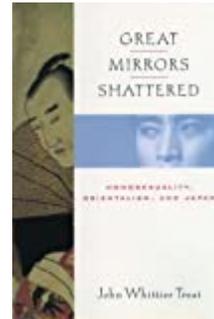


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**John Whittier Treat.** *Great Mirrors Shattered. Homosexuality, Orientalism and Japan.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. Ideologies of Desire series. \$29.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-510923-8.



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"I have not written a scholarly work," John Whittier Treat allows, in a nervous preface to one of the most challenging, provocative books in the field of Japanese studies in recent years. I disagree. *Great Mirrors Shattered* is nothing if not a scholarly work. It situates itself within professional discourse about Asia. It commands a wide range of reference. It contains footnotes! The trouble is, *Great Mirrors Shattered* – which refers, among other things, to the profession's reflections of Japan, Ihara Saikaku's seventeenth century text, *The Great Mirror of Male Love*, the notion of homosexual narcissism, and a very literal cracked mirror in the bathroom of Treat's Tokyo apartment that very symbolically shatters the day before he leaves Japan – is something else in addition to being a scholarly book. So what else to call it? Treat himself uses the word, "memoir," as the preface works its way around the theory and politics of writing the personal within a scholarly context.

"Memoir" will do – and thus the subtitle does no service by failing to alert the reader to how the book is not a standard "treatment" of the relationships among homosexuality, orientalism, and Japan but instead an embodiment of how these three subjects intersect in the life of one gay man. In one sense, there is a personal narrative that stretches over the whole length of the book. In the first chapter it is 1986. An assistant professor of Japanese

literature gets a sabbatical and goes to Tokyo to write a book about atomic bomb literature. He is funded by the Japan Foundation. He is already concerned about AIDS. He leaves behind the man he loves. It is September. Soon the young professor gets an apartment in Nagano. Before he left he was relieved to learn that he only has bronchitis. Now he is determined to travel light, complete his research, cease to worry about AIDS, and generally "live as if nothing is wrong" (p. 14). What is going to happen?

It would be misleading to suggest, however, that by the end of the second or third chapter we continue to imagine whether an executive from the Japan Foundation will appear to warn Treat that his stipend is in danger because he is frequenting gay bars. Much as *Great Mirrors Shattered* sometimes resembles fiction, it is not a novel. Although it remains more appropriate to wonder whether Treat will get laid rather than if he will get tenure, we quickly cease to care if his relation with his Seattle lover will break up (It does not). More crucially, I think, we even cease to care whether Treat himself has AIDS (He does not). What matters is the gradual accumulation of plot lines – as opposed to a main one – and how each of them comes to illuminate the others. The nature of our engagement, in other words, is intended to be intellectual rather than emotional – or just emotional enough to give tension as well as urgency to, for example,

the matter of whether or not a narrative of orientalism must necessarily be a narrative of homosexuality.

The performance (and not merely the “consideration”) of such a question constitutes a genuine intervention in Japanese studies. (Unless one day assistant professors receive tenure by writing-and not only writing on – their own versions of Pierre Loti’s *Madame Chrysanthème* or Roland Barthes’s *Empire of Signs*. Such texts define “the field” for Treat, and he cites them often.) As both gay man and gay scholar, Treat writes very much aware of those who have come before him as well as those who will come after. “I come from a long line of homosexual professors of Japanese literature,” he states. “I perch on the upper branches of a special family tree whose roots go deep” (p. 86). How deep? Treat is very interested in Sir Richard Burton’s career (though he was not gay) and in Ruth Benedict’s published statements about sexuality (she was). Alas, not much is known about Arthur Waley’s life. Alas also, Edward Said’s famous book, *Orientalism*, has nothing to say about homosexuals; however, this does not stop Treat from giving an amusing reading of the painting of the naked boy on the cover. *Great Mirrors Shattered* does not aim to be a “queering” of Japanese studies. One significant reason is because to Treat the field is already-obviously-queer.

Another reason, though, is more fugitive: the field is “queer” in ways that require the scale and intricacy of a whole book to examine, and then more to suggest rather than to stipulate. At one point Treat asks the following questions: “Why did Japan seem so silly to Kipling? Why am I so serious about it now? What is it that Kipling did not want to become here, but that I do?” (p. 167) The answer to the last question is not because Treat wants to become gay in Japan. He already is gay. Yet he is not gay in Japan in the same way as he is in the US. For one thing, in Japan he can attempt to live as if not so aware of the “viral shadow” of AIDS (p. 217). (Quotations from the Japan Times continually lay bare the hopelessness of such lack of awareness, although one wonders how much they formed an experiential portion of Treat’s own life in 1986 rather than form another formal “plot” for the text he publishes in 1999). For another thing, Japan affords Treat the opportunity to experience both the shifting equivalences as well as the abiding incommensurabilities of his subtitle. Living in Japan as gay man and scholar is exciting and challenging in ways that living in the US is not.

It would be too crude to say that, in Japan, Treat can be an orientalist and enjoy it. But it would not be in-

accurate. Perhaps the most crucial of the illusions not shattered in the memoir is a consummately erotic one: being the object of desire itself. Of the only woman about whom Treat confesses any desire, he writes that “I wanted to be her” (p. 50). The first sexual encounter he depicts is a memory of one of the lean, muscular men he wants to be; the clothing of another former lover, now dead, he wears “when I feel like remembering him, or being him” (p. 189). Insofar as orientalism is concerned, this means that Treat is continuously in a position of desire. He is of course not his object. He clearly does not resemble a Japanese. When Japanese utter the word “wareware,” it does not include him. And yet – especially since “it is our tradition to steal words from others and to hurl them back” – when he has a lot to drink “I can murmur ‘wareware’ like a mantra and believe it includes me, too” (p. 33). To put the matter more carefully: in Japan, Treat sees himself as aspiring always towards his object, while simultaneously enjoying a certain gap, either between the desire and the aspiration or between the aspiration and its fatuity.

Thus, years earlier (shifts in time throughout can be quite confusing), on a plane to the Philippines with a Canadian lover during an earlier visit to Japan, Treat notes that of course all the Japanese men on board are resolute for nothing but sex, “[b]ut then again, despite a smug contempt for our fellow passengers, so were we” (p. 40). Or, on an earlier visit to Hong Kong with his Japanese lover, Tetsuji, Treat reflects as follows: “We are both former colonial masters of this bit of rocky coast and at the same time two lovers whose love is both the rationale of empire and its challenge” (p. 151). Elsewhere, making violent love to Tetsuji, Treat wonders “how much of my love for him contained some inexplicable measure of my distress at not being him? At wanting to be him”(83)? The quick answer to this last question – Treat loves to ask questions –would be, quite a lot. In his final chapter, the issue is presented as explicitly as it ever is: “Is my own interest in the Orient really a desire to be the Orient, or instead its conqueror? Do I want to be Sir Richard, or his submissive servant”(p. 224)? How to answer these questions? It seems to me that Japan allows Treat to equivocate about the differences they pose, and to eroticize this difference.

In this respect his memoir is in stark contrast to those of Japanese-Americans who visit Japan or reside there for a time, only to experience the agony of an oscillating identity between Japan and the United States. Consider, for example, David Mura’s *Turning Japanese* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1991). Like Treat, Mura

concludes after his year in Japan that he does not feel “as bound now by my national identity” (p. 368). However, unlike Treat, to Mura Japan felt “too well defined, too rule-oriented, too polite, too circumscribed.” “Either I was an American or I was one of the homeless,” Mura concludes, “one of the searchers for what John Berger calls a world culture. But I was not Japanese” (p. 370). Why does Mura emphasize precisely those aspects or dimensions of Japanese society that Treat effaces? Mura does so because for him a national identity is at stake in ways it is not for Treat. Mura cannot eroticize the difference between Japan and the United States because the orientalist script permits him no unproblematic privilege in Japan (any more than the racial script permits him some unproblematic privilege in the United States). Whether in Japan or in the United States, he really is Japanese, or rather he has to begin by contending with how he is recognized in terms of not being or being so in each respective country. Treat, by contrast, can only desire to “be” Japanese because he is not.

Instead, Treat is more comparable to one of Mura’s (or Berger’s) “homeless” – and he revels in this fate. The fact that he is an American is for him of no particular interest. *Great Mirrors Shattered* is replete with the dream of a common identity among men-gay or not-that is beyond nation. “[F]ree trade,” he writes, has always been the official queer foreign policy, despite its occasional glitches. It is our way of saying these little kingdoms of yours do not matter all that much to us” (p. 143). Of course Treat knows that these differences do matter (and not only because of AIDS). He knows he has to answer questions at customs. He knows that the days of 1970 are over, when, with an earlier lover, “there were only two boys and the thought of all that Asian continent lay behind us, and all of history before us” (p. 62). But such knowledge does not prevent him from experiencing anew the sheer migrancy of desire, or of relishing certain visions that are only possible from within a life where national identity is ardent to suffer its recreation into something richer and stranger. One of the best examples of this last movement is when Treat finds himself standing somewhere in Tokyo before a billboard or poster displaying a beautiful young example of “white manhood” that he himself can imagine being. “But only because I am in Japan, where our common race makes the impossible distance between his beauty and my ordinariness, here if nowhere else, mean nothing” (pp. 70-1).

The entire narrative is deployed as a sequence of chapters in order to make such visions emerge as being embedded within a larger framework of daily experience

and memory, each refracted in and developed by the other. The above moment (set within the context of a climb to the summit of Mt. Fuji) does not quite end its particular chapter. What does conclude it is a final notation about how Treat is asked (once back in Tokyo) how he liked the experience. “I answered that it is indeed a trip that everyone should make at least once in a lifetime” (p. 71). What else to say? But the words are banal. Indeed, any words may ultimately be banal. However, this is not a book rich in social occasions. What there are instead are very personal, impeccably formal moments such as the one above, all of which can be broadly characterized as ironic. In one of his loveliest reflections, Treat explains the logic of his experience thus: “If Orientalism is inherently ironic, and therefore fatally flawed, than so too is Eros. Perhaps the flaw is in fact an irony we can learn to live with, given the alternatives. No, I’ve got it backwards. It is that irony that we live for” (p. 213) [last word italicized].“

Finally, *Great Mirrors Shattered* emerges as an exercise in sensibility, as well as a narrative of a year abroad or a series of essayistic fragments about the overlapping subjects of being gay, being an orientalist, and being in Japan. Not all readers will enjoy the sensibility-brilliant, mercurial, outlandish—as much as I did. For one thing, like all such exercises, Treat rather inevitably succumbs to the temptation to indulge himself. A few of the chapters are forced together, with mere will doing the work of imagination. Moreover, some of the writing in virtually all of the chapters is not free from false notes of sonority or pathos; Treat is a fine writer, but he has a limited tonal range. In addition, for me, the quotations from Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* read lumpishly. Worse, there is no single instance when the wholly public scale of the AIDS narrative becomes manifest with any urgency in the private realm; consequently, the panic whose evolution Treat wants to represent comes to appear a function of his own private fear, which, no more than his own presence in Japan during this time as a possible carrier of the disease, is never made subject to the same irony as virtually everything else in the book is.

A final matter of perhaps wider interest. Just about the only time in his memoir when Treat seems stern is when he accuses Shelia Johnson of “homophobia” after citing the passage in *The Japanese through American Eyes* when she criticizes American homosexuals because “they have often emphasized the subtle, the hypersensitive, the perverse, so that many Americans have absorbed vaguely homosexual connotations from American culture” (p. 201). To Treat, this sort of thing constitutes

“the common sense of my profession.” Does it? Everyone in the profession should read *Great Mirrors Shattered*, if only to test the truth either of Johnson’s criticism or Treat’s objection to it. It seems to me that his memoir at once rebukes Johnson and supports her. The rebuke is, I must trust, implicit in the whole of my review. On the basis of Treat’s experience—and not only his ideas—we are all in the profession entangled in imposture and masquerade. No matter that we are not all homosexual. As Treat asks at one point: “Can any of us go to the East, not effect a charade, and still be taken seriously” (p. 223). It may well be the case that gay experience brings out more fully and intricately than any other how our relation to Japan is fraught with orientalism that will not go away, whose irony with respect to us is constitutive to our relation to Japan. We may not seek to relish the irony as Treat does. Yet we can certainly respect, nay, admire his demonstration, as if it could be our own.

However, one man’s anger may be the same man’s irony, failed. How far can Treat be led by irony? We are led to expect, pretty far. But apparently not into the classroom. Hence, what are we to make if we put alongside Johnson’s criticism Treat’s characterization of Japanese literature when he began to study it in the 1970s as “esoteric, effete, aesthetic, and useless?” Now, he continues, the literature of the new powerful, corporate Japan is too redolent with “use”; his old “escape” is now the “patriotic pursuit” of his students, prompting him to reaffirm his conviction about these novels as “dazzlingly different, beyond our ordinary ken, quicker and cleverer than we can ever be” (85). Of course this does not mean that their study therefore is, well, a perverse one. Nonetheless, what Johnson means by “subtle” does not seem to

me much different than what Treat means by “clever.” Just so, the relation to the literature that she finds “hy-persensitive” homosexuals to be promoting is at least not unrelated to the relation to the same literature that the “dazzlingly different” Treat would urge on his students.

Once again, though, the matter does not end here. What other relation would any of us urge to our students, whatever literature we happen to espouse? At a time when the study of all literature is imperiled by a late-capitalist reduction of it to the instruction booklets of Sony stereos or Canon cameras (Treat’s examples), we have to admit, I think, that the “emphasis” Johnson bemoans is more or less precisely the same one that a sensitive professor of literature, gay or no, ought to promote—at least in part. Either this, or the students may as well be bid to go away and watch videos or take pictures. Treat might add: or have sex; as he writes in a brief updating of this memoir that I wish were longer, on the basis of such kinds of imagining he has “managed to privilege myself as an Insolent Person” within the “subculture” of the “global homosexual fraternity that legitimizes my work” (220). Insolent Persons, it seems to me, are professional treasures. They may not always be equal to their own insolence. But they always succeed in demonstrating in surprising, disturbing, and exciting ways how difference—theirs from the rest of us, ours from each other, Japan from the United States, and homosexuality from orientalism—eventually comes round to embrace us all.

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