



Matthew Ferrence

In Praise of *In Praise of Shadows*:
Toward a Structure of Reverse Momentum

What incredible pains Junichiro Tanizaki takes when he sets out to build an essay in a purely architectural style, at once fully Japanese and traditional and modern and old-fashioned and fresh and, he might say, a thing built to “harmonize with the austerity of Japanese rooms.” Yet for all this ingenuity, I understand as well how for many 21st Century readers, particularly Western ones, his “efforts might impress us as nervous, fussy, excessively controlled,” again as Tanizaki might say, did say, about something else. We are accustomed to something else, the very thing Tanizaki argues about architecture, that just as we rapidly grow used to and dependent upon the advances of the technological, we also rapidly lose sight of the ways that our very cultures, and ourselves, are built upon the relationship to things.

In Praise of Shadows attends specifically to the nature of semi-darkness, the flickering candlelight playing upon lacquerwear, the quiet repose of the ideal toilet (the most exquisitely-rendered extended passage on the beauty of that room I can recall in all of literature), the way that the brightness of externally-conceived technology can do damage to underlying culture and—this is a striking and important word—aesthetics. In this attention, Tanizaki is writing about our relationship to the world, and he is also making a case for the necessarily backward-glancing orientation of the essayist. We write, always, in negotiation with the past. We write about things, always in negotiation to that past and ourselves. We pay close attention to things, and history, and unspoken gesture, and darkness, because in peering deep into the alcove, we trust that we can make out the lines of the artwork that matter.

So I am citing Tanizaki in paraphrase here, and so too am I trying to voice both my admiration for his writing and what I see as the absolute contemporariness of his historically-oriented position. As

writers, we cannot write only forward. We must look back, so that we can reckon the way that things move. We are tracing the arc already drawn, so that we might imagine the shape of it to come. Perhaps this is a fundamental difference between fiction and nonfiction, since the latter can be purely speculative, as in science fiction (though even that, at its best, must address writers who have come before, and the scope of science that might lead toward the future). More than that, however, I am thinking about structure, how the tenterhooks of each section in Tanizaki link the essay always rearward. We might see this as a foreword propulsion, but I think instead that his structural choices are reverse transitions: he tosses out sea anchors, really, heavy finned things that slow the ship down so as to keep it on course. Perhaps obviously, this is what Tanizaki offers thematically, about the past, and shadow, and affection for objects of Japanese design. Less evidently, though, it is an inversion of how we race through an essay, or how an essayist might guide our thoughts. If so much writing creates tension through anticipation, makes us want the thing that will come next, Tanizaki does so by forcing us to always think about the thing that came before, even as we move onward.

Consider even the first move of *In Praise of Shadows*. Tanizaki's first section moves rapidly from an establishment of purpose—to consider the architecture of the Japanese house—into a quick gloss of the struggles he faced in building a new house that still evokes the old. He introduces, then, one of the many guiding principles of this essay in offering a final paragraph on “the problem of bath and toilet:”

The effect may not seem so very displeasing while everything is still new, but as the years pass, and the beauty of the grain begins to emerge on the planks and pillars, that glittering expanse of white tile comes to seem as incongruous as the proverbial bamboo grafted to wood.

Literally, he writes of the need to allow for grain and the—shall I say?—spiritual resonance of wear. Objects that resist history do not show grain, and they also cease to carry history. They become dated, not old.

If I offer my own echo of Tanizaki's considerations of theater makeup, objects that resist wear are akin to individuals who botox or cake on thick layers of foundation that, instead of concealing age, call attention to it, very much because they deny the beauty of natural furrows. Worse still, consider the youthful person who learns to internalize the façade-building of middle-aged age-terror. I am thinking of prom photos here, teenagers caked with makeup, or cinched with too-tight a tuxedo bowtie, or hair gelled flat, or pompadoured, or hairstyle updos that look bad in wedding parties and horrific pantomime on the young, or faces containing an ill-conceived semi-stubble pencil mustache that makes a person seem not older but less themselves. These are not sea anchors but, instead, icebergs of historical epic mistake. Youth has grain, too, and it is washed out with the very same false steps that lead to the sale of convertible sports cars and Rogaine and all sorts of nips, tucks, and injected inflations.

In Tanizaki's essay, the introduction of this idea of history, of the merits of residue, ends with the presentation of a first concrete location, the toilet, which resumes in earnest after a section break. He takes us to a temple, then precisely into that most glorious evocation of the beauty of the toilet, both as a literal object and state of being. I wish to emphasize, however, that while the first mention of the toilet at the end of section could seem like a standard move of what we call *foreshadowing*, instead he does so with a subtly different orientation, rearward even before we get there. Yes, Tanizaki has prepared us to anticipate writing on the toilet itself, offering what we usually expect from the forward drive of literature, but by the end of the section we are back again to a crucial line: "but even unfinished wood, as it darkens and the grain grows more subtle with the years, acquires an inexplicable power to calm and soothe." Here's the sea anchor, the historical *idea* of the essay pulling us back toward the concepts introduced in section one—the toilet is about the beauty of wear, not just the beauty of itself.

Such is the structural integrity of Tanizaki's essay. It simultaneously prepares us for the next part, even as it allows for space to include surprise, by the sudden appearance of No theater, and miso soup, and the cloudiness of jade. He moves us forward while also turning our heads constantly backward to the

thematic driver of the piece, which is a philosophical consideration of the nature of Japanese aesthetics. We never go so far forward that we cannot be pulled back toward what has come before. Jade takes on this job, and notably so does the structure of the lacquerwear itself, most of all the demand that we consider how every object described would *have looked* in the absence of electrical light.

Am I enamored too much with the subtly of this reorientation? I don't think so, as subtlety and the current resonance of the past is everything. This isn't Walter Benjamin, after all, with the horrible angel of history wrecking the past and dragging it into the future. Instead, it is a writer offering a succession of objects, a tour of place and architecture and cherished items that, at each new introduction, ask the reader to consider the new in light of all that has already happened. The essay unfolds in reverse.

This is most notable at the end, of course. If there's a thesis to this essay (and, as an essay, there is not, *per se*), it happens in closing: "I would call back at least for literature this world of shadows we are losing," he writes, "perhaps we may be allowed at least one mansion where we can turn off the electric lights and see what it is like without them." The essay ends this way, with a declaration of the heft of the past, and with an invitation to consider, in fact, what we have just experienced. I could see this essay beginning here, but also I can see how the essay loses all of its power if it does. We have been taught to peer into the shadows before we are told of their importance. We are being shown how to trust the shadows before we can know what might be within them, and this is because the shadows matter as much as what they contain, that in fact the shadows are themselves part of the what.

Often, I take my advanced nonfiction students to the special collections room at our small college library. There, we sit around a long table in a room devoted to the rare and endangered cultivation of the past. Books are history, which I don't mean as a soul-defeating pun that indicates our culture's disdain toward language, erudition, and respectful physicality. Instead, I mean that as a declaration toward those things. I mean to encourage the reinvigoration of antique ideas, to argue for why we lose much when we don't

recognize how long writers have been doing their thing, and how important are the objects of our own cultural backgrounds—not just the oft-assumed broadly Western in the case of the United States, but instead with the tremendous advantage of not-all-or-even-mostly Western, this being the very aspect that differentiates America from its former colonial power, from where, alas, emerged the wrongheaded sense of a monolithic past some would imagine could make us a narrowly and facilely and cynically-conceived “great” in some sort of falsely imagined “again.” Indeed, the vitality of American Literature happens, and has always happened, because of the collision of cultures. We have learned to look at this wrongly, though, taught to consider history as a continuous line of achievement, victors defining the limits of what we do. Instead, we must consider our continent and our culture as settled differentially, really never “settled” at all, by nations and peoples of many backgrounds, who in constant negotiations of our pasts might toss out our own sea anchors to steer us in the right new directions. This is a foundation to our aesthetic, or should be.

Yet, there is always a yet. This yet is about the electric light, in part, hearkening back to the questions of Tanizaki, and it is about the affection toward progress that is very much an affliction of the United States, where progress has always been about the place over the ever-receding horizon. This is a residue of our colonial past, that we must always seek to conquer instead of seek to understand where we’ve been, what has made us who we are. In America, you can always reinvent yourself. This is fine. But it is also dangerous, if who we were never matters.

Imagine you are one of my students, perched atop a wooden chair, wondering why we’ve gathered in this special room, behind special chiming doors, gathered together around a table stacked with oldness. Imagine that in front of you, maybe in your hands right now, is a text. It is, more than likely, an illuminated text. It was scribed, by hand, five hundred years ago, by a human being, likely a squinting human being hunched over a pinned piece of velum, with a meticulously selected quill, from a proprietary blend of ink, in a damp and cold stone room, with a sun dipping quickly behind the hills and the desire to get *just one*

more line down on the page before the light faded. This is a text that was written to be read either under sunlight filtered by, say, a stained-glass window, or a narrow slit in the wall, or by candlelight. Maybe all of these things.

Notice how small the lettering is. Notice how neat it is. Notice the pinholes left from the process of securing the vellum so that the calligraphy could happen. Notice the vibrancy of the ink. Now think about candlelight, which I imagine or at least hope we have all spent time in. Think about the motion of that light, how it is not the stable yellow burning of a filament nor, as is often the case now, the cold atomic who-knows-what of an efficient LED. Imagine how the illuminations themselves have been, well, illuminated. Consider what Tanizaki has to say about gold, “How, in such a dark place, gold draws so much light to itself,” and that “modern man, in his well-lit house, knows nothing of the beauty of gold.” Recognize that the pages you hold are, in fact, not modern. They existed and were made from a different darkness in a different place, and that their beauty, today, relies in no small part on our recognition of the darkness within which they were produced. The illuminations would have glowed, been *lively*, under the candlelight of their historical moment. No doubt, they look bad right now, under fluorescent glare.

Isn't all writing an act of peering into the darkness? Isn't this what I am really here trying to say today, that we look upon the ancient pages of such manuscripts, and the old writing of Tanizaki—an essay written a decade before my own parents were born by a person older than my grandmother who, by the standards of most of my students, presents an almost unreachable historical moment, thrice-removed in most cases, none having likely ever met anyone who lived during the lost times Tanizaki references, and that my students very well may not have met anyone who lived during the time he recognized that loss—because the writers before us looked into their darkneses?

Bear with me as I say it: if the world is, in some fashion, the pages of these books, we are the illuminations. As writers, we seek to offer that flash in the darkness, the reflection of light, light being all

things we might imagine: history, experience, object, other stories, writers we know and have read, the splinter I received in the musty barn of my childhood, or the splinter you received somewhere at some point, or our first paper cuts, or the first time the words on paper cut us open in a way we needed to be cut.

Once, somewhat long ago, I was more or less the same age as the people I teach. Now, I've become old enough to offer such phrases without irony and only mild embarrassment. And I recall the books that struck me hardest, in college, some of which my students know, and others that I recite as a kind of candlelight litany not unlike the powerful evocations of Catholic masses I attended when younger: Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal Dreams*. Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. E.M. Forster, *Passage to India*. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*. J.M. Coetzee *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, Michael Cunningham, *A Home at the End of the World*. Yukio Mishima, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*. Lewis Nordan, *Wolf Whistle*. Later, I came to others, Scott Russell Sanders and, in particular, his magnificent *Staying Put*. Kevin Oderman, *How Things Fit Together*. Brian Doyle, everything, plus *Mink River*. Lia Purpura, *On Looking*.

Each and every one of these books is a field of silver, gold, jade, precious metal and stone and, even more valuable, words. They are illuminations, to me. I find new ones constantly, thus I read constantly, the startling structure and resonance of Mark Doty's *Firebird*, the nearly-inaccessible beauty and confusion of Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*, Harrison Candelaria Fletcher in *Descanso for My Father* assembling an image of his dad through the accumulation of artifacts. And so forth.

I read to find illuminations, and because I recognize that the very same impulse that drove monks to huddle in dank chambers scribing words by hand drives all of us, as writers, those who wish also to illuminate. Words matter, because they draw us into the future by orientating us to the multiple sources of our own shared histories. These are the paintings in the alcoves. This is why there is nothing weird or old-fashioned, fussy, or inopportune about what Tanizaki writes:

We do not dislike everything that shines, but we do prefer a pensive luster to a shallow brilliance, a murky light that, whether in stone or artifact, bespeaks a sheen of antiquity.

As writers, and readers, and people who care about art and language, this is who we are. We never turn away from the antiquity, just as we seek always to dive deeper into the ever-gathering layers of what has come before us. We don't turn away from what we don't know, discouraged by what we don't understand but, instead, like the scribes at their ancient desks, that sun fading behind the treeline, hands cramped from a day's work, dutifully make marks. Or—shall I say *and?*—trust the artists of the illuminations themselves, who are us and others, who find ways to discover, make, reveal, reflect the light that pulls words to life.