

JAPAN IN THE MIRROR OF LANGUAGE: THE FAILURE
OF LANGUAGE TO REPRESENT OBJECTS
IN TRAVEL NARRATIVES
ON JAPAN

by

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ABSTRACT

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The travel narrative is, ostensibly, little more than representation of foreign places and things, foreign objects. The language of the travel narrative seems, on the surface, to succeed in representing the foreign. None the less, theory abounds which holds that language is fundamentally unable to represent objects, at least in a pure sense. Taking Japanese travel narratives as a particular example, this thesis attempts to demonstrate that the language of these narratives fails to successfully and fully represent objects as they exist, or have existed, in the world.

I work between what I take as two extreme theories of language, that of Jacques Derrida which holds meaning to be fundamentally unstable relative to language, which is, therefore, ultimately unable to represent objects, and that of Donald Davidson, which holds language to be the proof of an intersubjective world, such that linguistic reference must necessarily point back to objects in a shared world, and therefore has the fundamental capacity to represent these objects, at least to a certain degree. By analyzing the language of travel narratives relative to these theories and a number of others that fall in between these extreme points, I show that language, as it stands alone, fails to accurately reflect the world. Further, I show that the various contexts in which the travel narrative, along with its author, is situated fail to successfully assist the attempt at representation.

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PREFACE

The world as reflected by language seems a uniform place. There is no arcane dialect that must be mastered to speak of one's travels abroad in such a way that one's contemporaries might understand. It is a natural enough thing to read an account of travels in a foreign land and think to one's self, 'I know what the author meant,' or even, 'I can see it in my mind's eye.' When reading of objects, of things in the world, the matter seems all the more straightforward--after all, isn't a house, the sky, or tea cup a house, the sky, or a tea cup, here as well as there? Words seem equally adequate or inadequate in any context. Any struggle to get at the meaning of a word is part of mastering the language, not part of 'mastering travel narratives'-- or at least this is what would superficially seem to be the case. However, the language of travel narratives makes evident what is a problem with language more generally.

I shall argue that language neither functions in a uniform manner, free from the constraints and conditions of textual or temporal/social context, nor as an enclosed corpus of meanings free from the vagaries resultant from context and subjectivity in both the creation and receipt of meaning (reference). In other words, language generally fails to faithfully, fully, or correctly represent objects, at least to the extent that a linguistic reference (a noun, with attendant descriptive information) is taken to refer to a distinct object, fixed in place and time, and unique

relative to other objects.¹ My view is supported quite well by various travel writings, especially those of the 20th century ‘West’ focusing on Japan. Further, these texts present a special case in which, by a combination of particular hindrances to representation, the representation of objects in the language of travel narratives on Japan becomes even more difficult than in everyday speech. By examining the representation of objects, as well as the changing of the representation of objects over time and by authors situated (socially, politically, and personally) differently from one another, I will present evidence to support my above-stated views.

Prior to the opening of Japan to the West by the American, Commodore Perry in 1854, Japan represented, to much of the West, little more than a space of mystery, as a result of the shroud of secrecy that surrounded it. In the more than a century and a half since Japan’s opening to the Western world, a flurry of information has circulated about it, largely through travel writings of one sort or another. A common thread among these writings has been the attempt to speak of the new, the formerly unseen, and the properly foreign things to see in this land that is, literally, so far removed from much of what, for centuries, comprised ‘the world’ as it was held in Western thought.

It is precisely because of these attempts to present the ‘new’ that Western travel writings about Japan have the special character, among the writing of approximately the last century, of necessarily taking the representation of objects to its extreme, where reality must compete with the shortcomings of language, and the new rests desperately

¹ Say, for instance, an account of the appearance of Mt. Fuji. This Mt. Fuji, as represented by language, is meant to be distinct, as named, from other mountains and the features described at any given time are meant to be characteristic of that object, the mountain, at the time described. Thus language would seek to represent an object *in* time. The question becomes, at least in part, one of how this object, as presented through language, can (or cannot) be both linguistically stable and at the same time representative of a particular, temporally fixed, view or experience of the object referenced by language.

close to the ineffable. The sections that follow will break this struggle towards representation into its component parts, leading in the end toward a new way of viewing these travel texts through the critical lens of theory. Through the use of said theory one may draw out what makes linguistic representation an especially difficult endeavor in travel narratives on Japan. The issue is not merely one of language or social context, but instead concerns the range of elements which may complicate the representational attempt.

CHAPTER 1

THE LIMITS OF REPRESENTATIONAL LANGUAGE

The writer mysteriously exceeds his reader- any attempt at true reading confirms this. I say “mysteriously” because the language, the face we inspect, and that inspects us, originates in the unconscious and is out of reach.
Sven Birkerts, *An Artificial Wilderness*

1.1 What is an object?

Questioning the adequacy of language to represent physical objects -- to show, in other words, the immense gulf between the linguistic and the tangible -- is a foundational semantic issue, extending well beyond the language of the travel narrative. Although this larger question is part of my endeavor here, it is too large a topic to treat fully in this context. Examining only this larger question would also not allow me to do justice to the particular issues with language that arise in travel writing on Japan. The language of travel writing has the special feature of being rife with the treatment of abstract concepts as objects. Because of the mode of treatment of non-visually-imaginable noun-objects in travel writings on Japan, Japan itself, or the Japanese people, are treated as much like objects, in language, as, say, mountains or kimonos. Because of these issues, this thesis will not define “objects” as *necessarily* visually-imaginable noun-objects, but simply as noun-objects in general. Certainly the issue of language’s failure to represent individual, physical objects will be central to this work, but the larger questions of context that

will be spoken of demand that one not neglect abstract or plural objects. The first question, then, that demands an answer is a large one. Namely, what objects can be represented?

1.2 What Objects Can Be Represented?

The question of what *can be* represented is central to any discussion of the representation of objects. While the choice of what objects *are* represented in travel writing is partly determined by the locations written about, partly by the intention or inclination of the author, and partly by many other factors, all of these elements are subsidiary to the limits of representative language. It is because of the fundamental role of language in any attempt at representation, the well known theories of representational language that follow in this section are fundamental to the examination of the language of Japanese travel writing.

In examining the central theories of representative language, the task seems to be to find what elements of the various theories are germane to the present conversation and also to reconcile the points of friction between these theories. To start, I would argue that there are two extreme points of view relative to representative language: the view that holds stable representative meaning to be impossible, and that which insists that the meaning of words is so stable that it proves our shared reality as human beings.

Taking the first view, Derrida argues that meaning is decentered, that the text itself is not a body of meaning, but “a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself” (“Living On” 84). In other words, “no meaning can be fixed or decided upon” (“Living On” 78). From Derrida’s point of view, the Japanese travel narrative would be no better at referring than any other book, even a work of fiction. The ability of

language to point, to signify, to represent is ultimately limited, if not fully denied, by the fluid nature of a language rife with 'play.' Even the signified itself cannot help the stability of language because it, "is never absolutely present outside a system of differences" ("Structure, Sign, and Play..." 213).

For the moment, suffice it to say that were I to accept the notion that meaning cannot be fixed, that reference is always and everywhere uncertain, at least in large part, there would be no point in undertaking an examination of the representation of objects, as the conclusion would be apparent from the outset. The conclusion being that language cannot represent objects at all, nor could we, as users of a language, ever hope to pin a name on an object because even the object itself cannot be conceived of outside of a network of referential meaning. While I have already noted my doubts about the representational capacity of language, it does not seem to do justice to the subject to merely accept Derrida's proposition outright. The matter of language itself, and the context it provides to meaning will be examined in more detail in a following section.

The second viewpoint is characterized by the work of Donald Davidson.² According to Davidson, "the fact that... what is meant by a speaker ... [is] identified by causal relations with external objects and events is essential to the possibility of communication, and it makes one's mind accessible to another" ("The Myth of the Subjective" 52). Not only do words correspond to reality, as opposed to their being potentially meaningless elements in an endless 'system of differences,' but it is language's correspondence to reality that allows us the possibility of understanding and

² Davidson's theory is more complex and nuanced than my characterization indicates. However, at least within the space of the noted articles, Davidson ideally fills the position opposite Derrida that I wish to discuss.

interpreting another person's words or their experience in the world. Language guarantees our shared world while the fact that our world is shared, that it is intersubjective, guarantees that language can be meaningful and that said meaning can be shared. "Minds are many," says Davidson, but "nature is one" ("The Myth of the Subjective" 39). We share a world, and, hence, this shared world shapes our expression and limits our body of possible referents. The fact that we use "appropriate verbal behavior" ("The Myth of the Subjective" 44) in a given situation, and that we are understood proves that we do in fact share a world and are, thus, subject both to its strictures and its structures of meaning. The symmetry of this theory is both elegant and compelling.

It would be fairly easy to take Davidson's theory and run with it, not only to validate the representation of objects in Japanese travel writing, but to show that the linguistically comprehensible representation he describes grants us the harmony and security, at least in a linguistic sense, of a shared world that both allows, and is proved by, our successful attempts to represent it. If I read a text from 1886, written during travel to a Japan of long ago, and encounter objects like "lacquers, pottery, ... and quaint ivory carvings" (Morse 35), I feel that I apprehend something, that I get at the meaning of the words on the page, not least because I live in a world wherein I can conceive of, and know to exist, 'lacquers, pottery, and quaint ivory carvings.' Likewise, if I read a more modern book, even one unrelated to travel, about Japan and encounter therein another object, say an irregularly-shaped tea bowl that is "by no means 'beautiful' in the conventional sense" (Kurita 135), I still get the sense that I understand what is on the page, or, more to the point, that I know what the author is talking about, what he means.

My point is that in Davidson's view the age, type, or context of a written work has no bearing on the meaning of the words, as long as both the writer and reader belong to the same language-user community, that is, as long as such words as are presented are mutually intelligible.³ ⁴ However, I do not think that the matter can be handled so smoothly.

To what does the phrase "lacquers, pottery, ... and quaint ivory carvings" (Morse 35) refer? Certainly these are not distinct, individual, objects in a linguistic sense. Rather, each of the three of these supposed objects is actually a category of objects. Still, it would seem that one knows what the author means; after all, the words make sense. Yet, when one reads the reference in context, one finds that the objects spoken of are meant to refer to a certain category of imports, such as came from Japan at the end of the 19th century.⁵ The author notes that within this category of Japanese goods the objects "surprised and yet delighted us" (Morse 35). What surprise might come from pottery? I imagine, perhaps, only so many flower pots or art-class tea cups. Does this mean that I do not belong to the same language-user group as Edward Morse, the man who was "surprised and delighted"? No, because the words on the page form no barrier to my understanding. I can conceive of pottery at least as readily as his contemporary readership. Indeed, one finds that the

³ Davidson would not limit this to a written work, but instead to any act of linguistic communication within the same language-user group.

⁴ I think it is fair to assert that belonging to the same language-user group does, in fact, engender a great deal of context that extends beyond, simply, language itself. Being of the same time and culture, for instance, would go quite far in leading two people to be of the same language-user group. However, it is the comprehensibility of language between subjects that is at issue for Davidson, and so it is use of the same, compatible language that must be taken as his ultimate, and indeed only, criterion for belonging to the same language-user group.

⁵ I speak here of imports, but it should be noted that Edward Morse was speaking of objects *like* those imported to America at the turn of the century before last. Morse did, indeed, encounter these objects, and very many others, in his travels, which his book describes. I do not mean to confuse the issue of travel versus non-travel writing and I can assure the reader that these are objects spoken of as encountered-objects.

objects referred to above, as well as others, were often “as perplexing in their purpose as the inscriptions which they often bore” (35). The objects were not Greek to the author and his contemporaries so much as they were, in fact, Japanese. Thus, one cannot assume it is merely my social or temporal separation from Morse that makes his pottery, and other objects, so hard to conceive of; it was hard for him too. What one finds in reading of “lacquers, pottery, ... and quaint ivory carvings” is that one understands something: the words mean *something*. Yet, in this case as in others that I will discuss, inscrutable objects, or at least objects taken to be inscrutable, are regularly given names that seem to fit but do not. The reader’s comprehension of “Pottery,” and the other terms, seems to confirm Davidson’s theory about the effectiveness of language, but in fact exemplifies a failing of language to name, to represent, an object that it takes as its task to represent. Admittedly my brief discussion of this example does not take full account of important issues related to contextual meaning, the application of language, and types of language, all of which I will return to at greater length below. For now, however, we may not cast Davison’s theory aside, but it may be cast in doubt.

The second example of an object, given above -- the irregularly shaped tea bowl that is “by no means “beautiful” in the conventional sense” (Kurita 135) -- does little to support Davidson’s theory. Just as with the aforementioned pottery, one can envision a tea bowl, or failing that, a bowl filled with tea, but in this case the object referred to does not name a set: it does not name the category, ‘tea bowls of Japan,’ nor is it somehow inscrutable and thus resistant to representation, but is a distinct object, a one-of-a-kind “National Treasure” (Kurita 135) of Japan. Further, the tea bowl is presented as

empirically as possible,⁶ within the space of a guidebook, and is, therefore, as free as possible from the subjectivity, confusion, or ignorance of a writer who wishes to relate what they have seen during their travels. However, the book includes a picture, a photo-plate on another page.⁷ What I imagine as a ‘tea bowl that is not beautiful’ is not what is pictured, even if the picture is, indeed of *a* tea bowl that is not beautiful. Davidson, I should note, does not make the case that I have to be thinking of the same thing as the author, even if we are using the same words to refer to a given object, that is, People don’t, “have to mean the same thing by the same words” (Davidson “The Second Person” 121). I do not, that is, have to think of National Treasure number such and such, even if the author does so when he mentions an irregularly shaped tea bowl that is “by no means ‘beautiful’ in the conventional sense” (Kurita 135). This is wonderful for ease of communication, but here signifier and signified begin to become distinctly unstuck from one another. Still, I get something from what is written. I get something I am tempted to call referential meaning. Why?

Davidson might respond to this question as he did in “Three Varieties of Knowledge,” noting that the “knowledge of the contents of other minds is possible...only in the context of a generally correct, and shared, view of the world” (217). So, according to Davidson’s view, if I have indeed ‘gotten something’ from the description of the tea bowl, it comes by way of my being “generally correct” about what was meant, a correctness that comes from the author, everyone else, and myself, sharing a (the) world.

⁶ I say “as possible” here and below to highlight my hesitation to assume the possibility of adequate, empirical representation through language, as context and objectivity will be very much at issue later in this paper.

⁷ I take the image, in this context, as empirical representation of the world. Much could be said about the capacity of the reproduced image to represent reality, but it is beside the point in this linguistic examination.

Perhaps a weighty meta-language could fasten set meanings to objects. Alternatively, one could ask a speaker questions in order to pare down ambiguity and confusion. However, neither such system would be practical, and neither is employed in dealing with travel writing, or any other common speaking or writing for that matter. Instead, quite in the moment, we interpret others' "intentions, ... beliefs and ... words... [as] part of a single project, no part of which can be assumed to be complete before the rest is" (Davidson "Radical Interpretation" 186). In other words, we interpret others as part of our communication with them, rather than having consciously to *perform* an interpretation of them. Still, what if I were utterly wrong in my interpretation? I don't mean wrong in the sense of misunderstanding a word or a speaker, as interpretability is a principal feature of the type of language that Davidson is dealing with. I mean, if I am "generally correct" about what is meant, why and where am I wrong and why does this not seem to hinder conveyance of (some kind of) meaning?⁸

Charity, says Davidson, "prompts the interpreter to take the speaker to be responding to the same features of the world that he (the interpreter) would be responding to under similar circumstances" ("Three Varieties of Knowledge" 211). It is charity that allows language to work smoothly even in a case of discrepancy, as with differing conceptions of the 'tea bowl.' Charity circumvents the need for an obtuse meta-linguistic structure to clarify meaning. However, it may be that charity goes too far.

If I assume, through the principal of charity, that both I and the author are, more or less, referring in the same way, and that only our situation differs, then I cannot, even

⁸ I should clarify that, while I often mention a 'speaker,' I do not mean to indicate that the theories to which I refer apply to an immediate, speaking subject as opposed to an author. In so far as I do not highlight a fundamental difference between the communicative enterprises of speaking and writing, I take the theories applying to either as applicable to travel writing, at least as regards the theoretical aspects presented here.

if I am right in such an assumption, presume that the meaning I take from what someone writes confirms a shared reality. Reality may still be shared. However, I cannot access that reality through words I do not fully or readily comprehend, even if I take the author to mean *something*.⁹ Even if language runs smoothly thanks to charity, and even if I get some sort of meaning from the words of an author, if I do not in fact think of the same objects or object classes, defined in a set way, as a result of language, the observable functioning of language proves only that one's experience of the world is rather like that of someone else and that they use language, somehow, in a way not entirely unlike other people within their language-user group. There may be a unity of world and a unity of language, such that the world may be intersubjective and language may function smoothly across a diverse body of language-users, but the unity of either system nowhere demands a unity between the two, unquestionably linking meaning and world. To be understood proves only that speech can get around ambiguity and contextual limits.¹⁰ We may speak the same language, but we *do not* speak the same meanings. Such a view is not an attempt to promote radical skepticism of the world. It may, indeed, remain the fact that if we are able to communicate intelligibly about the world, we must share the same

⁹ We do not, after all, 'have to mean the same thing'.

¹⁰ By, 'contextual limits,' I do not mean context of the subject in the sense of the subjectivity that Davidson has railed against elsewhere, wherein people have different conceptual schemes. Rather, I mean the broader limits of context that I shall speak of later, encompassing such elements as textuality, language-context, situationality of self, and so forth.

world, otherwise there would be no basis for any sort of intelligible communication.¹¹

Still, sharing the same world is not the same thing as thinking in the same manner.¹²

At this point, we might say that we have access to more concrete meaning than Derrida would allow, but at the same time, we do not have access to the world, through language, to such a degree that we may thereby, linguistically, prove our shared reality. The situation is fortunate in that the majority of theorists dealing with the representative nature of language fall within the vast range of thought between Derrida and Davidson.

Meaning, referential meaning at the very least, is complex, far beyond the intelligibility of words or language systems and in ways other than inter-linguistic reference. Consider two new, deceptively simple, examples from Japanese travel literature. First, consider the term, 'Japanese Society' within the context of the quote, "Japan does not have a simple, uniform society, but an extremely complex one" (Reischauer 124). Second, consider the phrase, 'the image of Buddha,' in the quote, "The great bronze image of Buddha...is more than a thousand years old, and is much disfigured by earthquake and fire" (Keene 86).

The first example of an object, 'Japanese society,' presents something obviously complicated, an abstract notion. However, in terms of the language of travel writing, one does not speak of Japanese society in abstraction. Indeed, it has often been the goal of such writing to typify Japanese society, or at least render it explicable. In any case, the term functions as an identifier for an intangible thing, but a thing none the less. The point

¹¹ What grounds this communication if not the world? This is a question worthy of a great deal of thought (in addition to the great deal of thought already heaped upon it), but one which I shall not endeavor to answer here. Radical skepticism is a step too far away from the representation of objects in Japanese travel literature. I will take the world for granted, for now.

¹² Davidson saw language as neither systemic nor as a predictive model of thought, so I believe he would agree with these assertions.

is that when encountering a term of obvious complexity, if not outright ambiguity, the individual is necessarily left to make judgments as to what the term means or denotes. According to Edward Bendix, “Judgments [and]...discriminations [can be used to access] meanings of compound expressions of unlimited complexity” (407). Davidson notes that the reader or listener “must be an interpreter,” but he supposed that this interpretation would be “generally correct” because of the interpreter’s shared view of the world relative to that of the writer or speaker. Further, according to Saussure, “only the connections [between word and world] institutionalized in the language appear...as relevant” (Course in General Linguistics 1605). That is to say, not only is the world shared, so too are the connections to that world represented by language.¹³ However, in the realm of the very complex, when considering something like ‘Japanese society,’ which has little precedent for meaning in the lives of much of the world’s population, nothing but physically *being* in the same world suggests a distinct connection between writer and reader. Bendix notes that,

It appears... that the more reliable indices of semantic content are provided by tests which require informants to perform tasks derived from the more usual, everyday activity of trying to understand sentences...but a theory which uses responses to such tests with discrimination must also account for them by replicating the hearer’s manipulation of the code in the process of interpretation. (407)

¹³ Obviously, for Saussure, there is no natural connection between the word and world, merely an institutionalized connection relevant only to particular language-user groups.

In other words, even at the level of the basic, if one wishes to speak about understanding gained by an interpreting subject, one cannot ignore the active manipulation of the ‘code’ of language. Different people do not treat words or sentences the same way, and it is this great variability in treatment of the language that allows “unlimited complexity” in language.

So, were I to consider ‘Japanese society’ as a term representative of a set object, I could not be expected to treat it, even linguistically, in the same manner as anyone else. Does this suggest something like the radical possibilities for meaning (or lack thereof) proposed by Derrida? Simply put, no. I, like any interpreter, am imbedded in some context, so while the potential for meaning generation is infinite, the meanings that I will generate are not. The representation of abstract concepts seems doomed from the start, in terms of language, since there is no definitively definable version of the concept extant in the world, merely representative examples. While representations of abstract concepts will come up in later sections, in a purely linguistic sense there seems little room to doubt that a definite reference, via language, is impossible.

The second example noted above, that of the ‘great bronze Buddha,’ seems, for now, a relatively stable object, but it is not. While there exists a singular object referred to, I can only know that object, in the absence of prior experience, through the linguistic, textual, and temporal contexts of the text, myself, and, perhaps, the author. While the phrase ‘great bronze Buddha’ can be articulated without the words *seeming* meaningless, it is the information that is supplied alongside the title, the description of its having been damaged by earthquake and fire, that make it take on, if I may, a particular shape in the mind. The fact that the object’s name does not prove an impassable obstacle is only a

result of the way language functions, not a proof that language can successfully represent the named object. Clearly context suggests itself as the next area of focus.

CHAPTER 2

THE LIMITS OF CONTEXT

You are happy because you have entered bodily into
Fairyland,--into a world that is not, and
could never be your own. You have been
transported out of your own century...into
an era forgotten, into a vanished age,--back
to something as ancient as Egypt or Nineveh.
That is the secret of the strangeness and
beauty of things.

Lafcadio Hearn, *Japan: An Attempt at Interpretation*

Umberto Eco suggests that in order for semantic systems to work, in order for communication through language to be possible, “the states of the world must be *named* and structurally arranged... [and, having done this...] As soon as they are named, that system of sign systems which is called ‘culture’ (which also organizes the way in which the material forces are thought of and discussed) may assume a degree of extra-referential independence” (297). The significance of this is that what is described here is *not* a strict semiotic system of signifiers and signified. Rather, to the degree that language functions as the structure ‘culture,’ it fails to only represent, despite this representation being language’s only ostensible function. Rather, language, as a system of sign production, is both a means of representation and a means of ideological production (Eco 298). Semiotics, in this respect becomes both literary and social theory. My concern, in this thesis, is not with ideological forces, per se, but attention must be paid to the degree that language is divided in its purpose between representation and being a vehicle for

‘culture,’ as well as the numerous points at which these ends overlap. It is under the banner, ‘context’ that extra-representational forces exerted on, and by, language fall.

Travel writing about Japan is nothing if not a literature of context. Even if language were to be taken as enclosed and self-referential, any writing that takes as its subject Japan must necessarily ground itself in that context, even if said context is mere linguistic artifice and gestures to nothing in external reality. In other words, any writing about Japan cannot escape being writing about Japan; it carries with it a host of contextual assumptions. Further, any representation of an individual object, as Brian Cantwell Smith notes, must present the object such that it is, “distinguished from the background” (121). Thus the object and its being situated-in-a-place-and-time must be set against a background that is definite, such that the object may be viewed as “different from the background” (121). Context is, in other words, essential.

At the outset, I put forward the goal of showing language to be insufficient to represent objects in travel writing about Japan. Yet while the system or structure of language and meaning may be, in ways, questionable, as noted in the previous section, nothing that one may say about language itself seems entirely to do away with the ‘gut feeling,’ as it were, that something is communicated by travel narratives, as indeed, by most forms of writing. Further, the language of travel writing on Japan is, by and large, merely the language of the everyday; there is no special, detailed vernacular that is impenetrable to the uninitiated.¹⁴ Quite the contrary, the vast majority of travel writings are aimed at a mass audience; they are often a product to be consumed as light entertainment. So, while to show language itself to be an inadequate vehicle for the

¹⁴ Aside, perhaps, from italicized, untranslated terms, which will not be dealt with here.

representation of 'Japanese objects,' as the previous section endeavored, is at once a fundamental part of the examination undertaken here, it is also, perhaps, too vague. Despite the preceding efforts to, more or less, discount the phenomenon, it is still the case that people seem to get something from travel narratives no matter how inadequate the language. Further, the fact remains that travel writing must be, in some way, unique, because, as established, it does not necessarily have its own language, if what is undertaken here is not the invalidation of the representational nature of language *en masse*, but the demonstration that language is unable to represent objects *particularly* in travel writing about Japan. This said, the question of what causes the language of travel narratives on Japan to be unique relative to other instances of language-use becomes particularly important, even if this language, on its own, is proven to be an inadequate vehicle for representation. Having said this, perhaps consideration of linguistic context is an avenue to discover what makes the language of travel writing unique, as language may vary in use, if not in vocabulary, in these narratives.

In considering the issue of linguistic context, Leonard Linsky notes that linguistic expressions *do not* refer; the individual speaker or writer refers. This seems, on the surface, to be terribly simplistic, if not, indeed, to dodge the complex issue of the adequacy of language to represent objects in travel writing about Japan, or any writing for that matter. However, this is not the case. What Linsky is getting at is that any reference is "senseless...unless...context is indicated" (77). Linsky concerns himself, in the article "Reference and Referents," largely with pronouns (he especially takes the example "he") which literally indicate no one particular thing or person out of context, but that identify, very specifically, an individual person or thing so long as the proper

context is given and understood. What “secures uniqueness is the user of the expression and the context in which it is used *together* with the expression” (77; emphasis in original). Others have made the similar point that one can never escape context; words cannot be analyzed in a vacuum. I shall not belabor this point; I take it as correct. However, I think Linsky says something more. If it is not words that do the work of referring so much as it is the individual, then it does not matter so much whether or not the meanings of individual words or phrases can be asserted as either referring to the intersubjective world or other word meanings, because the connection between word and world is fundamentally indirect and almost supplementary in Linsky’s account.¹⁵

Context bridges the gap between confusion and clarity, between generality and specificity. Consider, as an example, the tangible symbols of the Emperor of Japan listed by John Morris in 1895, namely, “the mirror, ... the ball of rock crystal, the sword, and the brocaded banner” (5). Certainly, out of context, one may understand the words “banner,” “sword,” and so forth. However, it is not the language itself, not the particular words, that make one think of a Japanese sword, a *katana*, or a banner of silk brocade, likely covered over with stylized figures or, for the larger part of the English readership, inscrutable characters. This is not to say that what one imagines when one reads “sword” and thinks *katana* or when one imagines a ‘particularly Japanese’ banner is correct in any sense of correspondence to the world. Veracity is not the point. The point is that the context of reading something written about Japan, and hence, fundamentally related to the author-who-refers, conditions one’s response to the words on the page and is, therefore, largely constitutive of meaning. Otherwise, why might one not read “a banner

¹⁵ Or so I would argue. I have doubts that Linsky would make this leap.

of silk brocade” and think, ah yes, they must be referring to the Bayeux Tapestry; the context of the type of writing itself demands a different response on the part of the reader. Further, the reader is conditioned by what they know and believe about Japan in their access to meaning, and further by the immediate temporal and social context of the receipt of the original text, as shall be discussed a bit later.

Context may be analyzed in an instant in speech, as it seems to pose no ready hindrance to the functioning of language and the noted ‘gut sense’ of meaning (or representation), but context is not a unified body; it bears scrutiny so that its structure might be revealed.¹⁶ Further, while the limits of language’s ability to represent objects have been mapped, at least to a certain degree, in the previous section, so too must the limits of context be mapped in the granting of referential meaning.

2.1 The Context of Language

The representational capacity of language has been dealt with, already, to some degree. Yet, it remains to be shown that language itself bears something akin to context. Indeed, the situated-ness of a text or author, as will be examined below, may seem to comprise all the context that might readily be taken to exist; however, this is not the case. Consider, first, a seemingly straightforward description of something known to physically exist in Japan, Tokyo Tower, in the quote, “[Tokyo Tower is] a late 1950s copy of the Eiffel Tower that is slightly higher than the original” (Sacchi 25). Here, “Tokyo Tower” fills the role, in language, of proper name. However, according to Zeno Vendler in, “Singular Terms,” “knowledge of proper names does not belong to the knowledge of a language” (117). His statement notes, more or less, the simple fact that proper names do

¹⁶ If not its capacity to successfully re-present

not demand translation from language to language and, hence, that the meaning (or at least the capacity to identify) of a proper name cannot be said to reside in one language or another or with any one language-user group at one time.¹⁷ That this view is correct should be obvious to the extent that one does not take there to be separate Tokyo Towers for different language-user groups, but merely one, just as there is only one original Eiffel Tower, planted firmly in Paris.¹⁸ In other words, the manner in which Vendler describes proper nouns causes them to fill the role of pure signifier, pointing so directly and unequivocally at the signified that the vagary common to other elements of language is seemingly avoided, and indeed, the linguistic system itself is superceded. While I do not agree that proper names escape context, the notion that the proper name indicates the unique existence of a particular object, as distinct from other objects, is intriguing.

The above quote, which relates Tokyo Tower to the Eiffel Tower, taken entirely out of textual (temporal, social, political, etc) context, still says a number of things about Tokyo Tower, simply by dint of the linguistic context in which it is embedded. “Tokyo Tower,” as noted, is a proper noun and, as such, indicates a unique object relative to all other objects. However, what one learns of Tokyo Tower, in the absence of prior knowledge, by way of its being identified as singular is merely that--that it is a singular object which exists in the world, as opposed to something abstract like the title of a set or the *idea* or *symbol* of a tower. That the Tower is set, in the sentence, in relation to another

¹⁷ Naturally, the manner of graphically representing sounds does indeed change from language to language, but the proper name itself is not adapted by another language, it is merely reflected in a slightly variant set of phonemes. i.e. in the original Japanese ‘Tokyo Tower’ is *To-ki-o Tah-wa* (ときをタワー) --- literally the same words in a different phonic sound-set. That the name of the place, in Japanese, references another place, ‘the Eiffel Tower,’ which itself is linguistically removed from ‘*La Tour Eiffel*’ complicates matters, but this manner of complication will be discussed below.

¹⁸ Vendler puts a humorous spin on the matter, invoking Eliot, noting that, “the naming of cats may be a difficult matter, but it does not enrich the language” (118). i.e. Names are extra-linguistic.

tower, one better known in the West, suggests something about the socio-cultural situation of the reader and the demands placed on the author by his or her audience. Yet in a purely linguistic sense, the relational structure serves to liken the one object to the other such that language itself suggests that Tokyo Tower is, in fact, not deserving of the unique conception that would normally come by way of a proper name; it is in fact the same as the Eiffel Tower, merely a later, taller copy. It does not matter that Tokyo Tower looks no more like the Eiffel Tower, in reality, than any other tower-like radio transmission array. Nor does it matter that Tokyo Tower is not somber grey, like the Eiffel Tower, but a bright red-- perhaps both a nod to the flag of Japan and a warning to pilots who might stray too close to the structure in the city's blanket of smog. What matters is that the linguistic context of "Tokyo Tower" does not neglect the singular nature of the proper name, but rather takes this singular nature as its issue and likens the singular, foreign object to a Western, singular object. The conception of the tower, gained in such a way, is likely false, or at least it may not accord with the 'reality' of Tokyo Tower; yet the language of travel writing about Japan, about a place possessed of unknown, unique objects, cannot do otherwise than it has here without saying, essentially, nothing. In travel writing about Japan, the proper noun cannot stand alone, unmodified. How is this different from other writing? Quite simply, the difference is fundamental.

In common speech, the proper name is "allergic to the restrictive apparatus which other nouns need in order to introduce singular terms" (Vendler 121). This is obvious in the distinction between the phrases, 'I went to a palace' and 'I went to the Japanese Imperial Palace.' In the first case, someone could ask, 'which palace?' In the second case, such a question is unnecessary; the statement is as specific as it can be in terms of the

proper noun signifier. However, in the context of travel writing, it is a very different thing to say, 'the Imperial Palace is a largely wooden structure that lies in the midst of a vast garden' as opposed to 'in Japan there is an Imperial Palace,' if the goal of either such sentence is to represent the object, 'Japanese Imperial Palace.' Certainly not every sentence in every context and type of writing endeavors fully to represent the objects named therein. Even in failing to represent an object a sentence may be informational and meaningful. Take the second example above: 'in Japan there is an Imperial Palace.' In the absence of other contextual information or pre-existing knowledge, 'Imperial Palace' is not merely an empty signifier; it falls into the set perhaps called, 'names of things that are in Japan,' even if no foothold, so to speak, is given for one to climb towards some conception of what the Imperial Palace is as a physical object. In such a case language fails to represent a given object, but only in so far as its attempt at such representation is, from the outset, lacking.

'The Imperial Palace is a largely wooden structure that lies in the midst of a vast garden,' the second example, is different, in that it actively endeavors to represent the named object, yet is hindered by the implications of the proper noun. One knows the palace to be unique, but is given no linguistic information, through the proper noun, which conveys a *specific* image of the palace as it relates to a distinct object in the world. What grants meaning is the modification of the proper noun, through information supplied in the context of the sentence. The proper noun, on its own, means nothing, at least in terms of representation. Additional information supplied by the sentence is necessary both to mark the named object as distinct from other objects and, in cases, to constitute its meaning, should the named object be utterly foreign. Proper names may

exist outside of a language, but they do not exist outside language-user groups in terms of meaning. Proper names in travel writing on Japan, as a foreign, unfamiliar place, hold no meaning outside of inter-linguistic reference to other proper nouns, the referents of which are known, or outside the context of an informational sentence that endeavors to give some sense of the proper noun described. That the information provided succeeds or fails to represent the object is not at issue at the moment; rather what should be noted is that in travel writing on Japan, as a special case, the proper noun, on its own, holds no representational meaning in terms of correspondence to the world.

R. M. W. Dixon notes of signifiers that any signifying term in one language can be restated in another language by extending the range of meaning of the second language's existing terms (439). However, the extension of the range of meaning of existing terms does not guarantee that something new can be represented, merely that it can be suggested by what is already known. In other words, in the case of proper nouns, the new and foreign must have, as an isolated proper noun, as noted above, no meaning.

There remains, beyond the preceding, the possibility that the information communicated about objects in a travel narrative is limited by the amount of information that "can be transmitted" or which "has actually been transmitted and received" (Eco 40) in an attempted exchange.¹⁹ This could mean that information in any instance of communication is limited in scope by the strictures of language and that not all of this information is successfully received by the reader of a narrative. If language has such

¹⁹ In the sense that any information presented through language represents, "a statistical property of the source" (Eco 42) in that selection of what information to present (what to say) goes on within the mind of the writer and is not a 'full' representation of the original object; what is said necessarily represents, "an impoverishment of .. [the] endless wealth of possible choices [of what to say] which existed at the source before [the choice] was made of what to say." (Eco 42). What is said, in other words, is only a fractional part of what could be said.

built-in limits, this would seem to invalidate the possibility of any *full* representation of objects. If language, as a distinct structure unto itself, were to be considered the only concern of this thesis, the matter of full representation of objects might be nearly settled at this point.

Naturally, however, language need not stand alone. The writing or receiving self can actively manipulate information to present or gain meaning. The context of the self, in other words, may provide some hope that the shortcomings of a language as an isolated system are merely due to that isolation. Additionally, it would be folly to neglect the fact that meaning cannot be representational of the world outside of the context in which that world is *actively* represented or received.

2.2 The Context of Self

To suppose that the context of the individual self is constitutive of the creation or receipt of meaning via representation runs threateningly close to the idea that individuals have distinctly different conceptual schemes. While more may be said on conceptual schemes later, for now I shall proceed, more or less, under the assumption that the comprehensibility of language from speaker to recipient guarantees that individuals do not have unique conceptual schemes.²⁰ The obvious benefit of this view is that meaning via language is not radically indefinite,²¹ even if some variance persists.

Because there is a referring self, aside from the issue of whether or not one must refer, always, to a shared world, threats to the veracity of the content of one's mind, and hence, threats naturally exist to the world the individual may present through speech or

²⁰ A view outlined in detail by Donald Davidson in "On The Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme."

²¹ As such a view would render this project moot.

writing. Confusion and self deception come to mind. Marco Polo, for example, was convinced that Japan must have “inexhaustible” sources of gold and ‘vast riches,’ by virtue of the fact that he had heard stories of golden architecture and seen²² the use of pearls in ceremony.²³ From meager evidence and hearsay, mixed with his own desire, Polo concocted a fictitious Japan replete with material wealth far beyond what existed in reality. Still, particularly in cases where a travel narrative is written about a place felt to be exotic, it is hard to find accounts unmarked either by authorial confusion or a type of self-deception directed towards finding difference where such difference may be minimal or non existent.

In any case, the content of one’s mind is still related to the world, no matter if said world corresponds directly or indirectly to expressive speech. “Irrational belief acquisition” (Nelkin 385) can factor into the content’s of one’s mind, and thus into one’s speech. If Marco Polo saw pearls, he had no way of knowing their scarcity; he simply desired to report great riches. More importantly, at least for the present examination, desire seems to have shaped the perceptions of Marco Polo and, through this, the content of his mind; he had irrationally acquired a set of beliefs about Japan.

This irrational belief acquisition is not the same as confusion, because it is actively directed toward the end of creating, within the mind of the belief-acquirer, a particular situation, a particular reality, fictive though it may be. Further, irrational belief acquisition differs from mere self-deception in that the latter implies that the truth is known and abandoned in favor of an alternative, while irrational belief acquisition comes

²² Or, heard about, the matter is unclear.

²³ Japan is relatively poor in mineral resources and while gold-leaf covered structures would be built in the future, there were no such structures on record in the 13th century.

not out of an aversion to reality, or a desire for an alternative to *what is*, but through a desire to find a reality that *may or may not* exist and to take as evidence of this reality that which is patently irrational, simply to support one's desires.²⁴ Thus, what is presented in a travel text, being subject not merely to the confusion or self-deception of the speaking subject, may also be tainted by irrational belief acquisition.

Aside from whatever intentionality factors into the creation of a given text, intentionality is at work, consciously or not, in the creation of the content of one's own mind, and, as such, one's attempt to represent anything through language. Since language may thus only reflect the content of one's mind,²⁵ it is always and everywhere colored by the desire and intentionality of the receiving/disseminating subject. Claims related to "belief, hope, desire or intention" ("First Person Authority" 3) form, for Donald Davidson, a class of privileged expressions, privileged in the sense that the listener or reader is likely to accept what is put forward as a belief, hope, desire, or intention, as there is no access to another's mind beyond their speech. Davidson will go on to hold that such expressions, more or less, do not deserve their privileged status, as the truth value of such statements as noted above may often be challenged.²⁶ However, I would argue that this is simply not important, at least in the present context. The fact that an expression of belief, desire, hope or intent may not warrant the trust placed in it or accord with the true state of affairs in the world is irrelevant, exactly to the degree that faith is put in the

²⁴ This section largely reflects what I take to be the views on irrational belief acquisition outlined by Dana Nelkin in "Self Deception, Motivation, and the Desire to Believe."

²⁵ Aside from nonsense, i.e., one cannot speak spontaneously.

²⁶ The issue at hand for Davidson, in "First Person Authority," is not whether or not first-person statements are generally taken at face value, but rather that their seeming reliability and the 'authority' afforded them through this reliability is unfounded in so far as the truth of a belief-statement (or one of the other noted categories) is not superior to (that is, the statement is not more reliable than) a statement of something taken as fact.

expression. We tend to accept what other people claim when they make the claim as a matter of belief, as Davidson notes, and while reality may lead us to be cross, in the future, with those who have misled us, we have no recourse, in the absence of telepathy, but to accept blindly any statement of belief, desire, hope, or intention. Therefore, Marco Polo can be seen as having been mistaken about Japan. However, we cannot readily contest that he did not *believe* that Japan was a land of great riches. The truth-value of statements in travel writing is irrelevant to the ability of such writing to represent objects, while it is a central part of the character of such writing that it be accepted, more or less, at face value because it operates, at least, as a statement of belief, if not always hope, desire, and intention.²⁷

Consider an account of Japan from 1894, in which the author speaks of the atmosphere, literally the air, of Tokyo. He perceives, “an atmospheric limpidity extraordinary, with only a suggestion of blue in it, through which the most distant objects appear focused with the most amazing sharpness” (Hearn *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* 2). It does not matter that the reader of these lines may have read about or experienced the modern-day air of Tokyo, which appears, on certain days, as little more than a smoky, acrid fog. Nor does it matter that the author of the quoted lines would go on, after taking permanent residence in Japan and changing his name, to present a less idyllic Japan as one of the nation’s foremost authors of horror-fiction. Here, the context of the reader and the larger context of the author’s life seem, including later views of Japan that would

²⁷ What I mean is not that the truth value of a statement does not affect the veracity of the representation of an object, rather that truth-value has no linguistic effect on the *act* of linguistic representation in this context. A false representation may, therefore, be made; however, such a representation does not vary in so far as it is linguistically comprehensible/ interpretable as distinguished from a ‘true’ representation (I use single quotes here for the obvious reason that I take it as central to this thesis that ‘true’ representation through language is impossible).

prove contradictory to earlier impressions, for the most part, irrelevant. Why? Simply because the ‘atmosphere of Tokyo’ is not presented in absolute terms; it is presented as a perception rooted in time and circumstance; it is presented as an in-the-moment belief. The reader may be surprised to imagine a Tokyo without smog, but imagine it they do. There may not be a ready correspondence between the world as it is known to the reader and the ‘extraordinary atmosphere’ of 1894 Tokyo, but this presents no boundary to reading and interpreting the above lines as readily as an account that does correspond. The travel narrative has, as one of its fundamental characteristics, a certain belief-likeness,²⁸ and it is therefore subject to charity, on the part of the reader, such that assertions found in the narrative are taken not as true or false in the sense of correspondence to the world or the reader’s sense of the proper use of language, but rather as statements of perception. This assertion warrants more support.

I would be remiss if I did not point out an example of outright generalization in regard to perception that is, even on the face of the matter, too simplistic and vague to be true:

[The Japanese] love and toil unremittingly. They honour their parents....

They are intensely patriotic. They are markedly polite and hospitable.

They are scrupulously clean,...they dress decently. They are thrifty; they

are keen traders. They are imbued with the spirit of progress...” (Clarke 2)

I do not mean offense to the people of Japan. I think they are honorable, clean, and thrifty as well. However, in characterizing the set, ‘the people of Japan,’ it is false to say that

²⁸ I have, in the past, used this inelegant term to speak of Davidson’s notion of what grants authority in first-person statements. Here, I do not refer to a characteristic of certain utterances, but rather to the travel narrative as a whole.

there is or was not a person who was not thrifty, or who did not ‘love unremittingly,’ and so on. Generalization is a mainstay of travel writing, but the sort of belief that leads to such statements is not the kind of belief I wish to make an issue of. The challenging of the veracity of blanket statements does not need my labor; it is well established, and likely obvious.²⁹

Instead, consider the representation of something more or less precise, less impressionistic than the aforementioned ‘atmosphere of Tokyo,’ say, and far less impressionistic than the blanket-characterization of an entire population: a description of some broken bits of ancient pottery, fragments of which, “with their swirling designs and the baroque elaboration of their handles are still occasionally dug up by local farmers [in the village of Shinohata]” (Dore 23). These fragments are artifacts of the Jomon culture, the ancient Japanese, or at least some of their ancestors. These pots, both whole and in fragmentary form, while exceedingly rare, can still be readily encountered in many major world museums. There is, in other words, no reason for great mystery surrounding the physical description of these items. However, to say that the designs are swirling or that the handles represent at least something equivalent to “baroque elaboration” is not to put the matter plainly. Many people describe this sort of pottery as having a ‘cord-like’ design, that is, it appears as though wrapped in rough cord. The surface of the vessels looks at least as cord-like as it does ‘swirling.’ Even more striking is the suggestion that the handles of the vessels bear “baroque elaboration.” Certainly a comparison could be drawn, but Jomon pottery is arguably a lot more like pottery of other prehistoric peoples,

²⁹ Blanket statements are “intuitively plausible because they have so many obvious instances...., [but] yield contradictions” (Sayward 289) and fail, therefore, to apply to the whole set which they endeavor to describe. Frege, among others, has done much to disprove the general validity of blanket statements.

or even traditional native populations, than it is baroque. The content of the author's mind has shaped what he *can* believe to be the case.³⁰ Belief has shaped that which he relates in his narrative.

I don't mean to take the author of the above quote to task for being imprecise. Indeed, in the absence of some ultimately precise meta-language, he was, perhaps, as precise as he needed to be in the context. That is, he was as precise as he needed to be to mention fragments of pottery in a text that is about travel to a rural village as opposed to being about the pottery itself. Still, given only the information presented, it is highly unlikely that anyone could draw a picture of the pottery to which the author was referring that would accurately reflect what the author saw, in terms of correspondence rather than impression. It is even more unlikely that another person would describe the same pottery in the same, exact way, even if they belonged to the same language-user group. The reason that imprecision is tolerated, if not simply expected, in travel writing is that the author always seeks to represent what they have seen, as the genre demands, but they cannot present anything other than that which they *believe* to be the case, even when the matter seems, on the surface, cut and dried. Even bits of pottery are subject to the influence of the minds of those who wish to conceive of and represent them through language, and the reality of this situation is evident, everywhere, in the representation of objects in travel writing on Japan. This view is supported by even a cursory glance at research on the functioning of the brain relative to language in which the mind not only processes properties of an object, like color and shape, but conditions of that object such

³⁰ Davidson would call the process that built the content of the author's mind his "natural history." I do not delve in detail into what might have shaped the content of the author's mind simply because it is not this content that is at issue, rather, merely its effect on the author.

as its relation to other objects, its motion, its clarity of presentation (i.e., whether or not it can clearly be seen), thus connecting the object, in a fundamental sense, to the other contents of one's mind, and far exceeding the representational capacity of everyday language (Keane 115).

So, if the representation of objects in Japanese travel narratives, relative to the author of these narratives, is subject to confusion, irrational belief acquisition, and the belief-like character of any statement he or she puts forward in the context, it cannot be assumed that there is much possibility for language, within these writings, to successfully represent objects in terms of correspondence to their actual appearance in the world. However, one might counter that context, as a constructive element, may have been neglected. That is, that the negative effects of context on meaning construction have been highlighted; but there remains the possibility that if a text is taken as a text-in-a-time period, representational meaning will become a more likely prospect.

2.3 The Context of the Text

To assume that travel writing is somehow a spontaneous outpouring of representation is obviously false. Beyond, however, the structures of language and the intentionality behind the component words and sentences, travel literature is always directed, as with all communication, towards some definite end. That travel writing about Japan may be taken as an attempt, on the part of its author, to make their discoveries or accomplishments seem greater than, perhaps, they were must be considered as one of the 'definite ends' of this literature. The journal of Commodore Perry, wherein he relates his dealings with the fundamentally "sagacious and deceitful [Japanese]" (91), is one instance. The Journal of Townsend Harris, the first American consul-general to Japan,

who describes strange sights he encountered as “the first diplomatic representative that [had] ever been received in [Tokyo]” (117), is another.³¹ While the accomplishments of these men are beyond question, their interest in self-aggrandizement must be taken as obvious. Far more common today than overt status-seeking is the attempt of travel narratives to conform to public expectations for such writing and, thereby, produce a salable commodity for a ravenous readership. However, one’s experiences, if they are not to be taken as a fictional account, cannot be decided in their representation merely by market forces, though such forces may play a part as will be discussed later. According to Richard Rorty, if one goal of travel literature may be to “tell the story of [one’s] contribution” (21) to knowledge or society, another may be to describe experience, “in immediate relation to nonhuman reality” (Rorty 21).³² The goal is, in other words, to create in the text a context, a space for meaning, that exceeds the scale of the immediate and the human, beyond one’s “nation, or ... imagined band of comrades” (Rorty 21). This type of writing does seem to be a very common feature of travel narratives about Japan, and it has great consequence in terms of representational meaning.

Consider one example: Kyoto, writes one author, “is a kind of vast, open-air archive.... Its attractions are manifold, its appeal legendary, and its variety infinite” (Bayrd 11). So opens the description of Kyoto in a book of the same name. The text endeavors to speak of the past and present, linking the one to the other, as if the city had a

³¹ It is simply not true that Harris was the first diplomat received by the Japanese government. Even during periods of relative isolation, the Japanese retained relations with China and, to a lesser extent, the Dutch. Harris appears to be making the case that his endeavor was both of worth and that his account will be, ultimately, original and full of strange information.

³² Richard Rorty is not speaking about travel literature, per se, in this quotation. Rather, he is speaking about the act of reflective writing, which I think very much accords with virtually any conception of travel narratives. If Rorty was not speaking about travel narratives specifically, it was only because, I think, he was speaking about a larger category of writing which includes travel narratives.

character unique in all the world. But qualities of Kyoto, whatever they may be precisely, are not at issue here. What is of note is the language that, in creating a context for meaning that exceeds the human scale, goes beyond hyperbole to say, essentially, nothing about the city. 'Legendary' appeal and 'infinite' variety cannot be read at face value; to do so would be the same as to literally believe my assertion that I purchased the aforementioned text despite the fact that I had 'a million other choices.' To say that a place is known and has varied offerings says absolutely nothing. Should any place be written about, it must be known. Should any place be said to offer variety, one knows only that it does not exist as a mere point in space, but accords with whatever constitutes a 'place' in the mind of the reader. Obviously, there is no value in attacking common turns of phrase. What must be insisted upon, however, is that travel writing on Japan makes special use of meaningless hyperbole, as it attempts to invoke a super-human scale and scope relative to that which is written about.

The aforementioned text, Kyoto, was sold in 1974 by Newsweek to a general, rather than scholarly, audience. This time period corresponds to a wave of increased popular interest in Japan as the nation, first a mystery, and then a defeated enemy, began to rise on the world stage in terms of economic and cultural prominence. Some evidence of this interest comes in the fact that National Geographic featured Japan-related cover stories no less than four times in the six years from 1972 to 1978. The text, then, must struggle against other texts and new reports, if it is to present a Japan that exceeds the everyday, the common human domain. Kyoto, in its attempt to maintain a sense of mystery surrounding the city of Kyoto, shies away from direct statement of fact to draw parallels between the city and other mysterious ideologies and arts of Japan. For instance,

the character of the city is likened to the philosophy of the late author, Yukio Mishima, who held that, “To combine action and art is to combine the flower that wilts and the flower that lasts forever” (Kyoto 61).³³ The city becomes something like Japanese philosophy frozen in time, all but inexpressible, but extant in the world. Later in Kyoto, Kiyomizu temple is described as “the past recalled, the present given context” (134). Does this statement hold for the Japanese alone, or for all viewers of the temple? If the past is ‘recalled’ by the structure, how can this past be differentiated from the ‘context’ of the present if one is not amply familiar with the present of Japan? In other words, the American reader, who knows, for the sake of argument, neither much of the past or present of Japan, is told nothing about Kiyomizu temple that has any referential meaning as such. The ‘past’ and ‘present’ referred to in the quote are not those of the reader and thus cause the expression to take on the character of a blank spot on the page rather than to communicate something readily comprehensible.

However, while to say that “the past recalled, the present given context” is an empty turn of phrase in itself relative to referential meaning, does not imply that when the quotation is read in context that no meaning is communicated. It has been asserted already that the content of a travel narrative has the character of being belief-like, such that what is asserted is accepted as the belief of an individual rather than challenged on the grounds of correspondence to reality. Yet, the ambiguous nature of the above quoted

³³ The matter is further complicated by the fact that the quotation from Kyoto, misrepresents Mishima’s ultimate finding, as represented in his final philosophical work, Sun and Steel, that art and action are fundamentally irreconcilable, and one must, ultimately, be chosen over the other. “Never had I discovered in physical action anything resembling the chilling, terrifying satisfaction afforded by intellectual adventure. Nor had I ever experienced in intellectual adventure the selfless heat, the hot darkness of physical action” (Mishima 92). Such a view of the divide between thought and action led Mishima, in 1970, to attempt an ill-fated military coup. It is quite doubtful, to say the least, that he would have found Kyoto’s structures and objects to represent an inexpressible combination of thought and action, or thought preserved by the action of creating an object.

statement does not allow for a stable conception of what the contents of the belief of the author might be. Further, the matter is not presented, up front, as an individual impression of the city, but rather as a characteristic of the city in itself, at all times. Thus, failing being representative of individual belief in the case of Kyoto, Kyoto, the city, might take on the character of a meme for its meaning. Of course this demands clarification.

What is meant by ‘meme,’ here, is really the “selfish meme” (142) characterized by Richard Dawkins in “Selfish Genes and Selfish Memes.” This selfish meme functions in much the same manner as a ‘selfish gene’ in genetics, viz. it imbeds itself in such a way into the culture, just as does a gene into the essential systems of a body, that it is repeated from individual to individual, as a gene is from generation to generation, and is therefore difficult to eradicate. One might have called the thing a pernicious meme, had the title not already been assigned.

Dawkins claims, for example, that the meme of “‘belief in life after death’ is actually realized physically, millions of times over, as a structure in the nervous systems of individual men the world over” (143), such that these individuals’ brains have been “paristize[ed]” by the widespread meme. It has taken the character of a virus in society.

My point is not that the idea of Kyoto as being outside the regular march of history and change functions in some negative way, perhaps blocking the possible communication of the ‘true’ state of affairs in the city, its ‘true’ representation. Rather, the Kyoto meme takes the place of any *attempt* to re-present the ‘real.’³⁴ Kyoto, in this case functions as something known by the author of Kyoto, and either corresponds to a

³⁴ I mean this in a sense different from Baudrillard’s “hyper real,” which shall be examined later. The ‘Kyoto meme’ does not ‘supplant the original,’ in its entirety, but it instead stands in for what would, otherwise, be representative language (in terms of correspondence to the ‘real’) in certain circumstances.

meme existing in the society of the reader, or operates as the introduction of a meme.

Perhaps this is unclear. What do I mean?

It was common knowledge that Kyoto was spared in World War Two because of its status as a cultural repository for Japan. Texts coming out in the decades following the war highlight, in various ways, this identity. Kyoto has been called, “an intolerable place” (Mariani 310) for some who would rather have the convenience and style of a ‘modern’ city. Alternatively, it has been taken as evidence of the “thousand... ways the ancient past still invades...Japan of today” (Keene 6), even as the rest of Japan is a place of “shipyards... coal mines, printing presses and post offices” (Keene 7). Perhaps it is no coincidence that books relating the history of Japan rarely fail to mention that the pre-medieval Heian period took its name from the ancient city Heian, now called Kyoto. The matter is presented as if there were somehow an unbroken thread connecting the ancient past with today in Kyoto, reflected, perhaps, in the checkerboard layout of the city, borrowed from the Chinese fashion in vogue in 794 CE, which, “is still to be seen in the main streets” (Reischauer 46). A pattern, evidence of a meme, has developed in texts seeking to represent Kyoto. In some way or another, it is suggested that the past, almost inexpressibly, pervades the present.

None of the above views seem to take note of the fact that Kyoto has a modern existence. It is a vital and vibrant place no more magically connected to the past than any other place; and, if it has numerous historic sites, it is hardly a colonial Williamsburg, or more properly, a Meiji-mura.³⁵ Further, in a purely historical sense, Kyoto burned, mostly

³⁵ Meiji-mura is a ‘town’ set up to exemplify life in the decades prior to the 20th century. It is commonly invoked in Japanese speech, not necessarily in a negative fashion, but to indicate a contrived place representative of the past, like colonial Williamsburg in the United States.

to cinders, in 1692, thereby eradicating most of its physical, tangible connection to its previous millennium of history (Nosco 16). The truth of an object (or place-as-object) is unimportant, almost irrelevant, to its representation to the extent that a representational meme has taken hold.³⁶ It may be impossible to objectively represent something as abstract as the character of a city. However, in embracing a representative meme, in speaking of a city, and thus those places and things associated with that city,³⁷ as ineffably connected to the past, the chance for language to adequately represent reality is utterly denied. The matter need not be abstract. One could equally well be speaking of any particular thing. A representative meme, however, denies the possibility of linguistic representation of real objects to the degree that a meme in the “cultural environment” (Dawkins 143) of the author fills in for the attempt at representation. Consider, to take merely one example, a text that would describe a particular sword as representative of the repeated notion that a Japanese sword is “the soul of the samurai” (Oishi 58). The meme fills in for re-presentation of the object as it exists in the world. The representative meme is common to writing about Japan, particularly the travel narrative, and in all cases invokes the vague and ineffable while, literally, blocking attempts at linguistic *representation* by taking its space on the page. The meme, itself, cannot be a representation of an individual object in that repetition: representation is not its goal. As Gregory Ulmer notes of the thinking of Derrida, when repetition becomes the origin for meaning, “repeated, the same line is no longer exactly the same, ... *the origin has played*” (93), such that even should the meme have, perhaps, once had a distinct signified,

³⁶ I will use the term, ‘representational meme,’ for sake of brevity, to indicate a meme that has taken the place of another description of an object that, otherwise, would be an attempt at representation rooted in correspondence either to the world, an object in the world, or one’s experience of that object.

³⁷ This association comes by means of the representative meme.

the inherent play in meaning due to repetition has disconnected it.³⁸ Certainly, not *all* attempts at representation in travel writing on Japan are blocked by a representative meme. Often, the description of individual objects is taken, very distinctly, as a subject of focus. However, these cases carry with them certain other contextual hindrances to representational meaning.

Consider Japan as a museum.³⁹ According to Gaynor Kavanagh, the mission of the museum is twofold, being that, “museums have the responsibility to both collect evidence of the past and to interpret that evidence within the public domain” (98). As such, “the production of an ...exhibition has parallels with reminiscence-based drama” (Kavanagh 141). The museum is active; it manipulates objects via their modes of presentation while, at the same time, setting the ground for their interpretation. In any case, the museum does not simply represent the world as it is; it bears the marks of preference, bias, and, occasionally, ignorance. The creation of the museum exhibit is itself the crafting of a narrative. The museum presents a partial and imperfect reflection of the world.

Of course, the presentation of a literal museum exhibit on Japan and the possible literary-museum exhibit of the travel narrative are not precisely the same thing. However, the comparison stands on many levels. Douglas Crimp draws a comparison between the museum exhibit and Foucault’s institutions of confinement, noting that the museum is merely, “another such institution of confinement” (Bennett 59). So too, in the case of the travel narrative, must the subject be confined. No travel narrative seems to endeavor to

³⁸ Admittedly, for Derrida, it would not have had a distinct signified. But, hypothetically speaking...

³⁹ A notion explicitly raised by Gennifer Weisenfeld in “Touring Japan-as-museum”

present the ultimate compendium of Japan, but rather a limited view, a personal experience. Just as the museum must confine the object of study, so too must the travel narrative.

Naturally, to say that the museum is like the Japanese travel narrative in that it evidences active modes of presentation relative to objects or because it must necessarily confine its subject in presenting it is a weak comparison in that the relation between the museum and the narrative is convenient, but not, perhaps, necessary. What draws the two together in a fundamental sense is what Peter M. McIssac calls “inventoried consciousness” (5), which is a system of, “logic that is vital for understanding the museum” (5). The significance of this is that one does not analyze the contents of the museum exhibit in the same way as the contents of the world at large. Rather, one analyzes the contents of the museum as falling into a set of categories, or subjects; there is an artificial system of classification that the individual *applies to* what is encountered in the museum. So too, in the case of the travel narrative on Japan, does one apply an artificial logic of limits and classification. I should clarify.

I am, by no means, the first to draw a parallel between travel writing on Japan and the concept of a museum. Yet, the comparison stands as particularly apt. Timothy Mitchell wrote that, “by experiencing the world as exhibition, [one is presented] not an exhibition of the world but the world organized and grasped as though it were an exhibition” (Weisenfeld 748). To an extent, this is nice. If one treats Japan as something like a museum exhibition, there is, as noted, some mode of organization implied. Perhaps the people, food, music, religion, and so forth might be treated as distinct categories, and would, thus, be more manageable. Brian Cantwell Smith wrote of objects relative to

representation that they are, “small, local, and urgent. There is a pragmatic immediacy to objects... that would be lost by unrealistically raising the topic to that of the structure of the world” (115). While I disagree that objects can do more than *seem* local or small, relative to larger aspects of context, the object in-a-museum is marked out in such a way that it is divided from the larger context of the world; it is given a particular context and space of relevance. One might get a handle on “Japan,” the exhibit, but it may be far harder to do so with Japan the place, or even such and such Japanese thing, as the full comprehension, and hence its mode of representation, of any object must necessarily encompass all elements of object and context that make the object what it is, and these elements may extend far beyond the ‘walls of the museum.’

Perhaps, however, it is unfair to expect the travel narrative to have the massive scale needed to present objects as they are situated in the world.⁴⁰ However, even if this shortcoming were to be forgiven and ignored, the museum has its problems beyond merely its necessarily limited scale; there is also the matter of scope. What comes to mind is a favorite volume of mine, a book that catalogues a 1984 exhibition on tour from the Tokugawa museum in Japan, Shogun: The Shogun age Exhibition. The book is rife with glossy color photos of armor, ceramics, and art, in short, the artifacts of the shogun. These artifacts are divided into sections under headings like “Taste” (136) and “The Quest for Beauty” (176). When looking at any object in the textualized museum exhibit, one knows exactly what quality it is meant to represent. Even in the absence of an understanding of what an object is, what it is called, what its function is, and so on, it can be taken as representative of ‘Japanese Taste,’ or some such applicable title. The

⁴⁰ If this is possible at all.

exhibition book is certainly not a travel narrative; the exhibit was local and the book was probably originally bought in the gift shop of the Dallas Museum of Art. However, were I to pick up a volume like A Magnificent Exchange, perhaps the least formalized travel narrative that I own, about an American family in Japan, the similarities are impossible to miss.

Describing the apartment she was moving into, Stephanie Allen-Adams, the author of A Magnificent Exchange notes of her Japanese apartment that, “directly behind the door was a built-in cabinet with sliding doors. To the left of the door was a rice carpet room...to the right a small laundry room” (Allen-Adams 43). The space in which the action of this chapter takes place is defined, I would argue, not simply to give the reader an idea of an interesting apartment. Knowledge of the formal layout of the apartment serves no direct purpose in the narrative. The goal of the description, it seems, is to create a limited, relatively comprehensible space for the action of this section of the narrative. It sets up the exhibit space, as it were, within Japan-as-museum. If the author had said, simply, ‘we moved into a small apartment’ or, worse yet, we ‘took up residence in Japan,’ the space of action would be undefined. The reader would be forced in such a situation to conceive of any object represented in this part of the narrative relative to an environment that exceeds the bounds of the museum, as it were, i.e., within Japan itself. As it stands, by the author’s limiting the space of the apartment and making it, more or less, comprehensible, the reader does not encounter objects in unfamiliar relationships, but in relation to a comprehensible spatial environment, even if that space reflects little of the larger context that would allow new or foreign objects to be understood. As Douglas Crimp notes, “should the [ordering] fiction [of the museum] disappear, there is nothing

left of the *museum* but ‘bric-a-brac’” (49). Roland Barthes complements this, noting that in treating Japan to isolate, “a certain number of features...and out of these features deliberately form a system” (3), one fails utterly to “represent or analyze reality itself” (3). The ‘museum’ fails to be a sufficient ground for the linguistic representation of objects.

Still, beyond any abstract concept of textual context, there are instances where both the context and intention of a text that may be taken as a travel narrative are explicit. Chief among these instances are authors who go, or are sent, to Japan to report back about the likes of natural disasters, politics, and electronics, among a host of other factors. In other words, these are texts not about Japan as a whole, but about some specific Japanese thing. The title, ‘travel narrative’ applies to these texts only in so far as the author’s work reflects the character of travel, but apply it does. To clarify by example, Rolling Stone magazine has, at times, sent reporters to Japan to cover developments in technology relevant to their readership. One writer was sent to report on a hi-fi stereo show, yet rather than simply speak about the stereos on display, he could not help but communicate the futuristic sense of place, noting the “geodesic structure with no pillars or columns to interrupt the floor space” (Feldman 82) in which the show took place.⁴¹ Clearly the author felt it necessary to ground his article, consciously or not, in a sense of amazement at the seeming future-world of Japan. Yet a sense of sanguinity remains in the article: “What one sees in Japanese audio shows or audio shops this year likely will be seen in the U.S. a year or so later” (Feldman 82) the author notes, not, it seems, out of

⁴¹ This geodesic structure represents the fantastic and futuristic not simply because of the author’s fascination with and mention of it, but because the article was written in 1977 (about a 1976 show), before large geodesic buildings had become relatively common.

any sense of awe, but merely through an awareness of the prototypical nature of devices at trade shows and the logistics of large-scale international shipping.

Perhaps, one will say, it is too much to draw, from comments about an exhibit hall, the conclusion that the author felt the need to ground what he saw in a markedly futuristic, or at least technologically advanced, space. However, skipping a few instances (and decades) forward, the same magazine presented an article in 2000 entitled, “Japan’s Wireless Wonder,” about Japan’s advanced cell phone network. In the article, Japan is presented as being saturated by the influence of these high-tech phones (the features of which far exceeded those of American phones at the time) to such a degree that what is dubbed “thumb culture” had developed (Rolling Stone, Nov. 23, 2000), or a population that lives almost entirely through its phones.⁴² The two articles presented are, indeed, disparate in their content and focus, but reading them suggests that they both rely on a similar structure. The articles themselves require a particular grounding for their content to be correctly interpreted by the reader. In other words, the context of Rolling Stone magazine is insufficient; the writers experienced something, either at a hi-fi show or on the streets of Japan, that must be given a socio-cultural preface that constructs an environment of *difference* from the culture and sphere-of-experience of the reader.

This difference is important. Jacques Derrida holds that the “signified...is never absolutely present outside a system of differences” (“Structure, Sign, and Play...” 213). For Derrida, the system of differences in which an object exists is constituted in itself, within its own sign, but through contrasts, multiple, perhaps infinite, contrasts, that serve

⁴² In particular, the Japanese phones were capable of digital data transfer and internet access, while prototype American ‘internet phones’ still relied on comparatively rudimentary dial-up service (Rolling Stone Nov. 23, 2000).

to dispel the notion of the “transcendental signified” (214), such that meaning becomes imprecise, ‘decentered.’ Derrida goes on, more or less, to dissolve the notion of the signifier “as a metaphysical concept” (Structure, Sign, and Play... 214). Definition by contrast is the grounding of meaning, such as it is, not in merely a word itself, but in a complex network of contrasts that far exceeds the word.^{43 44} This act of drawing contrasts is very much what the aforementioned magazine writers, I would argue, were doing. For these authors, definition by contrast allowed relatively stable meaning. I should explain further.

To quote Carl Sagan out of context, “If you wish to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe” (218). That is, at least in this context, to say that one may not refer to an apple pie, or anything else, outside of a context in which it can make sense. Apple pies, in other words, demand the universe; they do not exist aside from a context in which they may be created, or, more fundamentally still, conceived of. The magazine writers, writing about objects they observed in Japan -- hi-fi systems and cell phone networks -- indicated by the contextualization of their observations that what they saw could not be understood fully or properly in the context of ‘our’ everyday. Rather, both authors needed to ‘create a universe,’ in much the same way that taking Japan-as-a-museum limits the larger extant world, in which that which is futuristic and different from what ‘we’ know is taken as par for the course. Otherwise, descriptions of stereos and cell phones would suffice to show that said objects were different from those versions that we know. Japanese objects, in other words, demanded not only a context of

⁴³ Definition is obviously the wrong word relative to Derrida’s thinking; however, I mean definition in so far as definition may be linguistically constructed.

⁴⁴ That is, the experiential world, or the experienced-world, not the intersubjective world. Mine is not a metaphysical argument.

simple difference relative to other objects, but a larger, contextual, difference. The fact, however, that the contexts created by the authors were limited means that while referential meaning may seem to be stable in the space of the articles, it faces the same difficulties as ‘Japan as museum,’ in that correspondences related to an artificial context rather than to the world at large reflect the artificial system rather than the world at large.⁴⁵

2.4 The Text in Time

That travel narratives are rooted in time is evidenced quite clearly by the fact that they have been studied relative to historic and socio-political periods quite extensively and even relative to distinct literary movements (Stubseid 1). Indeed, in virtually all cases, the historical context surrounding a travel narrative is essential to the examination of the representational language contained therein.

That said, prior to the opening of Japan by Commodore Perry, Japan is well known to history as having been isolated. It was, literally and figuratively, a space of mystery. Few had the opportunity to travel to Japan due to the strict restrictions placed on the movement of foreigners into and within the country, which prompted Lafcadio Hearn to observe of the encounter with Japan and its objects that,

You are happy because you have entered bodily into Fairyland,--into a world that is not, and could never be your own. You have been transported out of your own century...into an era forgotten, into a vanished age,--back

⁴⁵ By “artificial system,” I mean either a potentially fictionalized space (wherein exaggeration or misunderstanding may play a part) or a space which has been artificially limited, i.e. the space of an exhibit-hall as opposed to the nation or Japan or the larger intersubjective world as a whole.

to something as ancient as Egypt or Nineveh. That is the secret of the strangeness and beauty of things. (*Japan: An Attempt at Interpretation* 15)

Of course, to call a place a utopia, or a ‘fairyland’ for that matter, is not specific to any given time period. However, to approach Japan, a nation in the world, from the viewpoint of its being, somehow, outside the normal sphere of reality, does seem to be characteristic of travel writings on Japan prior to 1854. The specific relation of this viewpoint to the representation of objects through language should be fairly apparent. Should someone approach an object in an unreal space, a space removed somehow from the normal sphere of reality, or should any given space be perceived in such a manner, any attempts to represent objects encountered therein must necessarily come up against their belonging, at least in the mind of the writer, to an utterly different reality and, hence, being of a form and purpose both inscrutable to, and inappropriate within, ‘our’ world. Fully comprehensible representation of these objects would seem an impossibility from the start. As Hearn noted, the fact that Japan is perceived as a utopia is, in fact, “the secret of the strangeness and beauty” of the things found therein. Hearn’s claim is not quite the same as my own, but it does call for a deeper examination.

To that end, Merlin Coverley, in examining the effect of psychology on perceptions of place, i.e. “psychogeography,” has pointed out that Arthur Conan Doyle, in depicting Sherlock Holmes in pursuit of a criminal, and Robert Louis Stevenson, in creating a space for Mr. Hyde’s rampages, showed London as a “fogbound labyrinth” (45). Certainly, the vast majority of the readership for these works would have known, as, indeed, they know today, that London is not a fogbound labyrinth, or at least that it has a

reality-as-place that extends beyond its being such a labyrinth. The consequence of its depiction as such a space, as a “fogbound labyrinth,” serves not to depict reality as it is, but to create a “division between appearance and reality” (Coverley 45). Therefore, I think it may be fair to say that Hearn, in the above quote, was saying more about the history of travel writing on Japan than he could have possibly known at the time. The wonder and amazement of the author, or other emotions as will be shown later in this section, serve to ground everything that is depicted. To once again quote Coverley, there is an “obvious contradiction between the objectivity of the method and the subjectivity of that which is catalogued” (106).⁴⁶ The travel narrative is, then, ostensibly representational, but actually impressionistic. Of course, such a view belongs more to the section, ‘context of self’ than ‘textual context’ within this work, but it is essential to make this connection clear between author and subject matter, particularly as both change, in ways, over time.

It may be of use, in elucidating what I mean by ‘change over time,’ to consider, in a somewhat formal way, the effect of time on the text, that is, the textual-temporal context of a travel narrative on Japan. At the outset, I suggested the possibility that there may be something like an expiration date for the language of travel narratives, and it readily occurs to me that this can be proved only if radical discrepancies can be found in the capacity of language to represent given objects across time periods. However, it should be noted immediately that I have no wish to argue that words themselves have, despite their obvious ability to shift in meaning over time, anything like a limited period of applicability. Quite the contrary, as I hope is indicated by the inclusion of this

⁴⁶ This time Coverley is speaking about the mapping of a journey through a city. While this is not travel writing in precisely the same sense that I am writing about, I feel that the quotation addresses a common thread between the two branches of ‘writing about a journey.’

temporality section as a subsection under the larger banner, context. To prove that words lose their ‘proper’ meaning is to speak about language itself, which is not really my goal. To speak about language as necessarily relative to the contexts of both author and text *in* time, I think, will tell a great deal about the meaning of the language of travel narratives about Japan, and is, in fact, essential to an examination of the representational capacity of language therein.

Time relative to most writings on Japan seems often to be divided, roughly, into three periods: the historic past-- the time of samurai and shogun--, the decades surrounding the Second World War, and the prosperous post-war period. Proof of these divisions can be found easily enough in that texts, aside from complete histories, rarely attempt to show these periods as anything other than wildly divided from one another by social, economic, and ideological factors. I shall argue that, while the above divisions may hold for histories, economic studies, and other such texts, virtually all Western travel writing about Japan falls into five roughly-divided temporal categories:

1. pre-1854⁴⁷
2. 1854- World War II
3. post-war to 1970
4. 1970s to mid 1990s
5. late 1990s onward

Of course, one might counter immediately, that any sort of writing could fall under these divisions, as there are bound to be distinctions resultant, at least largely, from the tumultuous socio-political situation of the 20th century. However, these distinctions are in

⁴⁷ That is, before Commodore Perry’s well-known excursion to Japan.

no way arbitrary; they form fundamentally distinct *categories* between which travel writing on Japan bears marked differences that have a direct effect on the meaning of their language, literally on the meaning of the words they contain.

If Lafcadio Hearn, in the quotation above, saw Japan as a space of wonder, it was for many before him a blank space on the map. The 1837 log of a sailor, Samuel Wells Williams, represents an attempt by an American vessel to sail into the actively isolated nation. Williams encountered harbors lined with canons to keep his ship at bay, a treatment rumored to be the commonplace response even to merchant and whaling vessels that were in desperate need of aid or food (64-5). However, rather than being offended, Williams saw great wisdom in the isolationist tactics of the Japanese, admiring the fact that, because of their self-imposed isolation, “they have not subjected themselves to the visits of fleets and armies” (66), and have thus, “enjoyed peace within their own borders” (66). Williams saw a Japan that was, if anything, level-headed and practical, with a rationale and set of tactics both comprehensible and admirable. Just over a decade later, in 1849, an American businessman, Aaron Haight Palmer, spoke differently of Japan. He noted that, while the “mysterious empire” (68) had never been conquered by an outside power, the well-established denial of aid to the shipwrecked and refusal of trade, “ought no longer be tolerated by a nation of freemen” (70).

The point is not that one or the other view was more correct or representational of Japan. Rather, one can see that there was, prior to the opening of Japan to the West, no stable concept of what Japan was. Was it a friend? Was it

an enemy? Were its people deserving of respect or contempt? Factually, or thereabouts, virtually all that was known of the country came from the brief chapter by Marco Polo on Japan, which heralded the land as being of great mineral wealth, a claim that was not correct, and that was made all the more dubious by the accounts of magic jewels and amulets that directly followed it (Polo 255). Mutual confusion between the United States and Japan was so great that, in 1851, a government interrogation of a Japanese castaway rescued by Americans and then returned home led to the belief that, “one finds tigers and elephants” (Nakahama 81) among the native animals of the United States. While this example may be mildly humorous, it represents no greater level of confusion than was experienced by the Americans at the time. Works from this time period cannot hope to adequately represent Japanese objects, not simply because their authors were denied requisite physical access, but because the culture that produced these texts was utterly confused about Japan. There is no stable context for meaning in this time period.

After Japan was opened to the world, travel texts on the nation proliferated as eager information-seekers tried to fill the massive gaps in their knowledge. It is during this era that works emerged in West like the one already briefly mentioned by Lafcadio Hearn, as well as others by a host of other contemporaries. Further, this period between 1854 and the start of the Second World War saw a struggle between those, like Hearn, who endeavored to create a sense of mystery surrounding a faraway Japan, and others who wished to embrace Japan, newly arrived on the world stage, and depict the nation as merely another part of this

seemingly well-ordered and -understood world. That is to say, a divide existed between those who perceived Japan as mysterious and those who saw it merely as being more or less ‘caught up’ with modernity. However, in either case, travel authors seem to have, almost universally, found Japan to be only partially open to representation. What do I mean?

Precisely that both of these sets of authors, both those that saw a mysterious, romanticized Japan and those who held it to be merely another nation joining modernity, have, in attempting to represent the objects of Japan, come up against the sorts of limitations of language, self, and text already spoken of, as have all the authors, simply in different combinations and with different results, of the all time periods spoken of in this section. Within the 1854 to World War Two time period, those authors who saw Japan as catching up to modernity most commonly explain the nation as deciding, “to come out and take... [its] place among the great nations of the world” (Finnemore 4). The view was that Japan somehow advanced as, “They... built railways... [and] banks... [and established] newspapers” (Finnemore 4). In other words, Japan was merely at a certain stage in the process of becoming like the modern West. Anything beyond the modern, Western, and familiar is not only harder to explain, but earns far less descriptive space. On the same page on which Finnemore applauds building and infrastructure projects, he makes an effort to explain the topography and geology of Japan, noting that it is mountainous, and that, “many of the mountains are volcanoes” (4). I dare say that while the reader of this account may have been

readily able to conceive of modern railways and newspapers, a country, in effect, thoroughly covered over with volcanoes is far harder to visualize.

Indeed, it is not as if Japan had suddenly stopped being Japan and become the West in miniature. Nor was Japan somehow the magical fairyland that Hearn and a great many others, at times, described it as. As Jennifer Weisenfeld notes in, “Touring Japan-as-Museum,” travel narratives from this time period would often disappoint later travelers, whose notions about what objects existed in Japan were shaped by those narratives that saw it either as atemporal or thoroughly modern (749). As with other Eastern travel narratives written around the same time, “often the same location would evoke different conceptions: either a celebration...or disgust...with dilapidated conditions, and sometimes even ambivalence” (Wong 269). This is not to say that these travel narratives promised more than travel narratives about any other place written of at the time or even that they were somehow *more* false in their representations. Rather, what is important to this examination is that the above noted travel writings evidence that there were two *distinct* ways of representing Japan common at the time, that which held Japan to be a ‘fairyland’ and that which saw it merely as a new cog in the machine of the industrialized modern world. Travel narratives from this time period did not merely fail to accurately represent objects, they were denied this possibility from the start by falling into popular narrative modes which denied the possibility of presenting anything new, specific, or unique.

Of particular note is the fact that writings on the ‘Orient’ in general from this period began to describe an, “Orient...almost exclusively associated with

things” (Kim 380), such that the ambivalent writings on Asia began, in a more or less arbitrary fashion, to say that this or that object, or even way of arranging objects, was “peculiar to those [particular] Orientals” (382). Japan took on the character of a space of objects, but, as a result of the two aforementioned narrative modes, the representation of those objects was nowhere stable. The travel narratives of this period were both contradictory relative to one another and, in a representational sense, patently false, yet they continued on in this vein until the Second World War.

The period between the Second World War and, roughly, 1970, marks a distinct shift in the context of Japan in travel writings. The racism and vitriol of texts written during the war period is so obvious that it is needless to cite examples here, as these sentiments could apply to any wartime enemy-nation and are therefore not particular to treatments of Japan. What is of note is that the pre- and post-war Japans are seen as, literally, different places. Gone in this post-war period is much of the romanticism that had existed previously. Japan became a second-rate manufacturing power in this time, at least in the eyes of the majority of Western writers. Japanese objects become detached from atemporality and mystery and instead became subject to the idea that, “the inscription ‘made in Japan’ was quite enough to raise suspicion that the product might be of dubious quality... MADE IN JAPAN became a synonym for everything which didn’t work” (Mohl 23). Nothing Japanese, in or out of Japan, could escape the overriding notion, the accepted view, that Japanese things were inferior.

Yet, this situation reversed itself utterly starting in the 1970s and continuing through the mid 1990s, until the end of the “Japanese miracle,” or in today’s common

terms, until the ‘bubble’ of the Japanese economy burst. Japan, during this time period, became associated with manufacturing precision and excellence such that industry supplanted even the historical/romantic Japan of old as the element constitutive of what was thought of as Japanese society, and hence, the contextual background for the representation of objects. Mount Fuji, said one author in 1970, “formerly the symbol of Japan, is today dwarfed by technology” (Mohl 104). If in the pre-war period, Westerners perceived themselves as being in a stable, superior position, economically and socially, to the Japanese, then this time period saw the destruction of that view.

From the late 1990s onward, Japan has come to be seen on one hand as just another part of the world community, but on the other hand as still somehow alien. A current author, writing on Tokyo, has described the city as being of, “infinite vitality...it is overwhelming, fascinating, hypnotizing” (Sacchi 28). This description calls to mind the travel narratives of a century and a half before, which saw in Japan a ‘fairylad.’

One of the problems of travel literature, indeed, of literature in general, is that it tends to fall into patterns, be they the result of the expectations of the readership or the result of the overarching socio-cultural milieu of the time. If the travel narrative is to be taken merely as a means of representing, literally, the vehicle whereby the author mediates an encounter between the reader and the space and objects represented, then there must be no restrictions or conditions placed on the literary mechanism through which that-which-is is represented. However, while it is not my purpose to speculate on why a work might be subject to falling into patterns or modes of representation rather than pursuing objective representation, if such a thing is possible, it is worth noting such a condition, as it marks as impossible exactly the type of representation I have put at

issue in this thesis. It is certainly not the case that the sub-genre of travel writing on Japan is the only body of texts subject to the necessarily limiting factors patterns and forms which serve to identify a group of texts. However, the specific patterns outlined above are, indeed, unique to travel narratives on Japan.

2.5 The Consequences of Context

That a signifying term exists within the larger system of a language can serve to direct the meaning of that term, but in the realm of inter-linguistic reference one necessarily comes up against one of the key problems of representation outlined by Derrida. Namely, that a system of language that gestures within itself never, truly, escapes itself. To the degree that linguistic meaning is self-referential, the language of travel narratives fails to represent objects as they are in the world.

At the outset of this chapter, the notion of context seemed to hold a certain promise. If language on its own fails to fully represent objects, perhaps the multiple layers of context that surround and support any text might somehow aid in the presentation of referential meaning for travel narratives on Japan. As often noted above, one gets the sense that meaning is conveyed through these texts; the idea that this meaning might be representational of objects does not *seem* hopeless.

Language itself provides the basic unit of context. Pronouns depend on sentence structures for their referential meanings. Proper nouns, while ostensibly extra-linguistic, cannot function outside of a language-user group that recognizes their referential meaning unless they are supported by description, in which case the description fills the place of the empty signifier, as is especially the case with the 'new' and foreign objects which travel narratives on Japan seek to represent. Naturally, however, no travel narrative

emerges as a natural product of language. The referring-self writes the narrative and in so doing brings confusion and deception, either of self or others, to bear on the travel narrative, along with potential irrationally-acquired beliefs relating to the objects written about. The belief-like character of the travel narrative forms the second, fundamental level of context which must be taken into consideration if context is to support referential meaning. This belief-like-ness results directly from the author's presentation of what he or she believes to be the case, despite the fact that this belief might be conditioned or contaminated by the aforementioned afflictions of the referring-self. Further, belief does not bear a relation of equivalence to the world; its truth-value comes not out of correspondence to the world but to the mind of the writer. The third level of context is that of the text itself, carrying with it the attendant expectations of what a travel narrative on Japan should be like, even what it should say. It is on this level that hyperbole and ambiguous statements widen the gulf between language and fixed referents in the world. Further, within the text, 'representational memes,' the repetition of socially-embedded notions, may take the place of the very *attempt* to represent objects. The structuring of a text in order to represent objects in a consciously limited context wherein representation of objects seems more possible (i.e. Japan-as-museum) denies the possibility of objectivity because the ground for meaning is, itself, actively selected and shaped by the author and editors of a text. Finally, the time period in which the text is produced profoundly shapes not only the author's approach to the material at hand, but actually augments the attempt at representation of objects, such that the representations correspond, markedly, to preconceived socio-political notions about Japan and its objects.

Language does not fail to convey meaning; it is full of meaning. However, much of this meaning relates back to the mind of the author and the zeitgeist of the culture out of which they operate. The preceding analysis of context does not uncover a mechanism of stable reference to objects, but it does suggest that travel narratives on Japan are something much richer than the mere bodies of re-presentation that they ostensibly are; they do more than refer.

It may well be that examining travel narratives on Japan, not merely on one, but on multiple, interrelated levels of context, as undertaken here, may yield an answer to the question of what a given narrative represents. Certainly no single part of such an examination is necessarily an original undertaking, nor, in many cases, is it unique only to travel narratives on Japan. However, to recognize in these narratives the complex, interconnected web of contexts outlined above, allows access to a greater breadth of meaning than a futile search for pure reference. Further, the *full* context-structure, as outlined, is indeed unique to travel narratives on Japan, and therefore offers a uniquely suited means of approaching these texts.

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⁴⁸ It seems that, as of this time, the MLA has no formalized way of representing place-markers within digital kindle-editions of books, as such books have no page numbers, but rely on "location numbers." The range of location numbers within this book is 1-5118. Location numbers shall be given in place of page numbers in the thesis.

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