

THE COLD ROMANTIC FACE OF MODERNITY  
AND INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM IN THE  
'GERMAN TRILOGY' OF MORI ŌGAI

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**Abstract**

This article affords fresh perspective insights into the Romantic cultural and literary movement in Japan during the Meiji period and how it affected the thinking and sensitivity of young scholars who established contact with this new reality. Given the vastness of the field of research, the analysis conducted in this article addresses the literary and philosophical influence exerted by the European Romantic movement on the three short stories that form the 'German trilogy' of Mori Ōgai. These exhibit the unprecedented psychological introspection of modern man and his inevitable response to modernity: alienation, emotional turmoil, inner conflict and individualism.

The advent of modernity in East Asia, notably in Japan, following the Meiji Restoration in 1868, conventionally marks the beginning and establishment of modern Japanese literature.

During this period in world history, Japan officially abandons the plan of complete national segregation (*sakoku* 鎖国) enacted by the Tokugawa shogunate (1600-1868), and implements a series of forced measures apt to import Western sciences, techniques, and eventually culture, philosophy and literature with the scope of facilitating the immediate modernisation process of the country and its ultimate positioning within the world economic chessboard. This revolutionising phenomenon gradually influenced all social classes characterising the years of Emperor Mutsuhito's reign (1868-1912). This culminated with the introduction of Western theories, literary movements, and eventually, with also the imitation of Western poetic forms that expressed the sensitivity of a new and modern literature.

The philosophical elements and ideals of Western cultural and literary movements, such as that of Romanticism and Naturalism, travelled to Japan through the assiduous translation of Western works and through the personal experiences of individual Japanese intellectuals. Romanticism, similar to other literary movements that gradually spread among the intellectual circles, also began to take on distinctive characteristics and nuances, differentiating itself from the European source once permeated within the autochthonous historical and socio-cultural context.

Among the most prominent intellectuals of the Japanese Romantic movement emerge Kitamura Tōkoku 北村透谷 (1868-1894), the first modern writer to systematically treat the complexity of the introspective human nature; Shimazaki Tōson 島崎藤村 (1872-1943), who began his career during the Romantic period but progressively became known for his works written under the Naturalistic spell; Kunikida Doppo 国木田獨步 (1871-1908), influenced by Wordsworth's poems; and Izumi Kyōka 泉鏡花 (1873-1939), whose proximity to the Romantic imaginary is found in the presence of magical, fantastic and mystic elements. The latter, although never personally identified with the movement, is generally considered as one of the most prominent representatives of Japanese Romanticism. Finally, although not labelled as a Romantic author, Natsume Sōseki 夏目漱石 (1867-1916) is perhaps the writer who best represented the crisis of modern man during the Meiji period in his works dealing with the same arguments of the Romantics, such as the affirmation of the individual in his continuous conflict between personal freedom and solitude, individualism and modernity.

The first Japanese thinker, however, to get closely involved with the Romantic cultural movement in Europe was the young military physician Mori Rintarō 森林太郎 (1862-1922), widely known by his pen name Mori Ōgai 森鷗外, who soon became an essential figure in the establishment of modern Japanese literature thanks to his theoretical contributions, translations and literary production.

During his stay in Berlin, Leipzig, Dresden and Munich, Mori Ōgai in fact was able to gain a personal understanding of the same culture and tradition of which he had extensively read while studying in Japan. While in Germany, however, Mori Ōgai read influential works, such as those of Eduard von Hartmann, who gradually led him to the elaboration of aesthetic principles that later enabled him to partake in the literary and artistic criticism in Japan.

Although the Romantic literary and cultural movement was slowly coming to an end when Mori Ōgai visited Germany, the young doctor found interest in many of the Romantic themes and elements through the assiduous reading of European novels, including the German translation of the Danish work *Improvisatoren* (1835), by Hans C. Andersen. The Japanese writer was particularly captured by the literary genre of the Bildungsroman and the figure of the hero who is set to face great difficulties in his culminating quest for love.

The works of the 'German trilogy' vividly manifest the most recurrent themes of the Japanese Romantic movement, such as tragic love, female charm, the magical and the mysterious as well as the emotional sensitivity of the young protagonists. The term 'German trilogy', or *Doitsu sanbusaku* ドイツ三部作, was recently proposed by the first scholars who critically analysed the narrative production of Mori Ōgai, namely Satō Harunobu and Kinishita Mokutarō, who define the three stories of the 'trilogy' as *shoki no santanben*, literally translated as "the three tales of the debut". The three novels, *Maihime* 舞姫 (The Dancing Girl), *Utakata no ki* うたかたの記 (A Tale of Evanescent Moments) and *Fumizukai* 文づかひ (The Messenger), enriched with a stylistic form typical of the classical language, revolve around the psychological introspection of the modern lyrical self and its aesthetic experience and perception of art. The latter is here understood as an autonomous entity that takes on grandiose and dramatic forms.

The beginning of the Romantic movement in Japan, *romanshugi* ロマン主義, coincides with the publication of the first work of Kitamura Tōkoku in 1889 and officially ends in 1904 with the beginning of the Russo-Japanese conflict. The function of literature during this intense period is at a turning point, as readers not only can express their critical opinion but they can now also identify themselves emotionally with the events narrated and ultimately recognise themselves in the role of the protagonists of the novels, as in the case of *Maihime*, *Utakata no Ki* and *Fumizukai*. The writer, therefore, seeks to involve the readership with an expressive technique that is based on real life aesthetic experiences. Writers of this period, such as Mori Ōgai, clearly leave traces of their personal experiences to their readers with recurrent autobiographical elements.

The three works ingeniously emerge from the convergence of Romantic poetry and elements typical of the classical tradition, such as the *mujō* 無常 or the ephemeral and the classical expressive *mono no aware* 物の哀れ or 'pathos of things'. The notion encapsulated in the title of the second novel, *Utakata no ki*, for instance, seemingly encounters its quintessential realisation in the *Genji monogatari* 源氏物語 (History of Genji) of the eleventh century. In this piece of classical literature, the term *utakata* denotes the swiftness and evanescence of a moment, used to express the melancholy arising from the memory of the good old days of the past as transitory and ephemeral moments. The intrinsic connotation of *utakata* is that of an intangible fraction of time that vanishes into thin air leaving no trace, just like foam in the sea. This element of Japanese sensitivity is re-evoked through Romantic means to unveil the cold face of modernity: man's incapability to keep up with modern time losing all his certainty and self-confidence – alienation and desperate individualism being the inevitable result.

It should also be noted that Mori Ōgai had already contributed to the spread of the Romantic movement in Japan with the publication of his poem collection *Omokage* 於母影 in 1889. The composition of modern Japanese poems, *kindaishi* 近代詩, officially begins in 1882 with the publication of the collection *Shintaishi shō* 新体詩抄 (Anthology of Poems in New Forms), composed of nineteen poems, including five original and fourteen translations of Western poems.

The composition of the three short stories of the 'German trilogy' reveal Mori Ōgai's personal experiences in Germany and inspiration by the Western literary form of the novel in a rather progressive way so to express and present his reception of Romanticism to the Meiji society. In fact, the writer received a traditional education, thus, approaching the study of Chinese and Japanese classics as a young man, acquiring also a certain fluency and mastery in the classical language and experimenting with a personal and clear style.<sup>1</sup> Each of the three novels highlights a different aspect of Romanticism. If in *Maihime* the writer underlines the freedom and independence of modern man intended as an individual; and in *Utakata no ki*, the sentimental intensity embodied by art and the fascination for history gain reputable significance and autonomy;

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1 George Saitō, *Problems of Modernization – Discussions on George Ticknor, Mori Ōgai and Natsume Sōseki*, Risho University, NII – Electronic Library Service, 1980, p. 4.

it is in *Fumizukai* that the Japanese author employs a more refined and elegant tone to elevate the advent of ‘individualism’ through the protagonist, Ida, the only woman of the three novels able to stand out for herself, make decisions autonomously and lead her life with determination, even at the precious cost of relinquishing some ambitions.

*Maihime* was particularly received with enthusiasm, exerting considerable influence on the sensitivity of many young intellectuals of the Meiji period who felt being spiritually close to the events and decisions made by Ōta, the male Japanese protagonist. The young jurist, found in Berlin far from his family and Japan, reaches the unexpected awareness of a conflict instigated by the newly reforming society between his own feelings of freedom and the constraints dictated by the family.

The innovative contribution brought by Mori Ōgai in the spread of Romanticism in Japan is not merely limited to the experimentation of original themes typical of the movement, such as tragic love, the adulation of feminine beauty or the fine sensitivity of the protagonists, but it also includes the profound knowledge with which the writer masters a world that exalts the power of individuality and beauty combined. An analogous idea of beauty and art can be traced in Andersen’s *Improvisatoren* but definitely scrutinised from a different perspective. The refinement of the language with which Mori Ōgai proposes the work in Japanese in fact also analogically mingles with the beauty of the Italian landscape imagined and poetised on Romantic notes.

It should also be noted that Mori Ōgai’s effective proposal of Romanticism to the attentive Japanese readership was also indebted to his sound classical formation and knowledge of classical Japanese literature as clearly demonstrated by the recurrent reminders of images belonging to the post-Heian literary tradition. The originality of Mori Ōgai lies in fact in the re-evaluation of traditional Japanese elements through Romanticism and therefore in the portrayal of the Western cultural and literary current through converging points with the sensibility of classical Japan.

It is also interesting to note that Mori Ōgai was the first writer to give a systematic presentation of French Naturalism in Japan in 1889 with the coinage of the term *shizenshugi* 自然主義 as translation to the French *naturalisme*, thus, also contributing to its diffusion among the intellectual literary circles of the time. Naturalism was also experimented within Japan after the experience of Romanticism in the early twentieth century and soon became one of the central literary movements of the Meiji and Taishō periods (1912-1926). Although during the early years of the Meiji period the term ‘naturalism’ was commonly confused with ‘realism’, Mori Ōgai and Ueda Bin 上田敏 (1874-1916) undoubtedly demonstrated that they had a clear idea of how the term was used in the French literary context.<sup>2</sup>

The representation of Naturalism by Mori Ōgai in the journal *Shigarami zōshi* しがらみ草子 (The Weir) in 1889 appears to be in accordance with the thought of Claude Bernard, in that it mainly concerned the relationship between literature and science. Mori Ōgai, moreover, seemingly defends the idea of a historical continuation

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2 See William F. Sibley, “Naturalism in Japanese Literature”, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 28, 1968, pp. 157-169, p. 159.

between past and contemporary literature, arguing that the new tendencies towards realism and the psychological analysis were already present in Japanese literary history and that, therefore, they should be reaffirmed.<sup>3</sup>

As the title of *Maihime* indicates, the story of the first novel is dedicated to a young German girl named Elise who sees in dance the only way to cope with family expenses after the death of her father. Ōta Toyotarō, on the other hand, is a young Japanese lawyer sent to Berlin by the Japanese government to conduct legislative research. One evening, while walking and reflecting on his personality and how he had discovered his true self in Germany feeling a stronger vocation for history and literature than for law, Toyotarō comes across the young ballerina, distraught by pain and in tears for not being able to offer a decent burial to her recently deceased father. Toyotarō, moved by compassion, tries to help her and between the two there begins a love affair that, regrettably, causes the suspension of the scholarship and assignment in Germany for the young lawyer. Through some friends, however, the young man manages to find a job as a journalist until one day he is offered again the opportunity to return to Japan, regain the respect from the authority and pursue the career he had left behind. Toyotarō is thus forced to choose between his love for Elise in Germany or the possibility of starting a career in Japan. The young man finally decides to leave Germany full of remorse abandoning Elise, pregnant and now suffering from a pain that will eventually lead her to despair and final madness.

The second story, *Utakata no ki*, tells of a young Japanese artist called Kose who returns to Munich for the second time in search for a female face for one of his paintings. At the Academy of Fine Arts he meets Marie, a young and beautiful model who decides to pose for him. The model opens her heart to the Japanese man and tells how her life had been made difficult because of the love of the sovereign, Ludwig II, for her mother. The two go on a date by Lake Starnberg where the young woman, at the sight of the sovereign, faints and falls head down into the water, tragically drowning. The strong pain for the loss of Marie prevents the young artist from finishing his painting.

In the third novel, *Fumizukai*, a young Japanese man named Kobayashi is finally asked to recount an episode of his experiences abroad during a meeting among nobles and soldiers. The young man tells of the visit to the castle of Düben in Saxony where he met Ida, the young, generous, beautiful and mysterious German noblewoman who had instructed him to deliver a secret letter to the court that would allow her to be free from an imposed engagement. The character of Kobayashi is therefore here limited to the mere task of 'messenger'.

Romanticism, which exalted the uniqueness of the individual manifested by the subjectivity of sentiments, also brings the modern concept of individualism, a very difficult notion to present to Japanese society, in which the group was more important than the individual. This in fact caused a fierce interference between the sense of social obligation (*giri* 義理) and sentiment or empathy (*ninjō* 人情). The three stories of

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3 Luca Milasi, "Tra realtà e finzione: la rivalutazione della narrative premoderna nella critica letteraria Meiji", XXXIV Japanese Studies Congress AISTUGIA, 2010, p. 5.

Mori Ōgai reveal the commotion caused by this frustration and the pain of the three Japanese protagonists, Toyotarō, Kose and Ida, who experiment with a new individual dimension, which was stifled until then. In fact, as soon as these find freedom, they find themselves forced to make decisions while contending with their sense of duty, which finally suffocates their feeling and consequent desire for individual freedom. In the case of *Maihime*, the sense of duty leads the young Toyotarō to renounce his freedom in Berlin and exclude a possible and ‘contented’ life with Elise in Germany in order to return home under the directives of the Japanese government. Although the first experimental ideas of individualism imported from the West began to spread throughout the Japanese intellectual circles, the structure of Meiji society evidently was not ready to accept such radical change that would eventually lead to the realization of the individual’s feelings and striving for full emancipation.

The central themes of the ‘Germany Trilogy’ remarkably show how the author succeeded in weaving the characteristics of European Romanticism with the experiences of late nineteenth-century Europe and his unmistakable vision of the modern individual. Although the date of publication of the three works does not correspond to the order in which they were initially drafted, the novels intriguingly show a certain narrative continuity and thematic development brought forward by the author. *Maihime* in fact suggests the first phase of the author’s encounter with the West: an unexpected confrontation pervaded by wonder and amazement for the foreign culture and the richly variegated literary heritage that Mori Ōgai did veritably come in contact with. Thanks to his travel diary, the *Doitsu nikki* ドイツ日記, it is also possible to learn how the young doctor dedicated himself to institutional activities during his stay and study in Germany. Likewise, Toyotarō, the male protagonist of the novel, is a visiting student for the first time in Europe. In *Utakata no ki* it is the painter Kose who undertakes a second trip to Germany after six years; whereas Kobayashi in *Fumizukai* finally appears to the reader as perfectly embedded in German society in the guise of an officer.

As for the female figures, however, there is a certain change and development in the character of the three protagonists. In fact, although they are all forced to live a life they have not chosen, Elise, Marie and Ida act in different ways: Elise is subjected to and does not stand against the ‘cruel’ decisions made by Toyotarō; whereas Marie begins to show a firmer character by fighting to improve her living conditions. With the third and last story, the progressive character’s growth and development reach the apex in the female figure’s maturity and freedom: Ida takes a firm stance and manages to take control over her destiny and decide for her life.

The three stories do not only follow a progressive change in the personality of the protagonists, but they are also joined by various themes and elements, including that of madness. The three protagonists, in fact, live different states of mind that find their peak in madness: Elise loses her sanity because of love especially when Toyotarō prefers career and assignments in Japan to her, and leaves the girl pregnant and in despair; Marie is considered mad and is psychologically distressed by insistent and exasperating love of the sovereign for her mother, which ultimately leads the girl to death; and finally, Ida uses the ‘madness’ of music to express her feelings.

It is also interesting to note that although the male protagonists are Japanese, they solely relate with German female characters within European contexts. Even though the scenes take place in 'foreign' land, their setting contains images typical of the classical Japanese tradition.

*Maihime* appeared for the first time in the highly influential journal *Kokumin no Tomo* 国民之友 (The Nation's Friend, 1887-1898) in 1890 and is undoubtedly one of Mori Ōgai's best-known novels. It is in fact the first story that deals with one of the most striking problems of modernity: alienation. According to the definition given by Russian philosopher and literary critic Michail M. Bakhtin, the novel is the only literary genre that shows an uninterrupted development and therefore cannot be defined as completed.<sup>4</sup> Bakhtin makes a clear distinction between the epic that presents a story that is completed, closed, antiquated and the novel that is young, alive, open, still under development and above all not finished.<sup>5</sup>

The story of *Maihime*, written from a first-person perspective, presents a literary form that can be considered as an inspiration from the European novel. In fact, in many ways the work of Mori Ōgai recalls the novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* of Goethe. The story opens with the protagonist's explicit intention of not willing to tell a story orally, but to write those momentary feelings experienced abroad. By doing so, the narrator expresses his intention to 'tell' the story using the written language. This choice seemingly also demonstrates the explicit superiority of the written language over the oral rendition.<sup>6</sup>

If Mori Ōgai truly took inspiration from the style of writing of the aforementioned novel by Goethe, the story of *Maihime* clearly differs from this for the accurate psychological analysis of the characters it affords. In addition, for the writing of his story, Mori Ōgai chooses the elegant literary style, *gabuntai* 雅文体, the classical Japanese prose, preserving the forms of the classical written language. If the language of the three novels is classical and elegant, the setting is plainly Western and foreign. This spatial and temporal intersection with the autochthonous elegant narrative style, defined by Bakhtin as 'chronotope', gives the original Japanese version a uniqueness that is difficult to reproduce in other languages.

*Maihime* is the result of a skilful fusion between 'fiction' and autobiographical elements that examines themes closely related to modernity and its 'soft' repercussions on the life of modern man: the renunciation of the individual's independence in light of the obligations imposed by society and family. Mori Ōgai highlights the importance of freedom, the will and psychology of man and investigates the notion of individualism

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4 See Michael Holquist (ed.), *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981, p. 3.

5 See Haga Tadahiko, *Tropes of the Novel in Modern Japanese Literature: Soseki's Kokoro and Ōgai's Maihime*, Chiba University, Vol. 9, 1997, p. 42.

6 See Haga Tadahiko, *Tropes of the Novel in Modern Japanese Literature*, p. 43.

now widespread in Japan but which society cannot still put into practice. In a rather paradoxical way, however, the protagonist manages to accept the bitterness of life and to renounce love, seeing the possibility of fulfilling his ambitions by returning to his homeland.

Among the autobiographical elements is also the desire that unites Mori Ōgai with his *alter ego* Toyotarō to go to Europe. As the Japanese writer was subsidised by the Japanese government to study advanced techniques in Western medicine, so is Toyotarō entrusted from the government with the task of travelling to Germany for research. In his works, the author includes information about his life, desires, aspirations and details of his spiritual and sentimental growth. This autobiographical approach to his writings is visible from his first published work in 1890 to his last writing, *Hōjō Katei* 北条霞亭 in 1921.<sup>7</sup>

From his trip to Europe, Mori Ōgai also seems to have awakened a fresh perception of transience, time's evanescence as well as man's alienation. The thoughts of Toyotarō, who returns home as a different person and describes what he has experienced in the West as momentary and flickering sensations clearly acknowledge his perception of time as something intangible and ephemeral: "I have also realised how easily myself and my heart have changed. Whom could I possibly show these momentary sensations that change overnight?"<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, the feeling of alienation, another psychological condition that commonly tormented the Romantics, is so strong that it finally prevents the young man to make friends with the other passengers of the ship setting sail from the port of Brindisi for over twenty days. Toyotarō, in fact, tormented by a sense of guilt, prefers to stay holed up in the cabin of the ship rather than interacting with the others. The experience in Germany accompanies him to Japan with a new sense of awareness about the sadness and frailty of life. The pain of the young man soon mixes with nostalgia and with a sense of remorse that is too hard to forget: "I have shut myself in the cabin pretending to be ill and do not talk with my fellow travellers as I am afflicted by a resentment in my head that people do not know."<sup>9</sup>

While in Germany, Toyotarō realises that having followed his mother's suggestions, that is to study with commitment as a prodigious child and become a "living dictionary" (生きた辞書), he behaved like a passive individual manipulated mechanically by the government: "The government director would have originally turned me into a machine

7 Yoshiyuki Nakai, "Mori Ōgai: The State of the Field", *Monumenta Nipponica*, Vol. XXXV, No. 1 (Spring 1980), pp. 99-106, p. 100.

8 「自分と自分自身の心までも変わりやすいことをも悟ってしまった。昨日と今日とは異なる一瞬の感触を、筆に写して誰に見せられるだろう」, Mori Ōgai, *Maihime*, retrieved from *Aozora Bunko* 青空文庫: <https://tatsu-zine.com/samples/aozora/maihime.pdf>; trans. by the author.

9 「同行の人々にも話をするのが少ないのは、人の知らない恨みに頭を悩ませているからである」, Mori Ōgai, *Maihime*, trans. by the author.



to be used according to his will.”<sup>10</sup> He always uses images taken from the natural sphere to express his state of alienation, especially when confronting himself with his peers: “My heart felt like the leaves of the silk-tree which shrink and ward off when they are touched.”<sup>11</sup>

Toyotarō begins to live in a state of estrangement right from his arrival in Berlin, when neither his Japanese peers nor the women with their heavy make-up and gaudy clothes seem to consider him, let alone speak to him.

The European Romantic movement distinguished itself for its acclaimed exaltation of sentiment, as opposed to the concepts of enlightened rationalism. This theme is then connected with the awareness of the individual's discontent: man is afflicted by the impending weight of death and the impossibility of full contentment. Man is aware of not being able to achieve happiness because of his own internal conflicts. What leads Toyotarō to flee from Berlin and leave Elise alone, expecting his child, is also that spirit of personal dissatisfaction that pushed the individual towards career ambitions and ‘making a name’ (名前を高める) for himself and for his family. Toyotarō has already been dismissed from the office once and for the fear of not being able to re-affirm himself professionally or make a brilliant career as a government official, he decides to return home, suffocating his emotional bond with the German girl.

*Maihime* is, as also Donald Keene writes, the first work of a new literature written by a man who has really lived in Europe and has learnt something of his own sentimental and spiritual life.<sup>12</sup>

The romantic motif recurring in the story *Utakata no ki*, published in the journal *Shigarami sōshi* し が ら み 草 紙 in August 1890, mainly focuses on classical culture from which emerges the concept of the ephemeral and art.

The protagonist of this story is Kose, a young Japanese artist who revisits Munich after six years in search for a female face to finish one of his paintings. At the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, a place suggested by his German friend Exter, he finds Marie, a young model whose face seems to match with the expression he was looking for. The young artist compares the characteristics and the fine beauty of Marie with that of an ancient statue of Venus and the statue of the goddess of Bavaria on the Arch of Triumph in Munich. According to many artists of the time, true and pure beauty is best preserved in classical Greek and Roman statues.

Combining the profound knowledge of Japanese classical works with the Romantic sentiment, Mori Ōgai re-evokes also through the title of the novel the motif of the evanescence of time where every fraction of a second disappears without leaving

10 「官の長官は元々意のままに使える機械を作ろうとしていたのだろう」, Mori Ōgai, *Maihime*, trans. by the author.

11 「私の心はあの合歡という木の葉に似て、物が触ると縮んで避けようとする」, Mori Ōgai, *Maihime*, trans. by the author.

12 Donald Keene (ed.), *Modern Japanese Literature: From 1868 to the Present Day*, New York, Grove Press, 1956, p. 23.

any trace of its existence. This is particularly emphasised by the term *utakata*, or ‘foam in the sea’, recurring in classical Japanese literature – quintessential element of insubstantiality and transience.

It is interesting to note how the image of the sea foam and its connotation of evanescence also recall the foam in the sea of the fairy tale *Den lille Havfrue* (*The Little Mermaid*, 1836) by Hans C. Andersen. The real story of *The Little Mermaid*, contrary to the well-known modern animated adaptation by Walt Disney, tells of a young mermaid in love with a prince who dies by dissolving in sea foam. According to the tale, mermaids do not have a soul and when they die they dissolve into sea foam ending their existence, unlike men who can have eternal life after death. However, thanks to her gracious kindness, once dissolved in foam, the mermaid does not cease to exist but becomes a spirit, a daughter of the air. In the story of Mori Ōgai, when Marie is taken to the lake without her headdress and drowns, the girl’s spirit frees itself from the earthly bonds when “a firefly rises from the shores. Oh, that might be the girl’s soul flying away.”<sup>13</sup>

The evanescence and frailty of human existence exacerbate in modern man, according to Mori Ōgai, the same sadness typical of the Japanese medieval period, which was included in the aesthetic ideal of the *mujō* 無常. In fact, the author employs the expressive means of the *aware*, hence those feelings that spontaneously emerge from the human soul<sup>14</sup> and that stir the hearts of the protagonists in the three novels, clearly found, for instance, in the character of Kose in *Utakata no ki*. According to Marie, the artist has the rare ability to experience empathy and understanding for others.

The ending of the story and especially the possible completion of the painting by Kose has become the object of reflection and research for many scholars and literary critics. It is possible that Mori Ōgai wrote his story after a debate on aesthetics with Toyama Masakazu 外山正一 (1848-1900).<sup>15</sup> The Japanese author divulged for the first time the theories of German philosopher Eduard von Hartmann in his article “Toyama Masakazu shi no garon wo bakusu” 外山正一氏の画論を駁す (Refusing the Painting Theories of Toyama Masakazu) in April 1890.<sup>16</sup>

Mori Ōgai, who had recently learnt Eduard von Hartmann’s theory of aesthetics in Germany, criticised Toyama and founded his own theories by defending Harada’s work and using the concept of “imaginative painting”<sup>17</sup>. The theses of Mori Ōgai, influenced by Hartmann’s theory of aesthetics, can facilitate the understanding of the novel *Utakata*

13 「岸のかたへ高く飛びゆく螢ほたるあり。あはれ、こは少女が魂のぬけ出でたるにはあらずや」, Mori Ōgai, *Utakata no ki*, retrieved from the Horishima University International Repository: [https://ir.lib.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/files/public/1/15809/20141016124048376465/kbs\\_29\\_1.pdf](https://ir.lib.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/files/public/1/15809/20141016124048376465/kbs_29_1.pdf); trans. by the author.

14 See Matilde Mastrangelo, *Mori Ōgai: Il Romanticismo e l’Effimero*, Merate, Go Book editore, 2007, p. 12.

15 See Misuzu Danbara, *Mori Ōgai’s Views on Fine Arts and Utakata no ki – Creation of Picture of Lorelei by imagination*, Osaka Shoin Women’s University, 2005, p.1.

16 Michael F. Marra (ed.), *A History of Modern Japanese Aesthetics*, University of Hawaii Press, 2001, p.77.

17 Marra, *A History of Modern Japanese Aesthetics*, p. 3.

*no ki*. In line with the idea of the microcosm that allows the gods to gain eternal life if expressed in human form (*hitokata* 一方), the author gives the protagonist of the story the ability to confer eternal life to the young seller of violets, depicting the image of the Lorelei, the legendary mermaid of the river Rhine that, being of a transcendent divine existence, is portrayed in the body of the girl.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, *Utakata no ki* is a typical Romantic example of artistic expression where the inspiration becomes a work of art.<sup>19</sup> Kose's painting of the Lorelei represents the fruit of the pain and suffering of the young artist after Marie's death. This clearly exemplifies how the Romantic feeling can also be expressed through figurative art, as the ideal of beauty finds its best expression when man becomes one with art. In fact, when at the beginning Kose looked closely at Marie and stopped to admire her beauty, the young woman no longer appeared to him as the vendor of violets nor as the Lorelei, but as the deity of Bavaria on the top of the Arch of Triumph. According to some Neoplatonic theories, elaborated at the Court of Medici during the second half of the fifteenth century and based on the artistic culture of the Renaissance, the ideal beauty no longer exists in nature, but can be reached in the images produced by the artist himself.<sup>20</sup>

The third story of the trilogy, *Fumizukai*, published for the first time in January 1891, stands out for the psychological analysis of the young German noblewoman, Ida, who manages to escape a marriage agreement without love by joining the court of Saxony in Dresden. The task of the Japanese male protagonist, Kobayashi, as well as narrator of the novel, is limited to the mere function of a messenger, that is, to deliver the secret letter of Ida to her aunt, countess at court.

The figure of the young military officer Kobayashi visiting Saxony is comparable to that of an apparent observer who scrutinises the course of history without interfering with the plot or interacting with the action. As in *Utakata no ki*, the main male figure remains a spectator who, playing a minor role on stage, covers the fundamental part of the one who lends himself to listening. The two young men, Kose and Kobayashi, in the two stories get to know their own personality since both Marie and Ida recognise in them an uncommon character and empathy; the same spirit that leads the two girls to open their hearts and trust their discomfort.

The same inner conflict of the protagonist of *Maihime* between the sense of duty and the fulfillment of one's own desires is also found in *Fumizukai*. Living this conflict now is Ida, also driven by family decisions and the noble position of her father. When the young woman tries to open her heart to her father, he does not even give her the chance to conclude the speech by stating: "it is unconceivable for people born in nobility to act selfishly like those of lower classes."<sup>21</sup> The father emphasises that the prestige of

18 See Marra, *A History of Modern Japanese Aesthetics*, p. 4.

19 See Mastrangelo, *Mori Ōgai*, p. 17.

20 See Vittoria Napoletano, *La figura umana nell'arte*, Novara, Loescher Editore, 2010, p. 21.

21 「世に貴族と生れしものは、賤やまがつなどの如くわがままなる振舞、おもひもよらぬことなり」, Mori Ōgai, *Fumizukai*, retrieved from Aozora Bunko 青空文庫: [https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000129/files/45225\\_22340.html](https://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000129/files/45225_22340.html); trans. by the author.

their family was founded in the “sacrifice of the individual’s rights.” The renunciation of the pleasures of life can be rewarded by pride for their house, the same pride and desire for success that drives the young Toyotarō to make his decision in order to give a ‘name’ to his family and reach a social rank. Nonetheless, Ida, despite being born into a noble family, redeems her right to be a woman and manages to take control over her own destiny by refusing to consume her life in a “vulgar love story” (いやしき恋).

Ida is the only female protagonist of the trilogy who manages to decide on her own life. In other words, Ida can be considered a heroine, as she is the only female character in the trilogy that manages to complete her plan of ‘alienation’ from the fixed family patterns.

The nightmare of Kobayashi, in which he sees Ida riding and changing into a sphinx head, reminds one of some other Romantic components. The notion of the dream as an irrational instance is juxtaposed with the image of a sphinx, which represents the charm of the exotic and the mysterious during the Romantic era. In fact, the search for new inner experiences leads the poet to a new opening and acceptance of new spatial and temporal horizons. This explains the great interest that Romantic writers showed for distant lands and cultures. The image of the sphinx in *Fumizukai* opens up new thematic horizons that can be explained with the passion and interest of the author for the exotic, the mysterious, art, nature and history. The sphinx, mythological figure belonging to the Greek and Egyptian mythology, connects the human and the natural spheres: the body of a lion with a human head. In fact, nature appears to the poet as an entity not yet contaminated by human civilisation and he feels a deep interest and admiration for it. Man wants to be in close contact with the natural world, source of beauty and mystery.

The study of the literary activity of the Meiji period and in particular that of Japanese Romantic lyrical production are closely connected with the relationship with the Western “foreign” entity with which Japan came into contact at the end of the nineteenth century. The beginning of the Meiji period coincides with the beginning of modernisation. Among the literary movements that came to Japan from the encounter with Western culture, Romanticism is considered fundamental by many critics for the establishment of the modern national literature, allowing young intellectuals to acquire a certain awareness of their state of mind and spirit. The Romantic imaginary and above all the ideals of freedom and individualism triggered a continuous inner conflict in the Japanese writers of the Meiji period, as these new values stood in stark contrast with the expectations and obligations imposed by the family and society. Romanticism is the movement in Japan that introduced the modern ideal of the prevalence of the personal ego over the social ego, and therefore of individualism over collectivism.

To sum up, Mori Ōgai was among the first Japanese intellectuals to experience a personal encounter with the European Romantic dimension during his visit and study in Germany. On his return to Japan in 1888, he began his dual career as military doctor and writer, translating and actively participating in the critical literary debate and political discussions in favour of the scientific diffusion. Mori Ōgai presented and disseminated European thought, aesthetics and literature and above all contributed to the transmission of the Romantic imaginary through his translations and literary works by also unveiling the cold face of modernity: the alienated modern man tormented by an

inner conflict between sense of duty and desire for freedom. The stories of the 'German trilogy, *Maihime*, *Utakata no ki* and *Fumizukai*, published between 1890 and 1891, clearly manifest this intellectual quest by the Japanese writer.

The themes contained in the three novels depict the actual turmoil of modern man in the era of change, uncertainty and alienation. The readers of the Meiji period could easily identify themselves with the roles covered by the three different protagonists, who in their own ways experienced the irreconcilability between their own feelings of freedom and the constraints imposed by their family and authorities. The love for Elise in *Maihime*, for instance, sets the mood for the responsibilities, expectations and obligations of the family environment that force the protagonist to betray his own feelings for his and their family's 'name'.

From a critical point of view, the three stories turn out to be experiments, in which the author examines the various aspects and themes of the Romantic movement and associates them with his experiences through the introspective and emotional analysis of the characters. These in fact undergo in their own independent contexts different stages of emotional, psychological and spiritual evolution, starting from the abandonment and the madness of Elise for the love and loss of Toyotarō in *Maihime*; passing by the despair of Kose kneeling before the painting of Lorelei, ephemeral memory of the young and beautiful Marie in *Utakata no ki*; culminating with the non-action of Kobayashi and the firm stance and courage of Ida in *Fumizukai*.

The ideals of individualism and personal freedom manifested through the subjectivity of feelings and a specific existential condition, which the author expresses in the three novels of the 'German trilogy' do not hide the complexity in which they were received and finally adapted in a modern and conflicting Japanese context. By shedding light on the hidden side of reality, Mori Ōgai intriguingly portrays modern Japanese characters that experience continuous inner conflicts triggered by the uniqueness of the individual and the awareness of their discontent fuelled by social commitments and higher expectations.

Mori Ōgai's experimentation and careful attention to the emotional and psychological repercussions of modernity on the intellectual circles of Meiji Japan reveal the author's originality in the discovery of European Romantic themes while re-evaluating elements of the classical Japanese tradition. The stories of the 'German trilogy', in fact, manifest the frail condition of mankind and the evanescence of life during the advent of modernisation as well as the author's apparent attempt to soothe the reader's sensitivity by re-evoking and resuscitating traditional forms, such as that of the *mono no aware*, that is the perception that moves the individual's heart and unites him with the surrounding world, and man's ephemeral existence regardless of his geographical or socio-cultural background. Even if in mutation and progressive maturity, the personalities embodied by the Japanese protagonists and German female characters in the 'German trilogy' vividly portray the complexity of human nature before ethical and socio-cultural restraints. It is hence no surprise how modern notions and ideals of individualism found fertile ground to grow within the spirits of young Japanese intellectuals whose sensitivity was often tormented by the high expectations of a fast modernising yet traditional nation and the closer self's striving for intellectual and emotional freedom.

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