such as me uses it, has such obvious authenticity it awakens not even the slightest suspicion of doubt. When I wrote that name, somehow, people were put at ease (ATz 2:106).

Kō has taken the name of the narrator, one which the reader has never been given, and used it as his own. The irony of this, and the unnamed name’s so-called “authenticity,” throws into question the very possibility of a stable identity, much less the entire act of naming. At the end of the letter, Kō returns the narrator’s name to him and the narratorial voice as well, but the act of appropriation on multiple levels presents, for the first time in the narrative, an other that does not represent the exteriorization of a supposed narratorial interiority; instead, Kō reverses the process and usurps the narrator’s identity—he makes a performance of it, treating identity as though it is malleable and can be exchanged, making the narrator’s quest for a stable subjectivity out to be a snipe hunt, a pursuit which can only lead him from one tenuous promise of stability to the next. The closing moments of the work underscore this point even more sharply.

At the end of the novel, the narrator returns to the Kirishima household as Kamon and Matsuko prepare to move, forced out by their destitute circumstances. “I” walks up the steps to his old room to find everything gone, including the Matisse painting. Only a white outline on the dirty wall marks where it once hung.

Whitish dirt had had come away from the wall in one place, pointing to the last traces of the Matisse print that had hung there and which, for a long time, I had gazed at day and night. Nothing came to me
now at all; I only smoked my cigarette, staring transfixed at the traces of white dirt (ATz 2:122).

When he asks what happened to the print, Kamon tells him that Matsuko burned it, as she had done with all his previous prints. The destruction of the Matisse, however, also destroys the narrator’s cross-sectional diagram, ending his experiment to found his own subjectivity through the flat representation and apprehension of Kamon and Matsuko. The white dirt left behind that traces, not only to the absent form of the painting, but also to the absent form of “I”’s interiority. The color of the dirt is a telling detail. The color, of course, is white, the color of the sublime.

As Ishmael tells us, in his meditation on the color white in Chapter 42, “The Whiteness of the Whale,” “there yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more panic to the soul than that redness which affrights in blood.”31 When the narrator of A Winter’s Lodging gazes into the white traces of dirt on the wall, he confronts something like this “panic to the soul,” that sublime moment when the self is forced to face the possibility of its own irretrievable loss. This sublime confrontation is of the same order as that which Abe experienced only a few years earlier when he read, for the first time, Herman Melville’s Moby-Dick.

In his preface to Melville, Abe laments his inability to adequately comprehend Melville, an experience of loss he expresses through the power of metaphor—he likens Melville to a darkly enshrouded mountainscape containing unfathomable depths. This is the sublime turn, the compensatory pivot in which loss is transformed into rhetorical exultation. A Winter’s Lodging careens towards a similar turn. The narrator, unable to fully represent his traumatic confrontation (it can only be presented through the absence of the Matisse), swerves away from the recognition of the negativity that serves as the basis of the self and into a lyrical celebration of his autonomy: he likens himself to a gull that rises, free, above the wreck.

In the allusive turn to the Pequod’s demise and Ishmael’s survival, A Winter’s Lodging gestures toward the tension that defines the sublime and Abe’s experience of Moby-Dick. Abe’s experience with Moby-Dick was one forever marked by the moment of its initial encounter, the traumatic confrontation in which the subject is offered a glimpse at its own dissolution. This breakdown of the subject begins a steady burn that, like the cigarette
the narrator smokes as he stares at the absent Matisse, sets representation into its own self-annihilating motion. It is at this moment when the traumatic event pushes through that the subject is, as George Hartley writes, “faced with the beyond of representation: the point at which the representational apparatus turns in on itself and collapses in its inability to flesh out some adequate embodiment of the loss.” But Abe’s Apollonian vision depended, as we have seen, upon the repression of any traumatic event that threatened to shatter the symbolic identity of the self. The sublime turn is this pivoting move, the fulcrum through which Abe torqued the threatening power of excess—the beyond of representation—into the poetic activity itself. What A Winter’s Lodging details in its final pages, then, is the confrontation with the excess that Abe first experienced in Moby-Dick, and to which he allusively turns so as to contain it. The attempt to close out excess, to render it neutral, returns us to the question with which we began: the ability of the subject to represent.

The cross-section is a method of visual transcription meant to represent the object in its entirety but can only do so at the expense of depth. A visual process that flattens the other onto a single plane it must always yield, as a byproduct, some excess. Without this cropping of the other, the narrator would be unable to found his subjectivity. Subjectivity, Mieke Bal writes, “is formed by a perpetual adjustment of images passing before the subject, who makes them into a whole because it is continuous.” The narrator similarly orders the flat images of the other that pass before him so that they play in much the same way that a film unfolds before its viewer. The narrator comments on this quality of his memory in the opening paragraph of the novel:

... My memories are all dyed the color of a season. They are something like the individual frames of a movie film, each one possessing various colors; and yet the film color of those memories doesn’t match the corresponding calendar season. There are times that I recall the event of a summer day with the sensation of autumn and there are times that I recall an event in autumn dyed with the sweet color of late spring (ATz 2:7).

The entire movement of A Winter’s Lodging operates like a reel of film. We
can see this overtly, in the nature of the narrator’s memories which he likens to individual frames of a film, and in the ellipsis which introduces the passage, an unwinding that prefaces the narrative and starts its play. The narrative’s filmic quality is also evident in the Matisse painting, which functions as a screen upon which the narrator can project the ongoing drama of Matsuko and Kamon.

The continuous unrolling of images structures the entirety of the work, all the way to its closing moments in which Matsuko and Kamon push a cart carrying their last remaining belongings downhill:

Matsuko retrieved the derby hat that had just then been flung [from the cart] and was rolling down the hill, tucked it under her arm, and then, running at a jog, rushed to follow after the cart and Kamon, never once looking back. Soon thereafter, first Kamon, and then Matsuko, disappeared into the shadow of the stone wall on the corner but the sound of the cart continued to be heard for a while (ATz 2:124).

The narrator here, and in other similar passages, experiences a series of visual images that pass before him, creating continuity. But continuity, as Bal also notes, does not necessarily add up to coherence. As the narrator says, his memories are a confusion of colors and seasons, summer days perceived with the sensation of autumn or a moment in autumn colored by late spring. In spite of his careful projection of the other onto a single plane, the narrator cannot locate coherent meaning through the sum of images that passes before him.

The excess that the narrator desperately wants to sheer away returns to permeate the narrative in the form of the ellipsis that leads into the work and the sound of the cart that gestures outside of it, and in the form of the narrator’s consciousness, dispersed as it is across the characters that populate the story. There is, in that sense, a visual and verbal excess throughout A Winter’s Lodging. “Verbal” because the “I” that speaks is not the “I” that is suffused through all the characters. In spite of the shattered nature of the narrator, the exteriorization of his self across the characters that populate the narrative and his corporeal loss at its conclusion, he speaks in grand, lyrical tones. The narrative’s answer to the question that “I” poses
to his professor, then, is that the represented object is neither “the thing in itself” nor is it “the mental state one feels with respect to that thing,” but, rather, it is that which “is impossible to explain.” The flatness of *A Winter’s Lodging* continuously gestures to what lies beyond representation itself, to that which always escapes beyond the frame.

This is a lesson that Ishmael learned all too well in the course of *Moby-Dick*. In his attempts to grasp the leviathan, Ishmael tries his hand at all manners of representation, only to abjure each one of them in turn as insufficient. He examines paintings of the whale, prints, engravings in wood and in stone before eventually cutting into the whale itself. “Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will.” Ishmael is frustrated by the surface, by the skin that refuses to reveal what lies below. His frustration drives him deeper into his quest, generating the excess that is the narrative logic of the work. It is this excess which points to the beyond of representation, that which escapes representation but always returns.

*A Winter’s Lodging* engages the same dilemma. In it, Abe probes the borders of what can be seen and recorded. He tests the limits of representation in an effort to find a way beyond them. Abe could not write comfortably in the form of Japanese realism that he had inherited—too much had changed in the intervening years for him to fall back on any form that claimed a correlation between the writer and his voice, truth and the world. But neither could he bring himself to wholly abandon the promise once held out by that language. Contained within the climax of the novel is the expression of a continued desire for the aestheticized subject, the self that is identical with itself. This is not to say that we cannot find the same longing at work in *Moby-Dick*: Ishmael, in his explorations of the whale, searches out identity between outward form and inner self. But the excess that *Moby-Dick* revels is that which *A Winter’s Lodging* seeks, finally, to contain. The sublime turn at the end of the novel is that telling trace. It is the marker of Abe’s confrontation with the excess that Melville and *Moby-Dick* represented and his move to bracket it.

*Sea and Shore*: Some Final Reflections on Abe Tomoji’s Kinship with Herman Melville

When Abe was just beginning his career as a critic and a
writer—around the same time that Taketomo Sōfū published the first critical essay on Melville in Japan—the intellectual community had already begun to search for alternatives to the received literary language and the tradition of cultural assimilation that had produced it. Melville and *Moby-Dick* represented one more alternative, but the literary community, far more intent on searching out a replacement for the lost terra firma of the native home, did not look to Melville and his ironic sea.

Abe, perhaps unsurprisingly, appears to be one of the few writers at the time who was interested in the sea. He wrote a number of stories throughout his career that prominently feature the sea, most of them short fiction: “Secret of the Green Sea” (*Aoi umi no himitsu*, 1930), “Island Silhouettes” (*Shima kage*, 1943), “Women of the Shore” (*Umibe no onna*, 1947), “Gull Island” (*Kamome jima*, 1949), “Up to the Shore” (*Umibe made*, 1956), and “Two Seas” (*Futatsu no umi*, 1962). Abe’s sea is a marginal space for strange and beautiful women, and the ill or dying. His stories never venture out onto the open ocean but, instead, pause on the shore or, at best, an island off the coast. And it is no wonder why—when Abe writes the sea, it is frequently uninviting, roiling and stormy, a screen upon which he projects his characters’ inner turmoil or their dangerously wild spirits.

In “Island Silhouettes,” a young woman, Ryūko, stays with her uncle and aunt on an island in the Yatsushiro Sea to escape two young men she has become involved with. On the island, however, she meets a young teacher, Katsura, who struggles to fight off his own feelings of attraction to her. As the two tour Jesuit communities on the neighboring islands, they encounter a storm.

As they rounded the cape, the wide ocean opened up before them on the right and below them, clouded in the misty rain, the sea foamed whitely. A strong wind blew in from the western ends of the sea while the boat was tossed about by great swells: spray from the waves, mixing with the pouring rain, wet their bodies as they stood at the gunwale. Katsura urged Ryūko repeatedly to get inside. “It feels so much better out here,” she insisted, perhaps out of a stubborn refusal to give in to Katsura’s demands, but also out of a sense of invigoration, whether real or imagined, that left her body powerfully tense in the violent waves and rain (AT 89).
One of a number of siren-like figures that appear in Abe’s works, Ryūko is both alluring and dangerous. Early on in the story, she functions as a surface upon which men project their desires—as a group of contractors discuss the services that the wives and daughters on the island provide travelers, “their three gazes occasionally flowed in Ryūko’s direction” (AT 76). But as the story develops, it becomes clear that Ryūko more closely resembles the surface of the sea, bewitching in its beauty but also turbulent and potentially violent. In that sense it does not matter whether the invigoration she perceives standing on the gunwale is real or imagined—she exists as an extension of the sea, its surface reflecting—and reflected by—her tempestuousness.

The correlation between female figures and the ocean marks each of Abe’s sea stories. In “Secret of the Pale Green Sea,” the male protagonist rescues a young woman who has been kept captive in a lighthouse. He brings her onboard the ship he has been traveling on, only to wake and find her missing, presumed to have vanished into the sea. In “To the Shore,” the young wife Yukiko, suffering from radiation sickness from the Hiroshima bomb, attempts to throw herself and her child into the ocean. In “Two Seas,” the husband Kamo recalls his brief encounter and failed liaison with a young fisherwoman on a trip to a coastal hot spring. The ocean is a feminized space for Abe, which his male characters generally shun. Like Katsura above, they want to get back inside the boat or simply head back to shore. The only man that chooses to live at its edge—the lighthouse attendant Sanada in “Women of the Shore”—dies there, swallowed up by the waves. There is nothing of Melville’s circular irony at work here; Abe’s sea, rather, evokes what the literary scholar Margaret Cohen, building on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, refers to as the chronotope of the shore.

The chronotope is a concept proposed by Bakhtin to refer to patterns of narration that articulate certain attitudes towards time and space which have come to assume typological status. The shore, one of several chronotopes that Cohen proposes, is “an intensely social space [...] characterized by encounters of habitually separated groups, who inhabit the same world but that social stratification keeps apart.” 40 In bringing a variety of groups into contact, the shore represents “a liminal zone,” a threshold where borders are rendered indeterminant, open, and ambiguous.
“As a liminal zone,” Cohen writes, “the shore bears some relation to [the chronotope of] blue water, with its disorder and affinity for monsters that cross the boundary between species. On blue water, however, monstrous creatures like great white whales and cut-throat pirates flourish, while the shore is a place where the boundaries are tested, only to be reaffirmed rather than dissolved.”

A single narrative can feature multiple chronotopes, but Abe’s short sea fiction always limits itself to the shore. As stories of the shore, they test the boundaries of social mores, but they rarely cross them. If they do, the narrative moves to restore them to their former shape by the end, careful not to leave any nicks or dents or otherwise unsightly and misshapen forms. Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, in contrast, features, the chronotope of blue water mentioned above, white water, and the ship, three distinct chronotopal forms. The first is a realm of contingency and chance subject to unpredictable natural forces and encounters with monsters of the deep; the second, a “moment when the violence of maritime elements gets so excessive that it throws the narrative into a crisis threatening its breakdown”; and the third, a social space structured according to a rigid hierarchy that the dangers of the other chronotopes always threaten to pull apart. These chronotopes play out in the course of *Moby-Dick*, oftentimes in tension with each other: the Pequod traverses realms of blue water that can quickly shift into white and back again and Ahab tries to maintain control throughout. I point this out, not as a criticism of Abe for not including in his fiction chronotopes of the open sea or the ship that navigates them, but to illustrate the different approaches that Abe and Melville took in their depiction of maritime spaces, and to suggest that, while Abe might have shared a desire to test boundaries, he was also driven by a quietly insistent need to reaffirm them.

In *A Winter’s Lodging*, Abe draws closer to *Moby-Dick* than at any other time in his writerly career, but here, too, he proves reluctant to transgress boundaries and borders. At one moment in *A Winter’s Lodging*, when Matsuko and the narrator go in search of Kō who has vanished from the Kirishima house, they find themselves in a large vacant lot near the sea. When the silver expanse of the sea and a boat at dock comes into view, Matsuko is transfixed by the sight.

Matsuko who, until then, had been walking next to me
suddenly drew slightly away, turning just as abruptly to look into my face.

“Oh, the sea,” she whispered. “How I wish I could go to the other side of the far sea.” The voice that spoke had such a youthful tone to it that I turned in surprise to face her. Blood had risen into her face, only to vanish just as quickly. I stood there for a moment, unable to chase after anyone anymore, and stared at the forms of the young men and the mast rising up into the gray sky. I remembered that there had been a time in my youth when I, too, longed for the sea (ATz 2:68).

The sea here is another boundary, its horizon enticing the viewer to imagine what lies just beyond it. It beckons Matsuko and recalls to the narrator’s mind a time in his youth when he dreamed of far off lands. But this, too, is a boundary that neither proves willing to cross. Abe experienced something similar when he read Melville’s *Moby-Dick* for the first time—a glimpse of the secret power of its form and its potential. And, as in his sea fiction, while he might venture onto the sea, he made certain to never stray far enough that he could never make it back to the shore. By figuring his encounter with Melville and his work in terms of the experience of the sublime, Abe demonstrated the ways in which his engagement with and understanding of Melville was always predetermined.

In the experience of the sublime, the subject compensates for its potential dissolution with a corresponding positive movement—the mind’s exultation in its ability to think that which cannot be taken in through the senses. This “compensatory positive movement of the mind that has been checked,” Jonathan Culler writes, “is not just a result of the confrontation of the sublime but its telos, what the mind was seeking in the first place.” Abe derived from his encounter with Melville what his mind always sought in the first place. The encounter with Melville offered Abe an alternative, a chance to confront the split nature of the subject. In *Melville*, he chose instead to read the American writer through the hermeneutic of the tragic vision. In *A Winter’s Lodging*, he takes a risk and ventures further. In it, we can see where Abe helped carry forward the afterlife *Moby-Dick* and the irony of the sea. But even here, at his moment of closest proximity, Abe swerves, turning back in the end back to the comfort of familiar forms of
experience figured by the romantic subject. Based on this we might conclude that the lines of kinship which, decades earlier, so strongly bound Aoki Shigeru and Melville are, in Abe’s case, oddly weakened, if not wholly absent. But the lines of kinship mark separation as well as connection. They come together as tightly as joints of bone and can be scored just as easily. We continue to feel the taughtness of these bonds in the work of postwar novelists Mishima Yukio and Uno Kōichirō.
Chapter Three
The Irony of the Sea in Wartime and Postwar Japan

Ishmael!

at tragedy’s end, a single swirling current
that thing swallowing down the fate of man
the great nothing you saw draws us deeply in

—Ayukawa Nobuo, “Ishmael”

The poet and critic Ayukawa Nobuo (1920-1986) never wrote about Herman Melville (1819-1891) or *Moby-Dick* (1851), but Melville’s work apparently moved him enough to write, in the late 1950s, an ode to *Moby-Dick*'s narrator, Ishmael. The poem entitled, simply, “Ishmael,” begins, “Why did the terrestrial laws fail? / the bonds of blood break? / the green pastures fade away?”1 “Ishmael” follows the path of its namesake and traces movement from land to sea: the assumed stability of the terrestrial earth and all that defines it—laws, blood, land—fails, breaks, or fades away. Ishmael’s is truly, as the poet-speaker tells us, a “story of the sea,” evocative of the breakdown signaled by those works that take place on the open ocean.

In the concluding lines of the poem, which serve as this chapter’s epigraph, Ayukawa re-imagines the sinking of the Pequod at the end of *Moby-Dick*. He finds there a nihilistic scene, a “great nothing” (ōkina kyomu) that draws the viewer “deeply in” (fukaku hikitsukeru). In the doubleness of the statement (Are we being draw in out of fascination? Or against our will?), Ayukawa’s lines recall Abe Tomoji’s likening of Melville to an abyss some twenty years earlier. As with Abe, Ayukawa expresses a sublime desire for dissolution of both self and voice. He slips, ambivalently, into the death he perceived in the final moments of *Moby-Dick*. This nihilistic vision developed as part of the continuing response to the crisis of representation discussed in the previous chapter. The whirlpool that Ayukawa describes is the figuration of this crisis, baffling and intriguing all at once. It is this nihilistic vision and the literary and artistic responses to it through the space of the sea that serves as the focus of this chapter.

As we saw in the discussion on Abe Tomoji (1903-1973) in the previous chapter, writers and critics in the 1930s wrote with an especially heightened awareness of the limits of their literary language. Their
sensitivity to representation as a mediated truth incapable of reaching the fullness of world and self, led, on the one hand, to a radical questioning of the metaphysical centrality of the self and, on the other hand, to an artistic affirmation of language and the self’s failure. The crisis of representation, that is, became the praxis for a new mode of artistic creation, one that developed into a radically nihilistic vision. This vision was part of a reflection on the inadequacy of language and its inability to bring words into alignment with the world they claimed to represent.

The sea was one space around which this nihilistic gaze came together, a coalescence which marks an important shift in the irony of the sea. In the early 1940s, artists like Fujita Tsuguji (1886-1968) and writers like the young Mishima Yukio (1925-1970) envisioned the ocean in all its elementalism, an image of the sea that recalls the late Meiji oceanic imaginary. In Fujita and Mishima’s works, the sea transports the viewer/reader to spatial moments free from the forward push of linear time and the telos of history. But unlike their Meiji predecessors, Fujita and Mishima figure this sea as a primal space of violence and death. To posit death as the ultimate means of achieving wholeness and stability is ironic. Mishima would carry this irony forward, unchanged, into the postwar period.

Mishima forms another figure of kinship with Herman Melville. In his work, I trace the movement of the sea as irony as it winds its way from war to postwar.

The Sea and the Nihilist Vision in Wartime Japan

Death is, for the romantic, the only means of transcending the split that divides self from world and self from self. In “nothing,” romantics found the one state in which no difference exists. In the 1940s, writers and artists in Japan turned to this nihilistic vision as a means of responding to a world emptied out of meaning. The nihilistic vision did not wholly merge with wartime ideological devotion to the state, particularly that version which took shape around the sea.

Beginning in the late 1930s, the sea became the focus of renewed nationalist fervor. In 1937, the first Maritime Art Exhibition was held. Supported by the Naval Ministry, the yearly exhibition was designed to further interest in the maritime frontier. In 1940, the Cooperative for the
Maritime Literary Arts (Kaïyô bungei kyôkaï), one of many literary groups organized to support nationalist goals, was established. Its purpose:

to advance all investigations and research into cultural assets related to the sea; to properly further the expression of the spirit of the Japanese maritime nation, the strength of the Japanese maritime nation, and the beauty of the Japanese maritime nation through literary works in particular; and to promote and deepen our race’s awareness of and passion for the sea.4

In addition to state-sponsored exhibitions and organizations, the 1940s also featured a number of literary scholars who attempted to organize and promote a canon of Japanese maritime literature. Chief among these were Yanagida Izumi and Yoshie Takamatsu, both of whom had long expressed an interest in maritime spaces.

In their wartime essays, both Yanagida and Yoshie registered their disappointment with the paucity of ocean-voyaging literature in Japan in forlorn tones reminiscent of Kôda Rohan and Takayama Chogyû decades earlier.5 That did not stop them from believing strongly in the relationship between the Japanese people and the sea. “We do, as Japanese, have a passionate fascination with and love for the sea,” Yoshie wrote, “but it has long been our habit to have little direct contact or experience with it. That is, we lack awareness.”6 The calls for a maritime literature and art in the 1940s were an attempt to foster that awareness.7 The oceanic imaginary that formed in the late Meiji Period, and the desires concomitant with it, had not faded with time; filaments of it persisted through the Taishô (1912-1926) and into the early Shôwa (1926-1989) periods. In the early 1940s, it was asserted with renewed vigor as part of an effort to conjure a national sensibility that extended Japanese identity to ocean spaces. Nationalist poets like Kawai Suimei (1874-1965) and Ōki Atsuo (1895-1977) were two of those who helped shape it.

In “Spring Victory” (Senshô no haru), the second poem in his collection The Greater East Asian War (Daitôa sensô, 1943), Kawai Suimei cried:

Ah, how auspicious!
welcoming the morning of the two-thousand
five-hundred and ninety-eighth year
inaugurating the national founding
the spring sunlight
shines on the waves of the surrounding seas

Kawai’s poem counts years according the wartime calendar that traced its beginning to 660 BCE, the year in which the legendary figure Emperor Jimmu was said to have established the Japanese nation. The calendar was a way of marking time, a temporal progression of one year to the next, but each year only recalled the same originary moment: Jimmu’s mythical accession to the throne. In Kawai’s wartime poetry, the progression of time comes to a halt, yielding to an eternal image of the past that Kawai illuminates in the brightness of a spring ocean dawn. Kawai was not the only poet to evoke this sentiment over the expanse of the sea. In the poetry of Ōki Atsuo, a poet conscripted into the Imperial Navy, we find a similar image of time reshaped into a continuum as flat as the line of the oceanic horizon.

In Ōki’s poem “Sunrise over the Sea” (Kaijō nisshutsu), part of his collection Clouds and Palms (Kumo to yashi, 1944), a single oceanic dawn recalls in the poet-speaker a moment spread throughout eternity:

Was it so in times long ago?
the grand rising sun, emerging
on this limitless ceaselessly flowing
divine indigo  dark blue
southern ocean sea

Here the sun breaks over the horizon, not as the dawning of a new day, but as a repetition of all those that preceded it. Ōki homogenizes the movement of time into a single flowing course of the constant and ever-same. The sun, the cosmological embodiment of the emperor and symbol of his divinity, produces a spatial equivalent to the homogenous representation of time, casting its blinding light over the surrounding ocean’s surface.

this ocean sea I gaze out far upon
when I realize it is the sea of my lord
words fail me, tears fall
so bright I cannot even look.\textsuperscript{11}

The static view of time expressed in the poems of Kawai and Ōki was not a rejection of history; on the contrary, their poems commemorate it by reading every event and endeavor in terms of an unbroken chain anchored securely in the ancient past. Their poems draw the ocean into this vision, shaping it, more often than not, into a bright space of sunrises and celebratory deeds. In the nihilistic vision, this space was twisted, if not wholly inverted.

In the wartime paintings of Fujita Tsuguji, the sea functions as the backdrop to scenes of horrific and yet piercingly beautiful destruction. Fujita’s paintings embrace a nihilistic vision that occupies an uneasy and ironic position between wartime propaganda and an aesthetic that undermines the force of wartime ideology. Perhaps none of his works embody this vision more than \textit{Broken Jewels at Attu Island} (\textit{Attsu jima gyokusai}, 1943; Figure 1), one of a series of war documentary paintings that the Imperial Army commissioned Fujita to complete. The work’s title references the sacrifice of Japanese soldiers in combat at Attu, an island in the Aleutian chain, by calling upon the epithet \textit{gyokusai}, the oft-employed trope that euphemistically replaced the dead, broken bodies of Japanese soldiers with the image of shattered jewels. And yet, in re-imagining the scene of combat, Fujita depicts both Japanese soldiers and their American counterparts in an undifferentiated mass of tangled bodies. Friend and foe are all but indistinguishable from each other, painted in the same earthen tones of brown and red used to color the rocky shore. In this nihilistic vision, identities merge through the butts of rifles and the blades of bayonets. This ambiguity troubled critics at the time—Ishii Hakutei, for instance, wrote that \textit{Attu Island}, “prior to enabling any sense of awe at the loyalty and bravery of the imperial forces has the tendency to awaken in the viewer feelings of antipathy.”\textsuperscript{12}

Ishii expressed reservation at Fujita’s work and other works like it because it did not offer a clear and distinct vision of the war. Many of Fujita’s fellow artists, commissioned by the state, flooded their paintings with a bright, lucent light that clears space of any potential ambiguity or ambivalence.\textsuperscript{13} Their works are designed to commemorate a particular
moment, to create a temporal index against which the viewer can trace the movement and progress of history. The majority of painters were Western-style artists, called upon because their realist forms were seen to be the most appropriate for the depiction of wartime engagements. Fujita’s depiction resists these associations and realist methods. But this does not mean, as some critics have argued, that *Attu Island* visually figures Fujita’s resistance to the war.\(^1\)

The sea in the background is a dark and empty space, as devoid of life as the barren shore. But in the raging ocean waves that threaten to break over the scene of slaughter unfolding below, we are asked to believe in the presence and power of divine winds (*kamikaze*). In *Attu Island*, godly assent is inscribed onto a scene of complete and total destruction. In depicting the divine winds, Fujita references the late-13\(^{th}\) century Mongol invasions of Japan. In the second attempted invasion of 1281, the Mongol forces were repelled by a massive typhoon interpreted as divine intervention. Fujita’s reference to these divine winds in *Attu Island* enabled him to transform a complete defeat into uncompromised victory.\(^2\) There can be no history here because Fujita’s work transcends it, embracing a
hauntingly beautiful and frozen moment of mutual annihilation.

*Attu Island* and Fujita’s other wartime paintings function ironically, situating themselves in an uncomfortably ambivalent relationship vis-à-vis wartime nationalist discourse. The irony that we find here, however, is not the same as the ironic sea that we find in the work of Aoki Shigeru or Herman Melville. Fujita never demonstrated a fascination with sea spaces in particular. For him, the sea was only one space of negation. Mishima Yukio, who came of age at the peak of this nihilism in the early 1940s, would formulate his entire literary vision around it. Mishima used the nihilistic vision to negate value systems in an effort to find a value that exists beyond all of them. In his work, this negative irony consistently takes shape around and through images of the sea.

Mishima Yukio and the Irony of the Sea

We can see Mishima’s interest in the sea in the earliest of his fiction, “Forest in Full Bloom” (*Hanazakari no mori*, 1941), composed when he was a sixteen year-old student at the Peers’ School. Written in a florid, quasi-classical literary style, “Forest in Full Bloom” is a work that searches out spatialized aesthetic moments of feeling through an imagistically rich lyrical language that works against the force of linear narrative form. Although the young narrator of the story obsesses over his past and his ancestors, his interest in the past does not mark a historiographic desire to trace out his lineage; rather, it is an attempt to distill an essential mode of being that connects his mother, grandmother, great aunt, and beyond in a bond that supersedes time. He identifies, at the core of his familial bloodline, a form of absolute “longing” (*akogare*), that is, one incapable of every being sated. “I know the form of longing,” the narrator tells us. “Longing is exactly like a river. No part of the river is the river. For a river flows. That which was the river yesterday is not the river today, and yet the river is forever there. People can beckon it. They cannot describe it. My yearning is exactly this. And so, too, is my ancestors” (*MYz* 15:489). And as with all rivers, this river of longing empties out into the sea.

The sea is a leitmotif in “Forest in Full Bloom,” a symbol of the longing that connects all of the stories that the narrator recounts. In the second of the three episodes, the narrator tells of a young wife who lived at
the end of the Heian Period (794-1185). Traveling with her husband, the woman encounters the ocean for the first time in her life. Having always feared the sea, she finds herself now strangely captivated by the sight of it.

The broad seascape spread out as though it were the most natural of things placed in the most natural of places. The sky was brightly clear, and the floating clouds gleamed gold like the clouds in a picture scroll. The long peninsula, still shaded a fresh green, curved like an elegant arm cradling its right hand. For the first time, the woman drew into the haven of her breast the form of the whale-hunting sea. Just as it was rare for a serious wound to immediately carry forth pain, the woman discovered, in that brief moment, something completely unlike the fear that she had expected. And as the full force [of the sea] struck her breast, the Dragon King made his home within her. The woman was in ecstasy, the sort of strange ecstasy into which one plummets the instant before being killed, all the while knowing one will be killed (MYz 15:501).

In the ocean, the woman discovers what nearly all of Mishima’s hydrophilic characters would in the years to come: a powerful, thrilling, orgiastic pleasure that can only be felt in the moment of annihilation. In this ironic yoking of ecstasy and death, the young Mishima points to that crystallized moment of transcendence when the self erupts past its limits. The language, in its overwrought metaphors and allusions, speaks of a similar transcendental desire. In his use of the poetic epithet “whale-hunting” (isanatori) that, in classical poetry, modifies “sea,” and allusions to figures such as the mythical Dragon King, the narrator repeatedly calls upon classical structures of feeling in order to escape the limits of his own.

The sentences, too, which leap from one simile to another, repeatedly over-extend the expressive powers of language. The tropes (e.g., “spread out as though it were the most natural of things placed in the most natural of places”) carry little to no semantic force; they are purely ornamental, and as ornament they aspire to a form of absolute, purposeless beauty. That this can only be attained through the artificial and frantic manipulation of language makes such a move ironic. The fact that Mishima located this beauty in frozen moments of orgiastic violence often figured in the sea only
makes it doubly so.

The ironic language of “Forest in Full Bloom” works in harmony with the desires of its narrator, who continuously dives back into time, not to re-formulate his family’s history, but to flatten it into a spatialized moment of shared feeling. He explores his memories and the memorabilia of his ancestors—photographs, scrolls, and journals—in an attempt to see back into a world beyond his own immediate present. In this process, a form of myth-making, he discovers the longing that unites him and his family, a longing that can only be made possible through death. It is the sea that figures this longing in “Forest in Full Bloom.” In Mishima’s postwar work, the sea would continue to serve this ironic function.

In his second postwar novel, Confessions of a Mask (Kamen no kokuhaku, 1949), the protagonist-narrator recounts his efforts as a youth in wartime Japan to come to terms with his homosexual desires. As with “Forest in Full Bloom,” the narrator often recollects his narrative through images, objects, and crystallized moments of memory. In one such moment, he reminisces on his encounter with what he refers to as the “overpowering temptation of the sea”:

The waves began at first as an unstable green swelling in the offing, sliding over the surface of the sea. A gathering of low rocks protruding from the sea defied the waves by sending spray high up into the air like hands seeking salvation; at the same time, they drenched themselves in the sensation of the sea’s profound abundance, seemingly dreaming of buoys free from their moorings. But the swelling quickly left them behind and came sliding towards the shore unabated. Almost immediately something awoke within the green helmeted hood and rose up. The wave, following in behind, rose up with it, and flashed for all to see the keen blade of the sea’s great ax, ready to come down on the shoreline. The dark blue guillotine came down, sending up a spray of white blood. Immediately, the back of the wave fell seething after its crushed head and reflected, in all its absolute purity, the blue sky, that unearthly blue visible in a person’s pupils upon death (MYz 1:237).18

The passage is not allusively ornamental like the quasi-classical language of
“Forest in Full Bloom,” but in its orgiastic celebration of the metaphoric and analogical power of language it is just as overwrought. Over-sexed and over-written, it reaches out for an order that underlies all other orders, just as Herman Melville’s sentences in *Moby-Dick* stretch syntax ever further in an effort to move beyond the limits that they reveal. Mishima’s narrator, here and elsewhere, locates that absolute in complete self-annihilation that doubles as the all-encompassing fulfillment of life. The sea served as the basis for this alogical vision. In its waters, Mishima discovered a space that could hold these contradictions in dangerous suspension.

The sea pervades Mishima’s works. We continue to find it into the 1960s, perhaps most famously in *The Sailor Who Fell From Grace with the Sea* (*Gogo no eikō*, 1963) which tells the story of a sailor Ryūji, who harbors a powerful longing (*akogare*) for a heroic, glorified death that he believes awaits him at sea. It continues to unfold all the way to Mishima’s final work, * Decay of the Angel* (*Tennin gosui*, 1970), the last book in the *Sea of Fertility* tetralogy. In that work’s opening, an extended time-lapse mediation on a seascape, we hear a voice we have heard time and again throughout all of Mishima’s work: “The sea, that which is absent of name—the Mediterranean, the Japan Sea, the Suruga Bay before our eyes, all just barely united by that which can only be named the sea, and yet all refuse to submit to the name of this unnamed, this fecund and absolute anarchy” (*MYz* 14:367). The sea, always ready to the romantic as a space capable of obscuring or dissolving rational thought, proved to be fertile grounds for Mishima’s alogical mode of irony. The only work in which we find no trace of Mishima’s ironic sea is *The Sound of the Waves* (*Shiosai*, 1954).

*The Sound of the Waves* tells the story of a young fisherman, Shinji, who falls in love with and must win the right to marry, Hatsue, the daughter of a wealthy island ship owner. As Susan Napier has written, there is no hint of irony in the work: the only way we can find irony is if we take the work itself, in the nihilistic context of Mishima’s career and life, as an ironic gesture. Although there is, in the gap that he exists between the narrator and Shinji, always the potential for irony, the narrator resists this pull. He only observes, in careful and loving detail.

The young man felt in perfect balance with the fecundity of nature that surrounded him. His deep breaths, forming an unseen
part of nature, seemed to penetrate deep into his body, and the sound of the waves seemed to match the rhythms of the youthful blood flowing within his body. Shinji did not particularly require music in his everyday life, no doubt because nature itself met that need (MYz 4:260).

In *The Sound of the Waves*, in contrast to *Confessions of a Mask* and his later *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* (*Kinkakuji*, 1956), Mishima forgoes the tight narratorial perspective that delves into the twisted, labyrinthine interiorities of his protagonists. In perhaps the most quietly lyrical prose of his career, the narrator quits interior depth and studies only the surface. Any sign of depth is always marked off by a tentative phrase—such as the repeated “seemed” (*yōni omowareta*) that appears in the passage above—that calls attention to the limits of the narrator’s reach. As with the mythical tales upon which Aoki Shigeru drew, “knowing” only results in a fracture that divides the self from the world around it. The narrator, for that reason, repeatedly emphasizes that Shinji is a young man “who does not think” (MYz 4:241) or is “no good at thinking” (MYz 4:324). In his physical strength and supple flesh, there is no need to think; he need only feel. The narrator similarly feels his way along: casting his gaze over surfaces, he traces a contiguous line that envelops the body of Shinji and the natural world that surrounds him. As a result, on the island upon which *The Sound of the Waves* takes place, space lacks any qualitative difference; the sea itself rolls in tune with the somatic rhythms of its protagonist as though they were its own. In the process, primordial time is made present. The narrative goes to lengths to produce this mythical space, to construct an oasis beyond the necessity of history. However, it also repeatedly calls attention to its own artificiality.

There are, scattered throughout *The Sound of the Waves*, cracks and seams that threaten to bring down its carefully constructed pastoral world. Seams produced by sentences like the one that brings the first chapter to a close: “The flounder was laid out now upon the large white enameled dish. Red blood flowed out from its gills, still faintly working, and spread out over its smooth white skin” (MYz 4:231). Such frozen moments of stark beauty leak, like the blood that seeps from the flounder’s gills, a nihilistically destructive aesthetic that spreads throughout Mishima’s corpus. *The Sound*
of the Waves, however, also moves to seal these gaps. When Hatsue and Shinji, in one scene, seem on the verge of acting on the carnal desires that erupt out of their soaked and naked bodies, they suddenly decide to remain chaste in hope for a possible future marriage. And when Yasuo, a young man vying with Shinji for Hatsue, attempts to rape her, a hornet miraculously intervenes, stings Shinji, and allows Hatsue to make her escape. We are, at times, allowed glimpses of the external world—the Korean War and the shelled-out landscape of Okinawa—but we always come back to the closed safety island. Mishima goes to lengths to isolate the island from the workings of the everyday. But in constructing his idyllic world he repeatedly points us towards its constructedness.

The Sound of the Waves has puzzled critics over the years because it does not appear to fit in with the larger ironic arc of Mishima’s career. Later in his life, Mishima himself attempted to distance himself from the work, claiming, “I just felt like writing something that was, in every respect, antithetical to me” (MYz 31:221). But in repeatedly calling attention to its own artificiality, the narrative undermines the organic unity that it seeks to represent. For a writer such as Mishima, who viewed the world through a radically nihilistic lens, no one truth value could hold priority over another. In such a literary economy, binaries collapse and can even be exchanged: beauty is found in violence, death transmutes into life, and artificiality yields authenticity. It should not, then, come as a surprise that Mishima could write something so “antithetical” to himself, for there was never anything antithetical about it. In its artificiality, The Sound of the Waves works according to the same ironic logic as all of Mishima’s works. This ability to operate comfortably between radically different poles, to take irony and make it into a method, marks Mishima’s kinship with Herman Melville. It also marks the point where his kinship with Melville breaks apart.

Melville’s irony could be just as relentlessly destructive as Mishima’s. In land-locked Pierre (1852), Melville details the gradual collapse of the work’s anti-hero Pierre. But in Moby-Dick, surrounded by the sea, there remain gestures towards an experience capable of transporting Ishmael to some affirmative feeling of transcendence. In “A Squeeze of the Hand,” Ishmael attains momentary transcendence through the surface. Squeezing congealed spermaceti back into its original fluid state, he is transported to an ecstasy that knows no bounds.
As I sat there at my ease, cross-legged on the deck; after the bitter exertion at the windlass; under a blue and tranquil sky; the ship under indolent sail, and gliding so serenely along; as I bathed my hands among those soft, gentle globules of infiltrated tissues, woven almost within the hour; as they richly broke to my fingers, and discharged all their opulence, like fully ripe grapes their wine; as I snuffed up that uncontaminated aroma, [...] I declare to you, that for the time I lived as in a musky meadow; [...] while bathing in that bath, I felt divinely free from all ill-will, or petulance, or malice, of any sort whatsoever.24

In the unctuous touch of sperm, Ishmael finds the one sensual experience that can carry him beyond the surface. The hypotactic syntax of the passage isolates this moment, forcing us to hover over the same temporal ground. In “A Squeeze of the Hand,” we pause on a prolonged moment of orgasm, just as floridly sexualized as the sea passage in Confessions of a Mask. Ishmael squeezes and squeezes sperm until he feels as though he himself will merge with those who dip their hands alongside his: “Come; let us squeeze hands all around; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness.”25 Ishmael, too, longs for moments that carry one beyond the surface, but he finds it in the sensuousness of communal touch rather than a destructive slope that slips towards self-annihilation.

It is moments such as this that Terada Takehiko must bypass in order to make his argument for a Gnostic Melville and a nihilistic Moby-Dick. Such moments of transport will appear in Uno Kōichirō’s (1934-) work in the early 1960s. In the work of Mishima, however, we find it chiefly in The Sound of the Waves, in the body of young Shinji which throbs in turn with the sea around Song Island. Inversions of it exist throughout Mishima’s corpus. The character Ryūji in The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea, for instance, searches not for an identity that he can claim as his own, but for a death that will negate identity, thereby returning his self to a primary state of being. The liquid element pushes borders in Mishima, it promises a cessation of conscious only imagined through death.

Such a nihilistic attitude was, for Mishima, the only way beyond the
problem of modernity. In his negative worldview, the Japanese national and cultural identity which late Meiji thinkers had seen reflected in waters of the sea was merely a narrative construct as devoid of meaning as any other. His habit of mind could not simply lament the perceived loss of such an authentic metaphysical reality; his was the more radical belief that such a reality had never existed to begin with. Rather than lament—an act in which one must forever cast his thoughts back—Mishima yearned. This is why we receive, in all his works, repeated references to longing (akogare). Longing is not necessarily directed toward the future—it is unlikely that Mishima saw the future as offering any true freedom from the past or the present—but, rather, toward a time that will never come. His longing is, in that sense, oriented toward the possibility of an impossible future, a future that is, in other words, ultimately unknowable and, therefore, unrecognizable. In his works, the sea is the embodiment of this longing. Mishima voices this paradox as early as “Forest in Full Bloom.”

In the final story of “Forest in Full Bloom” another of the narrator’s ancestors, a woman born in early Meiji, recalls a childhood conversation she had with her brother before he passed away. She asks him how far the sea extends, to which he replies, “There is no sea, no matter how far you go. The sea might not exist even were you to travel upon it” (MYz 14:506). Only much later in life, after she has sought out, lived, and retreated from a life along the shore, does the woman come to realize the truth of her brother’s words. Such was the sea for Mishima: the embodiment of longing and the impossible answer to it. The irony of this longing can leave us grasping, searching desperately along his walls of paradox for meaningful purchase. But if there is meaning to be found in Mishima’s ironic forms, it is concentrated in the surface. In his overwrought prose, which revels in the sheen of youthful skin and the spray of breaking waves, Mishima attempts a form that, in its sheer artificiality, points to the impossibility of locating an authentic order that underlies all orders even as it expresses the powerfully insistent longing for it.

Melville as a Nihilist: Terada Takehiko’s Reading of Moby-Dick

The nihilism to which Mishima turned was not unique to him. In 1956, the British and American literary scholar Terada Takehiko
(1916-2008) published one of the first major critical works on Herman Melville and *Moby-Dick* in postwar Japan—an essay entitled, innocuously and humbly enough, “Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*—An Analysis and Interpretation.” In it, Terada writes of Melville as a thinker who radically questioned the Protestant Christian tradition in which he was raised, the same tradition that birthed romantic thought in Europe in the late 18th century and the modern Japanese literary-cultural imaginary one century later. He refers to Melville as an “orphan of God” and situates him within the Gnostic tradition, a syncretic pagan theological system which held that the world was divided into a suprasensible, unknowable realm and the sensual material reality. In Gnosticism the true, pure creator is understood as having withdrawn into the former realm, leaving the demiurge, a lesser, imperfect deity, to fashion the impure material world in which man was forced to exist. This approach has the benefit of drawing attention to Melville’s dualistic habit of mind—as Gnostic, Melville understood the world as irretrievably split.

Terada reads the conflict between Ahab and the white whale in terms of this dualistic worldview. He writes of *Moby-Dick* as a mortal struggle between the Gnostic titan, Ahab, and the demiurge, Moby Dick, which Ahab must defeat if he is to glimpse the suprasensible world that lies beyond this one. In his last act of defiance, Ahab, whom Terada equates with Melville himself, attempts to strike through the white wall that is Moby Dick. “In this terrifying death-match did Ahab ever manage to finally confirm the existence of a divine God?” Terada asks. “Supposing he only managed to discern some faint shadow beyond the white wall; or, supposing nothing existed beyond the wall at all—then, at that moment, the entire gnosismetaphysical structure comes crumbling down. And in the aftermath of the collapsed pillar of metaphysics, the knock heard at the door to the soul of the orphan of God can be none other than the uncanny, ‘unbidden guest’—European nihilism.”

This is the “tragedy” of *Moby-Dick* for Terada, a tragedy far more radical than anything that Abe Tomoji allowed himself to see or imagine in 1934. In Terada’s reading, the metaphysical self dreamed of as being identical to itself is revealed as fundamentally and permanently split. In the wake of this knowledge there is no absolute truth, no mode of being that can offer any epistemological support. Terada’s nihilistic understanding of
Melville was made possible by his careful reading of Nietzsche and Heidegger, and the works of writers like Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky, and D.H. Lawrence. It is also made possible by the nihilist romantic thought that dominated wartime Japan.

Terada closes his essay with a reading of the cataclysmic destruction of the Pequod, the same scene that Ayukawa took as his subject in “Ishmael” quoted above. Terada writes:

Here hangs an indescribably profound and eternal sense of nihilism. Here obtains an indescribably ominous reflection on the beyond of the void, where the soul of man freezes and dies. But it is no longer possible for us to venture an analysis; it is useless, it is even impure. It is forbidden for man, who exists as flesh, to wind his way in behind the world into which his existence has been cast. The magnetic needle of interpretation and analysis, tools of the meaningless field of literary studies, no longer serve any purpose now. I must declare together with Hamlet—The rest is silence.³⁰

In these concluding lines, Terada assumes the same nihilistic worldview that he discerns in Melville’s writing. He merges his voice with Melville’s and refers to literary studies as “meaningless” (hakanai), the act of interpretation as “useless” (muda) and even “impure” (fuketsu). He rhetorically overlays his attempt to peer into the essence of Melville with Melville’s own effort to glimpse, through Ahab, into the beyond of the suprasensible world. He declares his own act of criticism has been in vain—the magnetic needle is cast awry—and, rather than go any further, Terada chooses a figurative death.

Abe Tomoji reworked the same scene of destruction that Terada takes up in his essay into the ending of his A Winter’s Longing (Fuyu no yado, 1936). But the abyss that Abe’s narrator swerves away from, Terada and Ayukawa embrace. What did they see in this cataclysmic scene of destruction? The answer seems to lie in its promise of an ending. In the swirling vortex, we see figured the shape of the negativity that forms the ground of the metaphysical subject. Unlike Abe, Ayukawa and Terada were willing to confront that negativity. Mishima Yukio, however, shaped his entire literary imagination around it. His works unfold through paradoxes.
and contradictions, they take an ironic approach to literary production and form one more version of the irony of the sea. By the start of the 1960s, as Mishima was entering the latter part of his career, other filaments of the irony of the sea begin to appear in the writings of Uno Kōichirō.
Chapter Four
Uno Kōichirō and the Irony of the Sea

In the early fiction of Uno Kōichirō (1934- ), a reader of Melville and admirer of *Moby-Dick*, the irony of the sea transitions to another form. Uno’s early works, published in the early 1960s, form a response to this nihilistic vision of Mishima and wartime Japan. As with Mishima, Uno’s works search for some way beyond the immense weight of time and history. They appear to locate it in the world of myth and ritual, the same world to which Uno’s Meiji forefathers turned. But Uno did not commit to a simple return. In the realm of myth, Uno’s finds a nightmare of the ever-same: narratives of the past that return to determine and constrain the present. In Uno’s stories, characters are doomed to repeat the path carved out by their forbearers. But within this nightmare Uno allows space for a freedom that Mishima’s romantic nihilism could not easily permit. And key to this freedom is the space of the shore.

In the shore, a threshold realm that joins and divides sea and land, Uno locates a space that blurs lines, limits, and boundaries. Uno creates a formal analogue to this space in his literary language, which explores and presses against borders of interior and exterior, surface and depth, language and the world it seeks to represent. This language, in turn, speaks to Uno’s desire to cross limits, including those represented by narratives of the past which work to hem us in. In the end, Uno acknowledges the past as an ever-present horizon constraining our experience, but he also suggests, ironically, that, even bounded and determined by the past, freedom and autonomy remain possible. In *The Whale God*, the sea as irony holds out the possibility that the romantic dream of transcendence can be made into reality.

From Land to Sea: Uno Kōichirō’s Encounter with *Moby-Dick*

The early fiction of Uno Kōichirō voices the same insistent desire for authenticity of identity and being that we see across Mishima’s works. In stories like *Famine of Light* (*Hikari no ue*, 1961) and *The Whale God* (*Kujiragami*, 1961), Uno registers the desire and impossibility of attaining freedom from the past. In both works, Uno crafts mythical narrative spaces
that exist beyond the force of historical time. In a move reminiscent of his literary and artistic predecessors in the 1890s, Uno abolishes time and its duration. But in the ahistorical space of myth, Uno finds, not freedom, but imprisonment. Characters in Uno’s works are trapped by a past that refuses to remain continues to return in a circle out of which there is no escape. In *Famine of Light* this ahistorical space forms around a terrestrial vision—a desolate and mountainous landscape that suffocates and surrounds. In *The Whale God*, a work inspired in part by Uno’s reading of *Moby-Dick*, the vision shifts to one of sea and shore. *The Whale God* offers a glimpse at freedom, it offers a potential way beyond the suffocating narratives of the past that shape and constrain us. In it, Uno suggests that freedom can be found ironically, in the very past we struggle to escape. His work marks a shift in the irony of the sea, from one of radical nihilism, to one of potential affirmation.

As we saw in the first chapter, myth in the late Meiji Period (1868-1912) and into the Taishō (1912-1926), served as a powerful remedy to feelings of alienation produced by the historical forces of linear progress. Intellectuals, writers, and painters turned to archetypes in the distant, mythical past so as to evoke, through a community of shared rituals and gestures, the material meaning that they perceived as absent or vanishing in the modern world. Writers like Uno continued to look to myth in the early 1960s as means of re-enchanting experience and resurrecting past structures of feeling. In modes of oral storytelling, Uno and writers like him such as Ōe Kenzaburō found a sensibility that could renew their language and literary form. But in returning to myth, they also questioned it. As Uno’s works show, the closed and cyclical structures that characterize the mythical worldview (e.g., meaning found in archetypes or paradigms) snuff out the possibility of freedom and priority. In the world of myth, the horizon of experience always leads back to where one began, an experience of eternal recurrence from which there is no hope for escape.

In *Famine of Light*, his first major work of fiction, Uno focuses his writerly gaze not on the sea but on the earth—the narrative takes place in a destitute and all-but-abandoned mining settlement. The work is set over a decade after the conclusion of the Pacific War, but in this isolated space people seem to exist outside of time or, more accurately, outside of time as historically conceived. We are thrust into the world of an ahistorical past.
with *Famine of Light*'s opening line: “On windy nights you can hear the hum of countless people flying through the sky, so people say in this small mining village next to the sea” (99).\(^1\) In its inscription of symbolic meaning upon an everyday occurrence, the narrative calls upon the logic of myth. But myth does not have the same power that it did for the generation of Aoki Shigeru. Myth is, rather, treated ironically. In the dead wasteland land of *Famine of Light*, to exist outside of time proves more imprisoning than living within it.

The mine in *Famine of Light* has long been closed, but the settlement’s residents, too poor to leave, subsist on the veins they can locate with pick or explosive. The protagonist of the work, a youth named Keisuke, leads a life of monotonous repetition, each day entering old mining tunnels to uproot railroad ties or copper wires. Keisuke dreams of becoming a free man (*hitorimae no otoko*) and occasionally he thinks that he has attained it: “I’m a man, I’m alone and free now like an animal, Keisuke thought, feeling himself floating in a strange excitement as he gazed at the fog enshrouding his body only to immediately be blown off by the wind” (107). But the narratives of the past adhere to him like the layers of dirt, oil, and blood that encrust his skin. “I’ve had enough!” Keisuke cries at one point, in impotent frustration, “I’ve had enough already! I’m sick of it all” (146)! “We’ve all had enough, same as you,” one of the settlement’s elders tells him, “That’s why we’re trying to figure out how to bring an end to these terrible things.” There is no end, however. The past is not ready to relinquish its hold on the present. It literally returns, in the form of ghosts, to haunt the landscape: “When night fell on the valley and the wind blowing in from the sea grew stronger, everywhere people heard the cries of ghosts blown about in the fog” (99). Patterns of repetition guide life in the settlement: an old woman who keeps a pig as a pet sells it to the settlement for slaughter; when we see her walking through the town the next day, she has with her another pig. In the terrestrial world of *Famine of Light*, the more things change, the more they remain the same.

And yet, within its meditation on the pressures the past brings to bear on the present, *Famine of Light* also finds the room to describe lyrical moments of undeniable freedom. When Keisuke’s father dies, an event which opens the narrative, Keisuke senses an autonomy he has never known:

Closing his eyes, he could see through the flow of blood under his
eyelids the single speck of the sun glimmering in the clouded sky, he could perceive the thistle leaves hanging above drop their striking smell and shade over his face as they rustled, and he could feel his sweat drying rapidly in the wind blowing in from the sea and carrying with it the erotic scent of sand. Feels great, whispered Keisuke, half in a dream as he listened to the wild hum of a hornet growing suddenly loud, now soft, in his ear (101).

Keisuke is a cousin of Mishima’s Shinji in *The Sound of the Waves*. In his intensity of feeling, he forgets the borders of his self and dissolves into the rhythms of the world that surrounds him. Sensual perception draws the sun, the wind, and the sound of the hornet into his body, its eyes, skin, nose, and ears. But these moments of freedom exists only temporarily. When, for instance, the village holds a festival intended to quell the spirits of the mine, the communal celebration produces an carnivalesque atmosphere of sexual unrestraint in which “all the chains that had constrained human relations came undone around the bonfire; people left partners to form fluid new relations, and quickly released those to form a new partner or, alternately, focused on preserving them” (136). But in the aftermath of this orgiastic glow we learn that, “The excitement of the festival and memories of connectedness soon faded, coated in the grime of everyday life, and the villagers once again closed themselves up within their shells of shame and misery” (147). The settlement returns to life as it has always been. The terrestrial world of *Famine of Light* closes out all possibility of freedom.

The sea does appear within the suffocating and claustrophobic wasteland of *Famine of Light*. It hovers on the outskirts of the narrator’s terrestrial vision, coming to us in the touch of the breeze, the sound of the wind, or the reverberation of the waves over the horizon. When it comes into visual focus, however, it merely reflects the desolation and bleakness of the land it adjoins: “As [Keisuke] climbed the hill the wind began to strengthen and the rumbling of the sea began reverberate cut by the wind. A soft, black field spread out below and at its edge, across from the bank that formed a gray line, the sea unendingly blew up its white spray” (105). In its shades of black, grey, and white, the image is the obverse of the colorful seascapes that pervade late Meiji and Taishō paintings of the sea. In its colorless scene, it resembles, rather, their negative.
This same negative space of this sea appears once more, later on in the narrative:

The tides continued to ebb away quietly until the surface of the water washed the seaweed-covered semi-circular stone-stepped terrace leaving fiercely glimmering pools of waters scattered here and there and splinters of wood, garbage, dead bodies of dogs, and rotting vegetables were left still, clinging to the mud. A woman abruptly stood up and, as a signal, the other women rushed into the mud with a cry, stirred the mud about with both hands, gathered up the coal that fell from the buckets and tossed it into the bag at their backs (118).

The sea of *Famine of Light* is an inversion of the oceanic imaginary created by artists in the late Meiji and early Taishō Periods who envisioned the shore as a repository of Japanese culture and tradition. In the seashore, where Meiji and Taishō artists discovered the crystallized image of a pastoral and unchanging folk, Uno finds only a sinister space of death and rot. The women divers (*ama*) he depicts scrounge not for shellfish, but for fragments of coal littered among garbage, rotting vegetables, and decaying dogs. The dreams of difference earlier generations had entertained in the surface of the sea had become, for Uno and his generation, a terrible nightmare from which they could not awaken.

In *Famine of Light*, Uno asks us to consider the ways in which the past surrounds us with all the sureness of bedrock and stone. We can strike at it with picks and blast it open with explosives. But, as though in reply, the past only wraps itself around us even tighter, as in the narrative’s climactic mine explosion, which buries the majority of the settlement’s remaining men. The earth is “a merciless mother who devours her children,” the villager elder decries (145). He might just as easily have said the same of the past. In its insistence that the past cannot be outrun, *Famine of Light* presents as darkly a nihilistic vision as the one voiced by Mishima Yukio. This nihilistic vision, however, had not yet become an irony of the sea.

Uno wrote that *Moby-Dick* provided him with “a great number of hints” for *The Whale God.* As with Melville’s work, *The Whale God* is a story of revenge against a powerful and cunning whale. The kinship between
the two works, however, operates on a level more powerful than that of plot; it extends to a formal logic that I have, throughout this work, termed the sea as irony. In *The Whale God*, the sea as irony traces a familiar desire: the longing to escape the limits that time and history place on being and identity even as those limits are shown to be the source of our identity.

The protagonist of the work, a young whale hunter named Shaki, is sworn to slay a whale that killed his grandfather, father, and older brother. As with *Famine of Light*, in *The Whale God*, Uno poses the question, to what extent freedom and autonomy are possible in a world where narratives of the past continue to shape and determine both the present and the future? Uno’s answer to this question is complex and ironic. Key to understanding it unfolds his answer along the space of the shore. A liminal realm, the shore delimits and divides even as it facilitates contact and connection. Uno’s narrative form does the same. It obsesses over boundaries and borders as they appear across multiple registers, including space (inside/outside), vision (surface/depth), body (self/other), and voice (narrator/character). In focusing on boundaries and borders and the ways in which they connect and divide, Uno blurs and confuses them. He pushes against boundaries from within them so as to locate a way beyond them. In the end, Uno brings these desires to bear on the narrative’s conclusion. In the final pages, Uno entertains the dream that boundaries vanish. He suggests uneasily and too easily that freedom from the bounding line of the past is possible even as that bounding line circles us. In his insistence upon the dream of freedom within the bounded structure, Uno forms a reply to the nihilistic vision that appears in the works of writers like Mishima Yukio.

*The Whale God* tells a tale about the past and the ways in which, in the form of narratives of repetition, it forms a bounding line that constrains one’s identity and the possibility of priority. The narrative’s principal story involves the legend of a young man known as Shaki who seeks revenge on a right whale “with an extremely large white callosity” (116). The whale, referred to by villagers as the whale god, killed Shaki’s grandfather and brother when it first appeared. Three years later, it took the life of Shaki’s elder brother, who had taken an oath to slay the whale. In the wake of his death, the duty falls to Shaki who has been sworn to the same oath of vengeance. Shaki’s tale concerns the limits that the past places on both the present and the future. An actor in a narrative to which the past lays claim,
Shaki appears consigned to repeat the lives and deaths of his grandfather, father, and brother. The past forms a horizon of experience beyond which Shaki can never venture. It is such bounding lines of blood and time that *The Whale God* expresses an interest in exploring. The work traces a similar horizon in its structure, which embeds Shaki’s tale within a larger narrative frame.

*The Whale God* opens with an anonymous first-person narrator who recalls to us how he first encountered Shaki’s legend through an old whale picture scroll (*kujira emaki*). The background and introduction to the legend comes to us through the scroll’s owner, filtered through the medium of the narrator. “My host,” the narrator reports, “cast his mind back further and further, and began to relate an old legend from these parts that became the basis for this tale of mine” (171). After the scroll’s owner introduces Shaki’s story, we shift back to the narrative present where the principal narrator, accompanied by his host, walks along the beach. The narrator quietly reflects, “As my host retraced it, the tale gradually began to swell up within me and the form of the boy Shaki, whose name I didn’t know the characters for, floated up before me in an image so rich it was no less powerful than having seen him with my own eyes” (172). In noting that he does not know the characters for Shaki’s name, the narrator calls our attention to the limits of his knowledge. But the narrative draws an inverse correlation between the narrator’s lack of knowledge and the visual clarity that Shaki’s figure assumes. We find a similar fissure between interior and exterior: the tale is said to “swell up” (*fukure agaru*) within the narrator and manifest itself outside him. In *The Whale God*, borders are conceived of as fluid. They frequently present themselves only to give way.

Other figures from the tale emerge as well until, finally, the entire beach upon which the narrator walks transforms into the world of the story he has just heard:

the small nursery where the children were playing became the raucous whale house, the minute details of the tale, not included in the legend, came together within me, and, before I knew it, a golden froth boiled over far out at sea and the grand form of the whale god began to swim in towards me— (171-172).
The narrator, here, describes a dissolution of the borders distinguishing disparate times and spaces. Not only do the past and present merge, but boundaries that mark off inside from out appear confused as well: the details of the tale, which begins outside the narrator in the story told by his host, come together within him. The violence of this process in the discrepancy formed in the juxtaposition of the small nursery with the boisterous whale-house, a place where the whale meat is rendered and processed.

In its enraptured tone and play with spatial boundaries, the passage resonates with the conclusion to *Moby-Dick*'s first chapter, “Loomings,” in which Ishmael discourses on his reasons for going to sea. Chief among his motives, Ishmael lists the “overwhelming idea of the great whale himself” and one phantom-like form in particular: “the great flood-gates of the wonder-world swung open, and in the wild conceits that swayed me to my purpose, two and two there floated into my inmost soul, endless processions of the whale, and, midmost of them all, one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air.” Ishmael, too, is interested in the relation between exterior and interior. The flood gates of the wonder-world swing open into him, and the massive forms of whales seem to fit within the innermost borders of his soul.

I do not mean to argue that Uno had Melville’s passage in mind as he constructed his own. I only wish to point out the interest on the part of both writers at this early point in their respective narratives in the exploration of spatial borders and boundaries. “Loomings,” too, takes place on the shore, prefatory of the narrative’s move from land to sea. *The Whale God* also begins on the shore, but unlike *Moby-Dick* it stays there, hovering on this liminal space that joins and separates earth and water. The narrative unfolds on this border, tracing an uneasy movement between cohesion and collapse.

In telling the story of Shaki and his quest for revenge, the narrator continues to focus his narrative energies on borders. The small seaside village where the story takes place is said to be located “at a time when the countryside was not yet aware that the era name had shifted to Meiji” (164). The fishing village itself marks a spatial aporia within historical time, located at an indeterminate moment both within and outside the modern period. In the isolated fishing village, religions, too, have merged into hybrid pantheistic forms where Jesus assumes his place alongside local deities. The
village has a “small temple at which there were enshrined the three sea gods, Sokotsutsunō, Nakatsutsunō, and Uwatsutsunō, and, inside, a poorly carved statue of young Jesus held by Mary” (178). When praying to the village’s sea gods, Shaki claps his hands, but when he standing in front of the graves of his ancestors his fingers move just as easily to trace the sign of the cross. In *The Whale God*, the line of the shore marks a space where disparate times and beliefs come into contact. Uno crafts a narrative form that attempts the same by reimagining boundaries as bounding lines that contain and limit as well as shape and define.

*The Whale God’s* narrator probes the borders of bodies and objects. When Shaki encounters an old beggar who knew his grandfather, the narrator sees, not a human being, but a “lump of rags shook, turning its face this way and that” (187). At the baptism of a child that Shaki has adopted as his own, a far off cry interrupts the service: “Everyone raised their heads and gazed at the black shadow that came tumbling down the gleaming white dune ridge” (191). The narrator, in describing an object, often circles it, focusing on its surface. Forms of knowing that require penetration or inhabitation are elided, if not refused. He depicts objects elliptically, rendering them indistinct, a process which ironically bodies them forth, making them present and palpable. The visible outward contours of the body become the determinate principle that shapes the thing. We see this again in the oft-repeated term *kehai* or “sense.”

The narrator draws our attention to the feeling or presence that the surface of an object generates. When Shaki ascends to the village shrine, the narrator tells us that, “He could feel around him the smell of moss and quiet sense [*kehai*] of leaves going to rot” (178). As Shaki makes his way to the family gravesite, we are told: “There was definitely a sense [*kehai*] in the alcove, cut into the tableland like a square ditch. It produced the sense [*kehai*] of something heavy, he knew not what, which had cast its body down on the hard rock” (179-180). And when he visits Ei, the young single mother whose baby he adopts as his own, we learn: “In the poor shack there was no sense [*kehai*] that anything had been prepared, not a rice cake nor any sake” (185). The term *kehai* references a sensation that does not take sharp, distinguished form. It is a presence intuited through the body rather than known through the rational mind. In feeling the surface of objects, Uno’s narrator confers palpability and immediacy upon the world even as it
acknowledges the limits of its reach. His language acknowledges the way in which language can only reference objects with which it cannot be equivalent. Characters and identities in *The Whale God* are limited in a similar way.

*The Whale God* questions the metaphysical status of the self through its refusal to think of identity as stable or unitary. The narrative projects identity across characters, splitting people so that they comprise a whole in their complementarity. In *The Whale God*, pairings occur between Shaki and a drifter from Kishū, Shaki and the whale god, Toyo and Ei, and an old beggar and the village elder. The Kishū man rapes and impregnates Ei; Shaki pretends to the world that he is Ei’s lover and the baby’s father. Toyo is fated to marry Shaki even though she does not care for him; Ei cares for Shaki but will never officially become his wife. The old beggar flees the village because he sees the obsession with the whale god as insanity; the village elder can only think of slaying the whale god and while give up everything to accomplish it. Uno’s narrator deals with character in the same way as vision and touch—circularly and elliptically. Characters are redundant and contradictory at one and the same time. The narrator juxtaposes them against one other as if to suggest that being can only be made whole through its division and opposition. In so doing, Uno challenges us, like Melville, to think about how selves are to be distinguished and defined. The interest in the limits of identity signals an interest in locating a way beyond them. We perceive this desire for a beyond most powerfully in Shaki, who fears any process that threatens to make something less than a whole.

The day after returning from a hunt, Shaki visits the whale-house where the catch is dismembered, boiled down, and processed. The breaking up of the whale into its respective materials—oil, meat, tendons, bone—repels him. The narrator tells us, “He could never bring himself to get used to it” (176). As he stands at the edge of the scene, he thinks of the whale god.

I don’t want let this happen when it comes time for him, for the whale god’s funeral. I just want to get my revenge, then send him off quietly into the north seas. He’s been shamed enough by my grandfather, my father, and my brother. He’s the only one I don’t want let be cut apart by the hands of these landsmen, boiled down and processed after I’ve
stabbed him through with my harpoon. Just him (176).

Shaki detests the thought of the whale god meeting the same fate as the whale processed before him, as though the taking apart of its body will signal loss of its essence and disassociation of its meaning. He wish to preserve the whale god in its corporeal entirety signals a desire on his own part for an identity he can claim solely as his own, a desire reflected in the use of active and passive verbs that distinguish his actions from those of his forbearers. But what Shaki comes to see and, in the closing moments of the narrative, experience, is that identity can only be forged in the breaking down of the body’s borders.

As the narrative pushes towards its conclusion, it diverges from its focus on borders and their confusion. The narrative evinces a desire to transcend the borders it has located itself along. The borders give way too easily, as though they had never existed. At one point, in the climactic fight between Shaki and the whale god, Shaki finds himself gazing into the whale god’s small and open eye:

The eye, tinged with blue, stared straight at the young man as though imploring him: it was unexpectedly and quietly clear, flashing forth neither hatred nor spite.

Stunned and still, Shaki felt as though he and the whale god gazed at each other for a long time (208).

The narrative, which has repeatedly traced limits that separate and divide, presents us here with a strange, almost mystical scene of fusion. In the whale god’s clear eye, no borders seem to exist—it yields up a transparent view of depth and understanding. The desire for transcendence is one the work has obsessed over from its start: first, in the narrator who feels his present world transmogrify into the world of the tale; and, thereafter, in the limits and boundaries that the narrative so painstakingly traces so as to cross or blur them. But, in this moment of self-reflected gazing, no boundaries seem to exist at all. As Shaki approaches his own priority, limits and borders vanish.

In slaying the whale god, Shaki fulfills the pledge of vengeance. He beats out a new point in history that diverges from his predecessors. This
opens up the potential for a new identity, one wholly his own. But, in the whale’s death throes, Shaki himself is mortally wounded, his body cast into the harpoon blades that stand in the whale god’s back. “The young man felt his right shoulder and right thigh erupt in a violently searing heat, and the great sun raged in the young man’s eyes, only to soon vanish and be replaced by a heavy darkness that spread out before him—” (209). When the narrative resumes, the narratorial voice has cycled back to a first-person narration, but not the one with which it began. The anonymous narrator gives way to the voice of Shaki: “All around me was the desolate sand beach strewn with numerous rocks and dyed a brilliant red, and the waves, breaking with lonely cries, dyed the same color” (209). Beginning and end are brought into an equivocal relationship dislocated only by the fact that the “I” (watashi) who introduced the tale is not the “I” (ore) who completes it. In the final narrative shift in vocal register and the pages that follow, we are asked to consider the possibility that to repeat means to differ.

To return, at the end of the narrative, to a voice that speaks in the first-person but is not equal to the voice with which the narrative began is ironic. As with Moby-Dick, circular patterns of contradiction and paradox form the logical grooves along which Uno’s narrative runs. This ironic return implies that repetition can open space for difference. As the narrative traces its structural circle, Shaki traces another: he slips towards the deaths of his grandfather, his father, and his brother. Shaki’s impending death, however, does not strike us as an end, but, rather, as a beginning. Dismembered now, left with stumps of arms and legs, his broken body fits in a crib (nekago) that the villagers have made for him out of driftwood. Laid down inside, he seems returned to infancy.

Obeying his last wishes, the villagers sit Shaki on the shore facing the whale god’s bleached skull, the only part of its body that remains. Staring at the skull, floating in and out of consciousness, Shaki experiences a vision of himself as the whale god. The sea calls out to him, the rhythms of its waves figured as a voice that beckons him out of his own body:

At some point, pulled on by that voice, I felt transfigured into the whale god itself. I became the skull before my very eyes, my flesh swelled up to the largeness of an island, my skin transformed into thick blubber and black vellum, spray from the waves broke against
Physically enclosed in his crib, Shaki describes being pulled out of it and into a dream of himself as whale. Once again, the bounding lines of self and body bend and give way only to resolve again into a larger whole: the foreign body of the whale. The passage redefines the boundaries of the body and revises the shape of identity into something transcendent and expansive, beyond that already written by the narrative past. But the swelling up (fukure agaru) of Shaki’s flesh also recalls the tale itself “swelling up” within the principal narrator earlier, at The Whale God’s beginning. Here again, then, in its closing moments, the narrative references its start, forming a horizon which Shaki cannot cross. Uno redefines the limits of the self within the limits created by the narrative. He stretches and bends our notions of identity so that it is found in the body of another, but he does this while hinting that we are always limited by what came before.

In what are presumably his last moments of life, Shaki’s hears Ei singing the pledge of revenge to her son. Dismembered and now disembodied, Shaki has access to spaces and times otherwise unavailable to him from his physical position on the shore. “Ei was holding the baby now,” Shaki tells us, “practicing the song that she was to sing at my funeral. And the baby, some ten years from now, he would be ready to once again fight some magnificent whale a kin to the whale god” (222). As the narrative moves to seal its circle of repetition, it hints that circle will start again. But we should also note that Uno predicates this repetition on difference: Shaki’s son who is not his son will seek vengeance upon a whale who is his father but not a father. To repeat the past, to retrace the limits defined by the narratives of those that precede us, Uno suggests, leads to a difference that can produce freedom. He imagines this moment of freedom in The Whale God’s ending.

In the final paragraphs of The Whale God, Shaki trades his dream for reality.

The whale god pulled away from me and returned, once more, to the grand skull before my eyes, colored by the evening sun; and with its shadow extending lengthily behind it, it turned its nose to the sea.
and glared into the offing. A wind stirred and blew past me, I sensed death come one step closer, and, feeling released, I called to the white bones of the whale god.

“Your kind is truly wondrous.”

And the whale god answered in a voice so clear it shook the ground around me.

“And your kind, too, is truly wondrous” (222).

In the ameliorative last moments of *The Whale God*, any trace of the conflict between Shaki and the whale god dissolve into a quiet bond of mutual respect and shared contemplation. The narrative, working like an analgesic, removes all remaining tension by bringing the conflict between man and whale to a tranquil conclusion in the manner of the tragedy dreamed of by Abe Tomoji decades before. Shaki gazes out into the world and hears his own likeness in his words that the whale god casts back, their mutual speaking forging a complete and unified whole. It is an easy ending and, at the same time, it is not easy at all. There are ways in which the ending offers us, not answers, but further questions. The primary narrator-storyteller provides a frame that we cannot be certain we have ever left. Thus, we are left to wonder, in the final pages: Who is speaking here? In whose voice does one speak? In one’s own? Or another? Have we really entered a new beginning? Or have we lost entirely the possibility of beginning anew? These questions are romantic. They are also ironic. In the way that they are left to hover over the ending of *The Whale God*, they recall the very last of Aoki Shigeru’s paintings, *Morning Sun* (*Asahi*, 1911).

At the end of his life, when he was dying from consumption, Aoki chose to paint a sun rising over the surface of the ocean as though he saw within it the possibility of a new beginning. In a poem he composed earlier in life, Aoki wrote, “My fate, adrift in a whirlpool / flows on only to fall back to the beginning.” The circle was an important image for Aoki, one evocative of Buddhist notions of samsāra, the experience of continuous movement through the cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth. An early painting of Aoki’s entitled *Metempsychosis* (*Rinten*, 1903; Figure 2) depicts a series of nude female figures casting their bodies in a violent circular dance beneath a glowing orb not unlike the sun in *Morning Sun*. Aoki invokes the circle in
Buddhist contexts but also in terms of his own modernity and his romantic wish to start again. In their fragmentary and incomplete states, Aoki’s works complicate the notion of beginning and end. They force us to ponder, to what extent beginning means only to begin again. *The Whale God* poses similar questions in its sanguine conclusion.

In *The Whale God*, Uno meditates on the ability of the past to free us from history even as it binds us in a loop of repetition that pre-determines our every choice. Shaki’s life is set before he has the chance to live it. His grandfather, father, and brother all claim priority over him, burdening him with the expectation that he will redeem and rescue their past in his present. Shaki is, in that sense, endowed with the messianic power spoken of by Walter Benjamin. His is not a return to origin (Shaki can only repeat), but the fulfillment of the potentiality immanent in the past, the realization of which pushes the present into a time beyond the past that limns it. Insofar as the dream of redemption is always projected into a coming future, however, this realization lingers forever on the horizon, just beyond and out of reach. Shaki’s dilemma is one that Uno figures in his own narrative form.

We can see this most clearly in the description of the picture scroll that introduces *The Whale God*.

As with *Famine of Light*, *The Whale God* expresses an interest in past modes of representation from its very start. It opens with the description of a picture scroll or *emaki*.

Here is an old whale-picture scroll. In the middle is a giant whale, what seems to be a right whale, struggling wildly as it spouts blood while several small whale boats, distinguished by their red, white, and black paint, surround it and cast their harpoons.

A naked fisherman straddles the whale’s head, waving his blade, while below the layered netting, clinging to the whale, is another man, this one lying limply on his side and seemingly dead. The sea is rough as when there is a storm; above the whale whirl a number of white birds; and several of the small boats, having been flipped, now reveal their black keels (163).

After the narrator describes the central image of the whale hunt, Uno’s narrator draws our attention to the scroll’s shortcomings, the limits of its
form. He compares the depiction to other, similar works, and labels it “unskilled” (chisetsu) (163). He notes that its shading is “simple” (kantan) and its writing, “halting” (tadotadoshi) (163). At each turn he points to the scroll as an imperfect representation.

Representation always “begins with a duplication or repetition of identity,” Azade Seyhan writes, “Since representation can never fully recover presence or coincide ideally with it, it will always pursue strategies to cover absence.” In calling our attention to the scroll’s representational limits, Uno’s narrator outlines the absence it leaves behind. Uno predicates his entire narrative style upon this absence, continuously probing boundaries, borders, surfaces, and the line of the shore. His narrative style acknowledges limits. In its form, it seems most comfortable there. Only in the final pages, as Shaki merges with the whale god, does Uno suggest that these limits can be overcome. But this imagined fusion is predicated on Shaki’s dismembered body and the sun-bleached skull of the whale. Identities, the work suggests, can only come together when bodies are cut apart and flesh rended from bone. There is, in short, a fundamental irony in The Whale God, one which I have identified in the course of this work as the irony of the sea. The sea is, according to Uno, the most enjoyable aspect of reading Melville. It was also the one thing he found difficult, if not impossible, to evoke in The Whale God.
For Uno, Melville was, above all, a writer of the sea. In a short essay entitled “Sailor Melville,” (Funanori Meruviru, 1969), Uno wrote about his experience reading Moby-Dick: “The most enjoyable aspect of Melville lies in the ocean smell and tidal scent that pervades every page [...] The battles with whales are thrilling and the cetology chapters are of course entertaining, but, prior to that, it is this ‘sea air’ that distinguishes Melville above all else.” To identify Melville as a writer of the sea is not, in and of itself, worthy of note. But, for Uno, it is this “sea air” (shio-ke) that marks the difference between Melville’s work and his own. Uno continues: “I did, of course, garner a number of hints from Moby-Dick. But as long as I limited my setting to Japan, it was impossible for me to generate the same ‘sea air.’ The more I tried to depict a fishing village, the more it essentially became the same as a farming village.”

The climactic fight between Shaki and the whale god aside, there are no scenes in The Whale God that take place on the open sea. And once the fight with the whale god has ended, the surviving hunters make their return to shore. The “sea air” that so characterizes Melville’s Moby-Dick is absent. Uno locates this fundamental difference in a historic Japanese cultural resistance to open oceanic spaces. “The notion that Japanese are an oceanic people is a flat-out lie,” he writes, “Although it is actually far more dangerous to sail along the coast than it is to venture out into the open sea, Japanese seem to have nonetheless been uneasy once they lost direct sight of the land or mountains. Japanese sailors valued navigation by mountain rather than the reading of stars or compass.”

No tradition of sea writing exists in Japan, in prose or poetry, in spite of numerous efforts on the part of literary scholars over the years to shape such a canon. But the irony of the sea does not necessarily need a tradition of ocean-voyaging literature in order to develop. It can appear or take shape in any work that contemplates the oceanic or, even on a more basic level, the ocean’s elemental liquidity. It can even reveal itself in brief, transitory moments, such as the passage in Natsume Sōseki’s Kokoro (1914), where the protagonist-narrator attempts to approach a man he refers to only as Sensei:

I followed Sensei into the sea, and swam after him. When we had gone more than a couple of hundred yards out, Sensei turned and spoke to me. The sea stretched, wide and blue, all around us, and
there seemed to be no one near us [...] My whole body seemed to be filled with a sense of freedom and joy, and I splashed about wildly in the sea. Sensei stopped moving, and was floating quietly on his back. I then imitated him. The dazzling blue of the sky beat against my face, and I felt as though little, bright darts were being thrown into my eyes.\textsuperscript{15}

Buoyed up by the liquid element, floating on its surface and facing the open sky, the two form a connection figured in mimed action. Whatever bonds of awkwardness and hesitance prevented the narrator from approaching Sensei on land dissolves away once they are in the ocean water.

In the Japanese cultural tradition, the ocean was a chaotic realm and a gateway to the beyond. It was a space of fear and trepidation. Ghosts could rise out of its waters, gods were thought to reside in its depths, and pirates were known to roam its surface. In the Meiji Period, this sea gave way to a global one shaped by a Christian tradition that conceived of the ocean as other. Jurists, philosophers, and naval strategists from the fifteenth century Europe on had debated how to control and master it, bringing to bear on its surface narratives of conquest, progress, and history. But as writers and artists in Meiji Japan began to reflect on and respond to their modernity, they found in the sea the space to question. In its horizon, which reveals the limits of one’s knowledge and enables visions of limitlessness, writers and artists found the room to doubt, dream, and wonder. This revolution in sensibility was the marker of romantic thought.

In the 1890s, Japanese writers, thinkers, and artists turned to the oceanic element in order to escape the necessity of history. In its waters, they were able to restore meaning and substance to a world perceived as sorely lacking in both. They dreamt of the ocean space as a medium that offered access to a mythical horizon of experience from which the forces of history threatened to estrange them. The romantic paintings of Aoki Shigeru, however, complicated this dream. In their incomplete and fragmentary form, Aoki’s works signaled the ways in which this horizon is partial and flawed.

By the 1930s, the disillusionment of Aoki’s generation had grown in critical pitch, deepening to a sense of crisis and debilitating unease. Intellectuals like Abe Tomoji found sanctuary in rational, positivist thought and an aesthetic form that promised to seal the ruptures of self and being.
This critical desire impeded his ability to engage with the ironic sea as Melville presents it in *Moby-Dick*. Others turned to a romantic nihilism, what I referred to above as a romanticism turned against itself.

Writers like Mishima Yukio, who entered the literary world at the height of war, acknowledged with renewed sensitivity the impossibility of the Meiji dream. But they built their art around that very impossibility. If language was now revealed as mediat
tive, a crude and imperfect material capable of only artificially bringing forward the things in the world, then he would embrace that artificiality in their writings.

The romantic ideology of Japanese literary modernity took alternate forms in the postwar period. Mishima and Uno Kōichirō, in ways that were simultaneously distinctive and familiar, figure those forms. Their works express the desire to break with the past in order to forge something new, even as the past, in the form of the romantic longing for a return to origin, continues to shadow and shape their stories. It is the sea as irony that that formally traces this conflicted desire. As it threads its way through the paintings of Aoki Shigeru, the criticism and fiction of Abe Tomoji, and the writings of Mishima Yukio and Uno Kōichirō, the sea as irony interferes with romanticist discourse, forming patterns of resonance and dissonance that reveal the changing shapes of Japanese literary modernity.
Introduction. *Moby-Dick* and the Irony of the Sea


1 I have borrowed the term “edge zone” from Cohen’s work but the term also applies equally well to Casarino’s work where the sea and especially the ship, are described as heterotopias, a Foucauldian term that references “forms of representation that disturb and undermine representation.” See *Modernity at Sea: Melville, Marx, Conrad in Crisis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 15.

2 For a discussion on Defoe’s role in developing the sea adventure novel see Cohen, *The Sea and the Novel*, 59-96.

3 Casarino, 6.

4 See Cohen’s discussion on the 19th century maritime novel in *The Novel and the Sea*, 179-224. For a similar discussion with a Marxian approach, see Casarino’s introduction in *Modernity at Sea*, 1-17.

5 Quotations from *Moby-Dick* are given in the body of the text with references to chapter number or section title first and page number second. All quotes come from *Moby-Dick: or, The Whale*, 2d ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co. Inc., 2002).

6 Here I am drawing heavily on the insightful essays on Melville and his work by the Japanese cultural critic Takayama Hiroshi. See *Arisugari* (Tokyo: Seidosha, 1997), 222-274. Takayama refers to Melville’s sea as an ironic one, but he has in mind a poststructuralist version of irony that reworks the signifying nature of language into play. This understanding of irony makes Melville into someone who escapes his own contexts and rises above ideological forces. Melville’s irony, I would argue, does exhibit elements of play—it does in fact thrive on them—but his irony is (and, by extension, the irony of the sea) does enable escape or transcendence. Melville’s irony speaks of a deep and insistent desire to overcome the borders of language even as it recognizes the bounding line that they form.


9 Arvin wrote that “the distinction between verbs and nouns, substantives and modifiers, becomes a half unreal one—this is the prime characteristic of [Melville’s] language.” See Arvin, *Herman Melville*, 165.

10 Bryan C. Short writes that, “In giving center stage to created nouns like ‘whiteness’ and ‘indefiniteness,’ Melville exemplifies the ability of language to deny and at the [same] time emphasize the absence, to voice that which has no tangible substance.” See *Cast by Means of Figures: Herman Melville’s Rhetorical Development* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), 105.

11 Arvin, 163.

12 I am drawing on observation from Bryan Short. In discussing Chapter 42, “The Whiteness of the Whale,” Short writes, “Melville’s tropological rhetoric reaches into the grammatical level of language to challenge the logic of subject and predicate. At first blush, the boldness of this departure seems catachrestic in the extreme—even deconstructive—yet explanation, not absurdity, is its goal.” See *Cast by Means of Figures*, 105.

13 Sharon Cameron, *Impersonality: Seven Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 183. Cameron is writing about *Billy-Budd*, but her comments speak with equal
force to the use of double negatives in *Moby-Dick*.
19 Works important to my understanding of romanticism include: Isaiah Berlin’s *The Roots of Romanticism* (2001), Richard Eldridge’s *The Persistence of Romanticism* (2001), Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s *The Literary Absolute* (1988), Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre’s *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity* (2001), Azade Seyhan’s *Representation and Its Discontents: The Critical Legacy of German Romanticism* (1992), and Jochen Schutle-Sasse’s introduction to Romantic thought in *Theory as Practice: A Critical Anthology of Early German Romantic Writings* (1997). Isaiah Berlin’s study is a genealogical history of the development of romantic thought from its birth as an anti-Enlightenment movement to its continuing influence on recent and contemporary thought. Richard Eldridge argues that romanticism is not a past mode of thought superseded by realism, modernism, and postmodernism, but persists to our current day in the guise of an ongoing pursuit of freedom and the acknowledgement that such freedom is always partial and incomplete. Löwy and Sayre’s work, in an effort to redefine romanticism, argues that the element linking all romanticisms is a critique of capitalist modernity. Influenced by sociological methodologies, they propose a typology of sociopolitical beliefs common to all romantic thinkers. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s work, now canonical in studies of romanticism, argues that early German Romanticism fashioned a theory of literature as “pure production” or as “absolute,” terms that Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy invoke to mean the essentialization of the act of literary creation. Only in the act or generation of literary writing can one grasp that absolute that, in speculative philosophy, appears forever unattainable. In *Representations and Its Discontents*, Seyhan explores how early German Romantics responded to the problem of representation in their critical discourse. Schutle-Sasse’s essay in *Theory as Practice* is the most concise and cogent essay I have read thus far on Romanticism’s paradoxical articulation of desire (i.e., the desire for ideals such as transcendent being, freedom, and autonomy even as such ideals are viewed with skepticism). Schutle-Sasse corrects the view of romanticism as an idealistic movement and argues against its
association with the aesthetic ideology. My reading has slightly favored the German Romantic tradition but, insofar as romantic thinking arises in response to the experience of crisis in thought and experience concomitant with modernity, I do not believe that the differences between the multiple national traditions outweigh or outnumber the commonalities that bind them.

20 I borrow this term from Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy who write, “A veritable romantic unconscious is discernable today, in most of the central motifs of our ‘modernity.’” Emphasis in original. See The Literary Absolute, 15.


22 Ibid., 218.

23 Tōkoku’s wife reported that, “When we lived in Kokuzue he [Tōkoku] was either locked up in his study or out on the shore, one of the two. He was enamored with the sea and was always walking along the shore. I say the sea, but he really preferred the violent open ocean to the calm and sleepful sea. When he walked along the shore he would always sing so as to console himself.” See Kitamura Tōkoku Tokunaga Sunao shū, 474 n. 460.

24 Ibid., 218.

25 Toward the end of “The Mast-Head,” Ishmael describes climbing to the masthead to look for whales, only to find himself mesmerized by the movement of the sea below him. He writes, “lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie is this absent-minded youth by the blending cadence of waves with thoughts, that at last he loses his identity […] But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch, slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror” (see Melville, Moby-Dick, 136). Charles Feidelson offers an example of the most common reading of this passage: “Here the voyaging mind is fused with the world in a flux of wave-like forms; the identity of the self is lost in a pantheistic sea. Yet this attainment of sheer vision—in which, as Emerson described it, ‘I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all’—is suddenly dangerous […] To submerge in the sea is to drown; the self and the world are two, not one” (29). “Water-gazing is a paradoxical activity,” Feidelson continues, “a search for absolute unity with the objects of thought, only to discover that immediate knowledge destroys the thinker” (29). See Charles Feidelson, Symbolism and American Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).

26 Casarino, 135.

27 Howard P. Vincent demonstrates the extent to which Melville, in writing Moby-Dick, borrowed extensively from his sources in the cetological chapters. See The Trying-Out of Moby-Dick (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1980), 121-367.

28 Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre discuss the critical attitude of romantic thought to the experience of modernity in Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity. See, in particular, pages 18-43. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy also write that, “Early romanticism represents the sudden appearance of a crisis […] it corresponds to the profound economic, social, political, and moral crisis of the latter years of the eighteenth century.” See The Literary Absolute, 5. The crisis which Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy reference is the crisis of modernity which is not unique to any one time or region.


30 Ibid., 176.

31 My study overlaps here with the work of Christopher Connery who is interested in tracing political attitudes and conceptions of the sea globally. In his article, “There was
No More Sea,” Connery argues that the agonistic ocean of the Judeo-Christian tradition persists to the present day as a global one. There were once other oceans—Connery discusses the oceans of pre-modern China and Hawaii islands—but they all eventually succumbed to the Judeo-Christian one. See Connery, “There was No More Sea: the supersession of the ocean from the bible to cyberspace,” Journal of Historical Geography 32 (2006): 494-511.

Historians have noted the image of Japan as an isolated, closed country during the Tokugawa Period is essentially a false one—cross-cultural contact, and trade of goods and information did take place. In the early part of the Tokugawa Period, roughly the first half of the 17th century, Japanese merchants were allowed to travel to Southeast Asian countries. But there is a fundamental difference between Japanese mercantilism at this time and the mercantilism engaged in by countries such as England. In the period after 1640, maritime trade was heavily regulated and restricted by a series of maritime prohibitions (kaikin) that did not exist among the Dutch, Portuguese, or English. For a recent discussion on sakoku policies see Michael S. Laver, The Sakoku Edicts and the Politics of Tokugawa Hegemony (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2011).

Chapter One. The Late Meiji Oceanic Imaginary

1 The first chapter of Mahan’s Influence of Sea Power upon History was partially translated into Japanese by Kaneko Kentarō (1853-1942) in 1893 and then fully translated by Kimotsuki Kaneyuki (1853-1922) later that same year. The complete translation was released several years later, in 1896, as Kaijō kenryoku shi ron (Treatise on the History of Maritime Power). Mahan’s thought, however, appears to have been circulating in Japan prior to its translation. Sora Genzaburō’s two-volume Kaikoku (Maritime Nations), which Sora self-published in 1892, does not mention Mahan or his work, but is clearly indebted to it in terms of language and ideas.


6 Umi no Nihonjin (Tokyo: Minyūsha, 1895), 14.

7 Sora Genzaburō, Kaikoku, vol. 1. (Tokyo: Sora Genzaburō, 1892), 1. Sora repeatedly hails his audience, asking his reader rhetorical questions for which he immediately provides the response. This rhetorical style, a form of ideological interpellation, marks a pattern that can be discerned in numerous writings on the sea in the late Meiji Period.

8 Mahan, 52-53.


11 Umi no Nihonjin, 17-18.

12 Takahashi Tetsutarō, Kaiyō shinbi ron (Tokyo: Bunmeidō, 1903), 257.

Takahashi, 40.
17 Takahashi, 164. No one believed more fervently in Japan's maritime status than Takahashi Tetsutarō. But when he considered the large body of Japanese literature, he found that it contained, not a literature of the sea, but what he derided as a literature of "flowers and the moon," a reference to images frequently used in the composition of traditional Japanese poetry. "The traditional literature of Japan," he wrote, "has been unable to escape beyond flowers and the moon. But compare this to our ally, England, the Western Japan. Her literature cannot exist apart from the sea. England, in possession of such a literature of the sea, controls the ocean as a maritime nation, its people are the richest in maritime thought, and the ocean sciences there are vigorously researched. The strength of their nation truly lies therein." See Takahashi, *Kaiyō shinbi ron*, 183. For Takahashi, England was the Western twin of Japan, but Japan's lack of a sea literature threatened to displace that fantasy. Takahashi expends a great deal of energy in *Kaiyō shinbi ron* arguing for the development of a Japanese literature of the sea.
18 Tang, 4-5.
19 In the classical canon, the sea is frequently presented as a space of trepidation and fear. In the *Man'yōshū*, the sea is literally a place where the living and dead come together. Two of the collections major poets, Hitomaro and Akahito, composed poems where the traveler-poet encounters the corpses of men drowned at sea and washed ashore. In Ki no Tsurayki's (ca. 868-ca. 945) *Tosa nikki* (The Tosa Diary, ca. 935), the narratorial voice, a member of a governor's household that is making its way back to the capital, describes encounters with storms and fears of pirates. Perhaps the most famous depiction of the sea in narrative form appears in the Suma and Akashi chapters of *Genji monogatari* (The Tale of Genji, ca. 1000). In the Suma chapter, the Dragon King creates a tempest that threatens Genji's life and eventually forces his move to Akashi. The *Heike monogatari* (The Tale of the Heike, ca. early 13 century) also features a number of sea-related narratives, including the climactic battle between the Heike and Genji forces at Dan-no-ura. Some *noh* plays build on the sea stories in *Heike monogatari*, including *Funa Benkei* (Benkei in a Boat) thought to be by Kanze Köjirō Nobumitsu (1435-1450), which climaxes in a scene where the spirits of Heike warriors slain at the Battle of Dan-no-ura rise out of the waves to attack Yoshitsune and his crew as they flee from Yoritomo's forces.
20 A number of Rohan's narratives feature scenes of rivers and boating but by far his best known work that features the sea is *Isanatori* (The Whale Fish Taker, 1891). The work tells the life story of the character Hikoemon who spends part of his youth hunting whales off the coast of Ikitsukijima. According to Yanagida Izumi, Rohan's longest work, *Ten utsu nami* (Waves Striking Heaven, 1903-1904), began as a story of an enterprising fisherman in the late 16th century whose boat was set adrift. According to Rohan's plan for the story, the fisherman was to eventually find his way to an uninhabited island in the Pacific where he would have been forced to live as a castaway. Rohan, however, abandoned the work before it reached this point. A great deal of the research that he conducted for the narrative, which concerned the specialized language of fishermen, is now included in his complete works as *Suijō goi* (Glossary of Aquatic Terms). See Yanagida Izumi, *Kaiyō bungaku to nanshin shisō*, 36-38. And Yanagida Izumi, "Meiji ni okeru kaiyō bungaku," *Kokubungaku* *Kaishaku to kanshō* 61, no. 6 (Jun 1941): 72-74.
22 Ibid., 360.
23 Ibid., 361.
24 Ibid., 364.
25 Ibid., 365.
28 Norito or notto were founded on the concept of kotodama, the magical efficacy of words, and they appear to have operated powerfully on Kimura’s mind. He wrote of them as the greatest works of Japanese literature, “not prayers for the hands of official priests alone.” Kimura, “Umi to Nihon bungaku shi, II,” 32.
30 Takayama, 366.
31 Saitō Nonohito, “Umi to jinsei,” Teikoku bungaku 9, no. 8 (Aug 1903): 83. In the same issue of Teikoku bungaku in which he published “Umi to jinsei,” Nonohito wrote a review for Takahashi Testutarō’s Kaiyō shinbi ron. One might expect that, as two thinkers fascinated by the sea, Nonohito would have held Takahashi’s work in high regard, but, in actuality, he appears to have loathed his reading experience of it. He claims that the work was not worth the paper it was printed on and that he could not make it through the entirety of the book. Nonohito’s principal criticism is that Takahashi writes of beauty as something that only exists within the sea itself when beauty actually exists in objects throughout the phenomenal world. Given that Takahashi actually makes relatively little reference to beauty or aesthetics—contrary to the expectations created in the reader by the title of his work—one can only wonder if Nonohito made it far into the work at all.
32 Ueda Bin (1874-1916), a translator and scholar of European literature active in the late Meiji Period, wrote two essays on the Greeks in the journal Teikoku bungaku: “Girishia no shinbi ron” (On Greek Aesthetics, 1892) and “Girishia shichō o ronzu” (A Discussion on Greek Thought, 1895). Shimazaki Tōson (1872-1943) also referenced the Greeks and the sea in his poetry collection Rakubaishū (Collection of Fallen Plum Blossoms, 1901). In one of the prose-poetry sections, he writes, “The form of the sea, calm and quiet on its bottom even when on its surface the tides come and go and the waves roar and rage, is indeed that which people refer to as the form of the Greek arts.” See Shimazaki Tōson, Shimazaki Tōson shishū, vol. 15 of Kindai Nihon bungaku taikei (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1971), 482. As with the philhellenism among 18th century European Romantics, the fascination with ancient Greek society and culture in the late Meiji Period was an expression of longing for origins.
33 Saitō, 83.
36 Ibid., 82.
37 Ibid., 490-491.
38 Tōson reenacts this journey in the construction of his poetry, drawing on images and language from the classical poetic canon all the while couching them in patterns...
39 On the sheer ungraspability of the sea, Tōson wrote, “Gazing at the sea is like witnessing a dream. There is no way to count the stones that lie at the bottom of its water, no way to say where it stops, no way to say where it ends. Compared to the boundedness of a lake or the transparency of a river bottom, there is no way to gaze at the entirety of the sea.” See Shimazaki Tōson shishū, 481.
The term *rekishiga* (history painting) is a translation of the French *historia*, which implies history as narrative or tale and includes elements of myth or fable. The form dominated the Tokyo art world in the 1890s but began to give way to new motifs and modes of representation by the turn of the century. Aoki has been viewed by art historians as a transitory figure: his works are grouped within the historical genre, but in their expression of subjectivity—figured in the gazes of his subjects which stare boldly back at the viewer—he is seen as expressing a new structure of feeling that would inform the development of Japanese realist painting. See Kitazawa Noriaki, *Kyōkai no bijutsu shi: bijutsu keisei shi nooto* (Tokyo: Buryukke, 2005), 315-318.

It may seem contradictory for Aoki to have used the so-called Western-style painting (*yōga*)—as opposed to Japanese-style (*Nihonga*)—to depict mythical scenes from the native tradition, but history painting in Japan was, from its very inception, caught in paradox. Artists who painted in the historical mode participated in the construction of a national narrative that offered stability and security in the face of widespread cultural change. At the same time, Western-style painters like Harada Naojirō (1863-1899) and Yamamoto Hōsui (1850-1906), who were part of the generation before Aoki, began to produce historical works because it represented the pinnacle of artistic trends in Europe. Historical painting was, in other words, a way to preserve native tradition even as it contributed to national goals of Westernization.

Kawakita Michiaki, perhaps the most important critic of Aoki and his work, has referred to Aoki as the crystallization of the Meiji Romantic movement in the arts. See Kawakita Michiaki, *Kawakita Michiaki bijutsu ronshū*, vol. 3 (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1977), 168-169. All major critics of Aoki’s work, including Nakamura Giichi, Hijikata Teiichi, Ōshima Seiji, and Ueno Kenzō, have followed suit. Takashina Shūji might be one of the few critics who has tried to resist the critical desire to read Aoki in purely Romantic terms. He argues that Aoki is far closer in his ideas and forms to fin de siècle painters like Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) and Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898) and French symbolists such as Gustave Moreau (1826-1898). These are the artists with which Aoki was most enamored and whose work he mentions repeatedly in the writings that he left behind. Takashina Shūji, *Nihon kindai bijutsu shi ron* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1980), 114-118.


In a study that he did for *Yomotsuhirasaka*, Aoki depicts Izanami as she pushes up out of the earth in the nightmarish scene of rebirth, clearly placing the viewer in the world of the living. Aoki’s decision, in the final version, to shift the perspective to the “path” joining the two worlds refuges the painting so that the viewer occupies neither the land of the living nor the land of the dead but the space in between.

The scholar of Japanese folklore, Yanagita Kunio (1867-1962), discusses *ne no kuni* and its relation to the sea at length in *Kaijō no michi* (Sea Passages, 1961), a collection of essays in which he argues that Japanese culture originated in the south, near Okinawa, when people from the mainland drifted there in search of shells. These people then, over time, made their way up to the Japanese archipelago via the Kuroshio Currents. The origin of the word *ne no kuni* offers evidence of this migration, but more importantly, for this discussion, Yanagita suggests that *ne no kuni* referred to a folkloric belief in a world, at the bottom of the sea, where the dead and living could meet again. See Yangakita Kunio, *Kaijō no michi* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1978), 124-156.


48 Ōshima Seiji is convinced that Aoki had Monet’s Etretat and Belle-Ile seascapes in mind when he painted his own at Mera. Ōshima does, however, note some key differences between the two artists’ works. “Certainly in terms of the brushstrokes or the method of applying complementary color in the rocks, it is possible to mistake Aoki’s works for Monet’s but if one looks closely one sees that both Monet’s brush and colors are steady in the way that they adhere to objects while Aoki’s works do not adhere to objects but hover loosely around them.” See Ōshima Seiji, “Aoki Shigeru: sono roman tekina mikan no imi,” Mizue 6, 809 (Jun 1972): 34.

49 Richard Kendall writes on Monet’s fascination with geological sites and primordial landscapes: “In 1886 he visited Belle-Ile, an island off the coast of Brittany, to devote some three dozen paintings to its ‘sporadic granites and sand’ [...] Confronted by some of the most ancient constituents of the earth’s crust, he used jagged silhouettes and dense impasto to express the volcanic character of the island in pictures such as Rocks at Port-Coton, The Lion Rock, Belle-Ile. With unusual eloquence, Monet told a friend: ‘I found there marvelous impressions of the world’s dawn, of time abandoned, the freshness of solitude, the torment of planetary dramas.’” See Diana Donald and Jane Munro, eds., et al, Endless Forms: Charles Darwin, Natural Science, and the Visual Arts (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 312.


51 Each of the contemporary art historians who have studied Aoki’s works make reference to their incompleteness. See, in particular, Nakamura Giichi’s essay, “Mikansei no mondai” in Kindai Nihon bijutsu no sokumen (Tokyo: Zōkeisha, 1976), 220-242.

52 An anonymous critic in the Yomiuri Newspaper wrote, in reference to Yomotsuhirasaka, “Aoki’s fantasy work is a draft but it is unexpected to have someone compose such a painting for the White Horse Competition. Workmanship aside, for a group that works only with a rustic realism and believes this to be everything in art, to have a person who tries his hand at something supra-natural is welcome.” See “Shūki kaiga tenrankai juranki,” Yomiuri shinbun, 10 October 1903.

53 This critic, who went by the pen-name Shigen, continues, “Of course I do not mean to imply that just because the painting is incomplete it is no good: however, only after Aoki’s skill has produced a completed painting will his talent come into being. With that in mind, we cannot very easily leap to conclusions about Aoki’s real worth.” See Shigen, “Hakuba-kai gahyō,” Miyako shinbun, 10 November 1904.

54 A number of critics agree that Aoki borrowed the structural layout of A Good Catch from the Pantheistic procession depicted in the Parthenon.

55 Ōshima, 35. In many of Aoki’s works, including Prince Onamuchi (Onamuchi no Mikoto, 1905) and The Tempyō Era (Tenpyō jidai, 1905), the figures openly gaze at the viewer. Yamanashi Toshio comments that, “We cannot find in Japan, up to that time, any other painter who made his work into such a scene, nor was there anything like it in the realm of history painting. All historical figures, all those people called forth from the past stayed in their world in the beyond; none of them dared step foot into ours.” Yamanashi Toshio, Egakareta rekishi: Nihon kindai to ‘rekishiga’ no jijyō (Tokyo: Seunsha, 2005), 354-355. Yamanashi implies that the gaze in Aoki’s works links spaces across the span of time. I agree with Yamanashi’s reading but would also argue that Aoki figures the gaze (as it appears in myth) as transgressive and alienating act, a mode
of seeing that divides even as it joins.

56 Ishii Hakutei, “Bijutsukan sōhyō,” Yomiuri Shinbun, 5 May 1907.
57 Two studies that Aoki did for Iroko no miya visually trace this path: the first is almost abstract in its conception, with geometrical patterns of color that recall paintings that appeared immediately after A Good Catch—paintings such as Dancing Girls (Shōjō gunmai, 1904), Spring (Haru, 1904), and Pleasure (Junraku, 1904); the second study moves closer toward the crystallization of form but in the obscurity and indistinctness of figure it recalls the underwater world of Yomotsuhirasaka. In the version that Aoki submitted to the White Horse Competition, the figures appear still and frozen, caught in a moment of hesitance and wonder. And although Aoki took great care in structuring all of his paintings (e.g., the chain of female spirits spiraling up to the surface or the linear procession of the fishermen in A Good Catch), Wadatsumi iroko no miya separates itself from Aoki’s previous works in the structured, parallel placement of Toyotama-hime and her servant on either side of Yamasachihiko. Ueno Kenzō reads this rationalization as a retreat from his earlier style. Ueno Kenzō, “Aoki Shigeru no geijutsu—sono hyōka to kiseki,” in Aoki Shigeru to Kindai Nihon romantishizumu (Tokyo: Nihon Keizai Shinbunsha, 2003), 27.

60 Although Aoki was fascinated by the sea, he seems to have been particularly interested in the ocean floor. In several illustrations that he did for Iwano Hōmei’s (1873-1920) poetry collection Evening Tides (Yūjō, 1904) three years prior to his submission of Iroko no miya, he included an illustration that he claimed was of the sea floor and which he later titled Fate (Unmei, 1904). See Aoki, Kashō no sōzō, 262.
61 Matsunaga, 22.
62 Kawakita Michiaki comments, “In actuality, looking at the works that follow Wadatsumi no iroko no miya, we unfortunately find very few pieces done well, aside from a few works that were produced with comparative ease.” Kawakita, 202.
65 Ichikawa Masanori, Aoki Shigeru to kindai Nihon no romantishizumu, 20.
66 Takahashi, 256.
68 Uchimura Kanzō, Chirgaku kō (Tokyo: Maruzen Shuppansha, 1898), 64. Hegel envisioned the unfolding of world history in geographical terms: the elevated lands or mountains were home to uncivilized, nomadic peoples; the moors and valley plains offered its inhabitants fertile land, which encouraged the development of agriculture and early forms of the state; and the coastal land was the pinnacle of history, encouraging the peoples that lived there to venture out onto the open sea. The sea in Hegel’s vision, like many of the Meiji hydrotropic thinkers who shared in his romantic thought, did not divide one space from another, but bridged them.

Chapter Two. The White Whale Ashore; or, The Arrival of Moby-Dick
1 Ōhashi Kenzaburō, ed., *Nihon no eigaku 100 nen, Shōwa hen*, vol. 3 (Tokyo: Kenkyūsha, 1969), 84-96.

2 Taketomo Sōfu, “Haaman Meruviru,” *Eigo kenkyū* 20, no. 6 (Sept 1927): 564. All translations from the Japanese are my own. The fact that Taketomo writes ‘Life as it ought to be,’ and ‘Life as it is’ in English demonstrates the degree with which these ideas were held to be the same ideals of literature held by writers and literary scholars in Europe, especially Britain. This article was also reprinted in Taketomo’s collection of essays on British and American literature, *Eibungaku ronkō* (Tokyo: Banrikaku Shobō, 1927), 153-166.

3 Taketomo much preferred Melville's earlier sea romances *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846) and *Omoo: A Narrative of the South Seas* (1847)—which he viewed as autobiographical works—over any of Melville’s other fiction, including *Moby-Dick*. He spends most of the essay summarizing the plot of *Typee*.


5 Two other scholars of British literature—Toyoda Minoru (1885-1972) and Sakuma Gen (1886-1945)—wrote on Melville at around the same time or a few years prior to Abe’s publication of *Melville*. Toyoda provided an introduction and detailed notes for an abridged version of *Moby-Dick* published in English by Kenkyūsha as part of a series for students of English language literature in 1931. His introduction opens with a brief biography of Melville's writing career, focusing predominantly on his prose fiction. “Poetry,” Toyoda writes, sharing the opinion of Sir Edmund Gosse, “was not Melville’s forte” (vi). Toyoda then moves into a discussion of Melville’s relationship with Hawthorne, which was perhaps the most expedient way of introducing Melville to the Japanese English literature students since Hawthorne was one of the few American writers known at the time. In the last section of the essay, he focuses on *Moby-Dick*, which he identifies as “a form of philosophical fiction” (xviii). He comments on the allegorical power of the work, which he finds to be expressive of some internal conflict within Melville, but one whose meaning he cannot clearly identify. Toyoda offers the opinions of figures involved in the Melville revival of the 1920s, including E.L. Grant Watson and Hugh I.A. Fausset, but concludes that the *Moby-Dick* “is itself a complete and perfect work that will not allow dissection” (xxii). Abe Tomoji would voice similar sentiments in his own criticism. See Herman Melville, *Melville's *Moby-Dick* or The White Whale*, ed. Hattie L. Hawley (Tokyo: Kenkyūsha, 1931), i-xxxii. Toyoda reproduced much of this introduction three years later when he composed an introductory essay on Herman Melville and *Moby-Dick* as part of a series of published lectures on English-language literature. See Toyoda Minoru, “Haaman Meruviru no ‘Hakugei’ ‘Moby-Dick,’” in *Eigo Eibungaku kōza*, vol. 15 (Tokyo: Eigo Eibungaku Kankōkai, 1934), 125-148. In 1934, Sakuma Gen published his *Research on American Fiction (Amerika shōsetsu kenkyū)*, one of the first pieces of literary scholarship solely on American literature. His discussion of Melville and *Moby-Dick*, however, is only cursory. As with Taketomo, he appears to favor Melville’s earlier “autobiographical” fiction like *Typee*. His opinion of *Moby-Dick* seems caught between acknowledging the work’s canonical status and his own personal tastes: “The novel is extremely long, and, while the detailed recordings of the sea journey are certainly rather tiresome and the writing style presents its own idiosyncrasies, the vivid depictions of ocean adventure together with the rhapsodic fantasies and occasional wit, do, in spite of all of that, make this work one of the rare products of 19th century romanticism” (133). Sakuma Gen, *Amerika shōsetsu kenkyū* (Tokyo: Kenkyūsha, 1934).

6 Unless otherwise noted, quotations from Abe’s works are cited in the text using the
abbreviations below.

\[ M: \quad Melville \text{ (Tokyo: Kenkyūsha, 1934)} \]

\[ ATz: \quad Abe Tomoji zenshū, 15 vols. \text{ (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1977)} \]

\[ AT: \quad Abe Tomoji, ed. Takematsu Yoshiaki, vol. 13, Mikankō chosaku shū \text{ (Tokyo: Shirojisha, 1996)} \]


9 Abe, “Kurai Amerika,” Arakure 2, no. 6 (July 1934): 40-41.


11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., 55.

13 Katō Yūji reads Blunden’s framing of Moby-Dick as tragedy in Dionysian rather than Apollonian terms, but there is no indication that Blunden had such a Dionysian view of tragedy in mind. See Katō Yūji, “Herman Melville and Modern Japan: A Speculative Re-Interpretation of the Critical History,” Leviathan 8, no.3 (Oct 2006): 11. The lectures that Blunden gave at the time Abe Tomoji was a student at Tokyo Imperial University have not, as far as I know, survived, but in lectures that Blunden gave in 1950, on a return visit to Japan, he makes reference to the same tragic narrative developed by many of the revivalists in the 1920s: the marking of Moby-Dick as the premature climax of Melville’s writerly career; his “withdrawal” from the literary scene after ten years of feverous writing, etc. Speaking on contemporary American fiction, he comments that, “Even now, when American writing is so multifarious and so capricious, the highest and best track that it takes is Melvillian. The immense view and the unifying isolated idea are still likely to be attempted in prose or verse by American authors. The power is there, the accumulative and the self-devoting power which must be working if a Moby-Dick is to be envisaged and written at all” (256; emphasis added). Blunden’s description of Melville is that of the intellectual whose “accumulating and self-devoted” power of mind (a self identical with itself) achieves the wholly unified and organic work of art. See Edmund Blunden, Chaucer to “B.V.” With an additional paper on Herman Melville: A Selection of Lectures Given Chiefly at Tokyo University by Edmund Blunden (Tokyo: Kenkyūsha, 1950).


15 On Melville’s marriage, Abe shares the opinion of Lewis Mumford that it must have been an unhappy and lonely one. “But somewhere in Melville’s heart there was likely something that he could not be wholly satisfied with and for some unknown reason that was reflected in the heart of kind Elizabeth. An indefinable loneliness lurked beneath the tranquility and peace of their household, and how like Melville this too was” (55). In a similar vein, Abe also writes that Melville, through his encounter with Hawthorne, learned “the truth that the human soul, and especially the soul of the artist, is something that must forever exist in solitude.” See Abe, Melville (Kenkyūsha, 1934), 76-77.

16 I will discuss Terada’s work in more detail in Chapter Three.


18 Spanos, 50.
Abe not only read widely in the work of critics like I.A. Richards, Herbert Read, T.E. Hulme, and Aldous Huxley, he also translated and introduced their work to the Japanese literary community. “Literary Criticism and Psychoanalysis” (Bungei hihyō to kagaku seishin bunseki, 1930) and “Poetry and Prose” (Shi to sanbun, date of original publication unknown) introduced Richards’ and Read’s work. “Practical Criticism” (Jisshōteki hihyō, 1930) introduced Richards’ *Practical Criticism* (1929). “On Expression” (Hyōgen ni tsuite, date of original publication unknown) and “Embers” (Kaijin, 1930) were partial translations of Hulme’s work. All of these essays were included in *A Theory of Intellectual Literature*. See Abe Tomoji zenshū, vol. 10 (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1977).

Discourses centering around realist fiction and realism pervaded the literary community in years just prior to and after Abe’s publication of *Melville*. Much of the so-called “discourse of anxiety,” which began with the publication of Miki Kiyoshi’s (1897-1945) “The Discourse of Anxiety and Overcoming It” (Fuan no shisō to sono chōkoku, 1933) and gained momentum with the publication of translations of the Jewish philosopher Leo Shestov’s work, revolved around issues directly related to realism, specifically the relation of the subject to the external world. Miki’s essay identifies a particular discourse of anxiety across the work of French writers such as Proust and Gide, Swiss theologians like Barth and Brunner, and the German philosopher Heidegger. Following the French thinker Albert Camus, he locates this feeling of anxiety in the collapse of the humanistic subject in the wake of World War I. The epistemological category of realism, which had its basis in the empirical tradition that helped found this construct or “type,” was similarly viewed as broken, unable to sustain a vision of the rational self. Miki’s outwardly simple solution to the dilemma was to produce a new “type,” one that relied not on any realist or mimetic relation to the outside world but, rather, turned inward so that it was identical with itself: “A type is not always something real. A type is not something that can be created through the simple mimicry, abstraction, or generalization of that which exists in the external world: it must contain an aspect that is created from the internal, from the passions of the self [...] It is not merely idealistic but neither is it merely realistic: it approaches classicism.” (18). Realist discourse made the truth claim that the close observation of the world could reproduce that world, the realm of reality or the truth. Miki, no longer confident in the veracity of such a claim, argued for a turn from the external world and into the internal world of the self. Miki referred to this move as one towards classicism—cooconed safely within its own shell, Miki’s type was the aestheticized subject no longer split and anxious but wholly identical with itself. Other writers and critics, including Fujiwara Sadamu (1905-1990), Kobayashi Hideo, Kawakami Tetsutaro (1902-1980), Aono Suekichi (1890-1961), Abe Rokurō (1904-1957), Itagaki Naoko (1896-1977), and Tosaka Jun (1900-1945), would continue to engage these ideas in the months and years ahead. Hirano Ken, Odagiri Susumu, and Yamamoto Kenkichi, eds., *Gendai Nihon bungaku ronshū*, Vol. 2 (Tokyo: Miraisha, 1957), 9-18. Seiji Lippit offers an expository discussion of this “discourse of anxiety” in his *Topographies of Japanese Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 203-212. In 1934, a roundtable discussion on realism also took place among major writers and thinkers in the literary community including Kobayashi, Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972), Kawakami Tetsutarō, Aono Suekichi, Takeda Rintarō (1904-1946), Nakano Shigeharu (1902-1979), Moriyama Kei (1904-1991), Uno Kōji (1891-1961). The discussion opens as a debate on the merits and problems of socialist realism but quickly broadens to focus on realist discourses in general. There is no consensus of opinion among the men gathered, but they all—with the exception of
Nakano who remains on the sidelines for most of the discussion—reject or have reservations about realism as a productive literary method. See Aono Suekichi, Kawakami Tetsutarō, Takeda Rintarō, et al., “Riarizumu ni kansuru zadankai,” *Bungakukai* 1, no. 4 (Sept 1934): 75-90.

21 Kobayashi Hideo, *Kobayashi Hideo zenshū*, vol. 1, 189. Kobayashi was not alone in figuring the feeling of loss through the form of the native place. Other writers in the 1930s, including Nagai Kafū (1879-1959), Hagiwara Sakutarō (1886-1942), Shiga Naoya (1883-1971) and lesser known writers like Kodera Kikuko (1884-1956) and Katō Takeo (1888-1956), wrote about the perceived disappearance of the native home in their works. For discussions on Kafū, Hagiwara, and Shiga in relation to the native place and issues of Japanese cultural identity see Stephen Dodd, *Writing Home: Representations of the Native Place in Modern Japanese Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 174-213.


23 Ibid. Fukuda Kazuya writes that, “Kobayashi’s argument located the loss of the home as the foundation for a view of literature as that which emphasizes, in direct opposition to literary realism with its emphasis on content and depiction, form and stylistic experimentation. For Kobayashi, the loss of the native home was nothing other than the collapse of reality, the object of content and realistic depiction. Literary persons had no other choice than to confront the otherness and materiality of language and form, now made apparent by the loss of reality.” See *Nihon no kakyō* (Tokyo: Yōshensha, 2009), 117.

24 Kobayashi, as Katō Yūji has noted, was more cognizant than Abe of the role that romantic conceptions of the self had played in informing the development of the Japanese literary language. If his politics had allowed him to read an American work like *Moby-Dick*, he likely would have grasped it in terms that would have exceeded Abe’s own. See “Herman Melville and the Japanese Gamming with his Works in the Modern Context: A Speculative Re-Interpretation,” *Tokyo Gaikokugo Daigaku ronsō* 73 (2007): 30-31.

25 Abe discusses, in at least two essays, some of the problems that he perceives in the narrative mode of realism. In “The Problems with Realism” (1932), Abe wrote of realism as an extremely limited form for literary expression—whether the 19th century naturalistic realism of Maupassant or the psychological realism of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, it was always limited in the extent of reality that it could express. It was for that reason, only one narrative tool among many. As he would write in another essay, “Realism and Truth” (1934), “How can the writer express truth through his tool, the novel? Such a problem will never be resolved solely through the dogma of so-called realism alone.” See Abe, *Abe Tomoji zenshū*, vol. 10, 175. For Abe as a bourgeois intellectual, literature was at its “best” or most moving when it was ideational, that is, when it delved into absolutes such as Truth. Abe’s solution to the incompleteness of realism, borrowing from the criticism of Aldous Huxley, was to renew it with classical modes of writing such as tragedy.

26 Abe expressed the relationship between contradiction and order through the figure of the pendulum that alternates from one pole to the other. He wrote: “Contradiction and order.—It is art that brings these both together. And it is the aim of art to simultaneously enlarge the degree of disorder and intensify order. To return to my example of the pendulum again, the moment of maximum swing in the arc is the best art. The largest disorder and the largest order—this is where we find the value of art. The polytheistic Greeks were at the same time those who pursued order the most in their arts.” See *Abe Tomoji zenshū*, vol. 10, 22.

27 Abe likely borrows this term from T.S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent”
(1920). This is one of the rare instances where Abe did not cite the essay which he was referencing.

29 Ibid., 427.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 160.
33 Hertz, 8.
35 Bal, 5.
38 As Margaret Cohen has observed, the discourse of modernity has, until recently, been one almost wholly focused on the land. “From the mid-19th through the end of the 20th century,” she writes, “the great cultural theorists delineated a geography of modernity that was primarily land-based. The focus of Marx, Benjamin, or Foucault on *terra firma*, on territorialized spaces like the nation state, the city, the colony, the home, and the factory, would have surprised Hegel and, indeed, his early-modern predecessors, who lived with a keen awareness of the waterways of global capitalism.” Margaret Cohen, “Fluid States,” *Cabinet* 16 (Winter 2004/2005): 75. Cohen has elsewhere, borrowing from the photographer and theorist Allan Sekula, referred to this attitude as “forgetting the sea.” See Margaret Cohen, “Literary Studies on the Terraqueous Globe,” *PMLA* 125, no. 3 (May 2010): 658.
39 Most of these stories, with the exception of “Secret of the Blue Sea,” were not included in Abe’s collected works.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., 659.

Chapter Three. The Irony of the Sea in Wartime and Postwar Japan

The epigraph for this chapter comes from Ayukawa Nobuo, *Ayukawa Nobuo chosaku shū*, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1973), 187-188. All translations from Japanese are my own, unless otherwise noted.

1 It is not known exactly when Ayukawa composed the poem, but it is included in a collection dated 1956-1958.
2 Ayukawa, *Ayukawa Nobuo chosaku shū*, vol. 1, 186. The poem, in its entirety, reads:

    from *Moby-Dick*

    Why did the terrestrial laws fail?
    the bonds of blood break?
    the green pastures fade away?
From where why did you come?
there is good in him
who speaks to us not a word
he who has bare feet that roam
he who believes fully in the genes of his soul
there is good in Ishmael.

His soul needs seven tools
a sail, a rudder, a map, a compass, a life buoy, a harpoon ......
pulled on by the phantom of the sea he
(is so unlike the American who
has a farewell party with his friends
leaves for Venice or Paris
and can’t control his spending
he is not an adventurer fastened in fake armor and helmet
like the Ulysses in cinema scope
nor is he a worshipper of violent flesh)
is not castrated by climate or customs
he boards the Pequod with a dream far heavier
than anything the scales of the Old Testament can measure

His destination
is neither the dark clouds hanging above Europe
nor the landlocked borderlands of Asia
left to the waves, the wind, and the hands of fate
it is the world where terrifying illusions and the leviathan reside
at the heart of this story of the sea

Ishmael!
at tragedy’s end, a single swirling current
that thing swallowing down the fate of man
the great nothing you saw draws us deeply in

3 There were maritime art exhibitions held every year up to 1944. The paintings initially focused on fishermen and seascapes, but, as the war progressed further south, more paintings focused on the South Seas appeared. For a list of paintings submitted to the exhibitions see Shōwaki bijutsu tenrankai shuppin sakka ichiran (Chūō Kōron Bijutsu Shuppan, 2006), 900-915.

4 Bungei nenkan Shōwa 15 nenkan, (Tokyo: Dai’ichi Shobō, 1940), 111.

5 “In spite of the fact that our country Japan,” Yoshie wrote, “is one of the leading maritime nation in the world, in terms of literature we must admit that we have yet to produce a work of maritime literature worthy of vaunting to the world.” See Yoshie Takamatsu, “Kaiyō bungaku,” in Kaiyō gaku dokuhon (Tokyo‧Tokyo Hibi Shinbunsha, 1940), 176. Yoshie also mentions Melville and *Moby-Dick* in this essay, but not in any great depth. It is questionable whether or not he even read the work. “This [*Moby-Dick*] is a whaling narrative, and it appears that Melville himself was someone who had joined a whaler,” Yoshie writes. “The plot concerns a large whale that goes mad and flees. They chase it down no matter where it goes. Moreover, in chasing it, whites and blacks all come together in its pursuit. Eventually they follow it into the sea somewhere off the coast of Japan and do battle.” See Yoshie, “Kaiyō bungaku,” 191-192.

6 Yoshie, 177.
There appears to have been an intense and repeated call for the production of a maritime literature in the years between 1939 and 1941. See, for instance: “Ide yo kaiyō bungei: Kigen 2,600 nenki to shite daiundō,” Tokyo Asahi shinbun, 3 Oct 1939; “Kaiyō bungaku wa deru ka?” Nihon hyōron 14, no. 9 (Sep 1939): 300-308. Honda Akira, a British literary scholar and critic, wrote an essay in the same year in which he described the qualities that went into the production of a maritime novel. See “Kaiyō shōsetsu nit suite,” Shinchō 36, no. 10 (Oct 1939): 36-41. Aono Suekichi, another literary critic, wrote an article in 1941 in which he began, “There is recently a persistent demand for a literature of the sea and yet, although Japan is a maritime nation, it appears that we have no outstanding instance of a literature of the sea.” See “Umi to koten no hanashi,” Kaiun hōoku 1, no. 11 (Nov 1941): 46. It is hard to gauge exactly to what extent calls for a maritime literature were “successful”—although one finds repeated calls for a maritime literature no one identifies any contemporary writer or works that express an interest in the sea.

Kawai Suimei, Masakaki (Kanao Bun'endō, 1943), 151.


Ōki's lines themselves call upon us to feel this unbroken connection with the past in their language, which draws upon the Man'yōshū (Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves, late 8th c.) and the ancient norito prayers.

Ishii Hakutei, “Nihon no bijutsu wa kaku aru beshi,” Bijutsu 1, no. 3 (March-April 1944): 9.

Kawai Suimei wrote a poem commemorating the battle at Attu Island. In contrast to Fujita's work, it does not ambivalently represent the Japanese defeat but portrays it as a noble sacrifice. See Kawai, Masakaki, 41-43.


Bert Winther-Tamaki observes that Fujita drew heavily upon the classic scrolls depicting the Mongol invasion in his wartime paintings. See Bert Winther-Tamaki, “Embodiment/Disemodiment: Japanese Painting During the Fifteen-Year War,” Monumenta Nipponica 52, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 152-153.

Mishima's first work of published fiction, “Forest in Full Bloom” (Hanazakari no mori, 1941), which I will discuss in detail below, would seal his status as literary darling of the Japan Romantic School. Mishima, after the war, would protest his association with the Japan Romantics, but, as John Nathan has written, in spite of Mishima’s protests, he shared much them. See John Nathan, Mishima: A Biography (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1978), 45-48.

All quotes from Mishima Yukio's are cited in the text using the following abbreviation:


I have chosen to use the title of the English translation here. John Nathan, in consultation with Mishima, settled upon this title because the Japanese one, which pivots on the pun eikō (towing/glory), was impossible to render into English. John Nathan, Mishima, 190. We hear Mishima’s eternal “longing” in Sailor as well: “Suddenly, through the window, cast wide open, came the fullness of the ship horn’s boundless echo, filling the dimly lit room. That grand, wild, dark, demanding grief-filled: haven-less, pitch-black and smooth as a whale’s back: that which is filled with all passions of the sea tides, all the memories of a hundred thousand sea voyages, every feeling from
elation to humiliation; that familiar cry of the sea itself. The horn, filled with the shininess and madness of the night, stormed in from the dead center of the distant offing, from the open ocean, conveying a yearning for the dark nectar in the small room.” See Ketteiban Mishima Yukio zenshū, vol. 9 (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 2002), 233.


22 Isoda Kōichi writes about the difficulty critics have of placing The Sound of the Waves within Mishima’s career. Isoda, 385.

23 According to John Nathan, Mishima is also reported to have referred to The Sound of the Waves as “that joke that I played on the public.” Nathan, 121. Elsewhere, Mishima wrote that “the widespread success of The Sound of the Waves, its popular acceptance, was like having cold water splashed in my face.” See Ketteiban Mishima Yukio zenshū, vol. 32, 319.

24 Herman Melville, Moby-Dick: or, the Whale, 2d ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co. Inc., 2002), 322.

25 Ibid., 323.

26 Terada would later expand upon this work and include it in his book The Silence of God: The Essence and Works of Herman Melville (Kami no chinmoku: Haaman Meruviru no honshitsu to sakuhin, 1968), which remains one of the great critical achievements by Melville scholars in Japan.

27 There are similarities between Terada’s work and Lawrance Thompson’s earlier Melville’s Quarrel with God (1952). Terada was familiar with Thompson’s work and, while he acknowledged that it was persuasive in places, he disagreed strongly with its conclusions. He was particularly adamant that Melville was not a mere “Enlightenment atheist” satirizing the Calvinist god as Thompson argues; instead, Melville was a firm believer in his faith, but the power of his desires led to a radical skepticism. Terada, 102-104.

28 Ibid., 95. Terada’s likening of nihilism to an “unbidden guest” is an un-cited reference to Nietzsche’s famous statement.

29 On the figures of Ishmael and Ahab, Terada wrote: “If one were to cast these two characters in terms of the author, we would find that Ishmael is the author’s Apollonian layer and Ahab the Dionysian one—they are the chorus and the act, the Apollonian unitary vision and the Dionysian disruption that form the oppositional conflict without which ‘tragedy’ cannot exist.” This dualistic view of tragedy, as composed of both Apollonian and Dionysian elements, is the Nietzschean view of tragedy that takes into account its creative and destructive elements, the latter of which Abe resisted. Terada, 97.

30 Terada, 171

Chapter Four. Uno Kōichirō and the Irony of the Sea

1 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations of Uno Kōichirō’s work are quoted from Kujiragami (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1982).

In calling attention to the fact that he does not know the characters for Shaki’s name, the narrator creates an effect reminiscent of *Moby-Dick*’s opening narrative line, “Call me Ishmael.” Here, the implication is that visual characters would provide Shaki with a stable identity.


Shaki eventually loses the sensation of pain, which had been the only reminder of his physical body. “Strangely enough, the pain, so intense up till now, vanished from my body as though it had been a lie—when I pressed my wounds with my good hand, there was no trace of pain.” See Uno, *Kujiragami*, 218.

Ōhashi Kenzaburō, in discussing the conclusion of *The Whale God*, wrote that it “has all the feel of some too-naïve, Japanese reconciliation.” See Ōhashi Kenzaburō, ed., *Kujira to tekisuto: Meruviru no sekai* (Tokyo: Kokusho Kōdansha, 1983), 447. I am not certain what Ōhashi means by “Japanese” (*Nihon-teki*). The statement could be read to imply that he is arguing for form of narrative closure peculiar to native Japanese sentiments. Knowing Ōhashi’s work, however, I do not believe that to be the case. That aside, I agree that the ending is problematic, but I would argue that it is problematic in a way that opens up additional questions rather than in a way that (as the term “reconciliation” [*wakai*] implies) closes them off.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

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