

In Marilyn Ivy's *Discourses of the Vanishing*, the author explores various different ways in which a longing for the premodern is articulated in Japanese society. Her main argument is that while many have argued that tradition is merely invented, in Japan tradition is not so much invented as it is preserved in phantasmagoric images. In order for modernity to persist "modernist nostalgia must preserve, in many senses, the sense of absence that motivates its desires" (10). Ivy explores ways in which the objects of nostalgic desire is preserved, demonstrating how "elements of a revived past operate as the amplified elements of the stylishly novel" (57). She argues that Japan represents an aspect of what Jameson has called the retro mode: "the desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past is now refracted through the iron law of fashion change and the idea of the 'generation'" (57).

While reading through Ivy's text, I was struck on several occasions on how useful her analysis of Japanese modernity could be for a study of contemporary conservative or traditionalist movements within Catholicism. As a type of backlash against informed and progressive Catholicism, many conservative individuals and groups have inculcated within themselves a nostalgic longing for a world they never knew. In their imagining of a sort of neo-Baroque Catholicism, it is not as though they are inventing a tradition wholly anew, nor are they simply recapitulating premodern (or rather early modern) notions of Catholicism; there is a sense in which their nostalgic drive parallels that which Ivy has elicited from the discourses of the vanishing in Japan: "a longing for pre-modernity, a time before the West, before the catastrophic imprint of westernization. Yet the very search to find authentic survivals of pre-modern, prewestern Japanese authenticity is inescapably a *modern* endeavor, essentially unfolded within the historical condition that it would seek to escape" (241).

In examining this longing in Japan, Ivy examines the importance of the oral in creating and fulfilling the desires for vanishing but not yet vanished objects of desire. In discourses about the production of knowledge as local and oral (18), she argues that a “double inscription—as both superfluous and essential, marginal and traditional—is necessary for loss to emerge as recoverable” (25). Through this process, the Japanese homeland become a place one was supposed to discover, as “Japan beckoned as something strangely familiar: the native remote” (47). In the face of the changes following the opening of Japan and the rapid industrialization, the sense of nostalgia for the Tokugawa period gave rise to a situation in which the “surviving numinous became the romantic object of those caught up in the disenchantment of the world” (73). Not only was the process in which Japanese came to desire the pre-modern phantasmagoric in some sense, but many of the objects of their desire were actually ghosts and spirits, especially those associated with the remote mountains in regions such as Tono. In these discourses about ghosts and folktales, fact and fantasy “exist in an aporetic relationship to one another, ensuring that only across their difference can narratives of desire and loss find their way” (82). Just as the desire for the pre-modern cannot exist without the experience of the modern, so too must fantasy exist in order to situate the authentic.

Ivy argues that it is in the Japanese concept of *furusato*, which she renders as hometown, that two desires arising out of the experience of modernity merge: “the desire to encounter the unexpected, the peripheral unknown, even (and even especially) the frightening” and “a countervailing desire, pushed by an opposite longing, to return to that stable point of origin, to discover an authentically Japanese Japan that is disappearing yet still present” (105). The modern longing for something new and exotic, by means of which Japan has itself be

reinscribed as worthy of (re)discovery, is merged with the nostalgic longing to return to the way things once were, a longing that can only be experienced through their loss, giving rise not only to one's own hometown, but the categorical concept a *furusato* for all Japan, with Tono as an exemplar. Ivy notes, however, that even in the “authentic” Tono rituals of *mushi matsuri*, that a longing for return is expressed: “sacrificial logics do not operate. The moment of expulsion—of risk—is now foreclosed, as the tracing of a perfect circularity replaces the movement toward an outside” (139). Such ritual performances, she argues, “exemplify the modern desire to keep the uncanny at bay—to evoke the real without allowing its irruption into everyday life” (140). Whereas the rituals associated with the Tono are seen to represent authentic Japan, that which was and remains Japanese despite the loss experienced elsewhere as the onslaught of an otherwise welcomed modernity, they are in fact reshaped according to the cultural logic which renders the loss bearable by asserting its return to its place of origin, just as those who have come to discover Mount Osore, Tono, or a *taishu engeki* performance will themselves return to their modern, middle class, urban homes. Ivy asserts that this represents “the duplicity of ‘tradition’ itself: a transmission that always contains the possibility of betrayal, of an arbitrary selection from the past” (187). The irony is that in searching for an authentic, essential, immutable past a selective forgetting, remembering, and reshaping takes place.

This loss, however, is necessary to assert the permanence of such traditions. Ivy argues that “only from the position of loss can one assert that nothing has been lost; only when the seamless, unquestioned transmission of custom has been interrupted, does ‘tradition’ emerge. The realization of loss is forestalled, denied, by an insistence that nothing is lost. It is denied by an idealization, a memorialization of place, a bracketing of practices, an

assertion of continuity” (188-190). This is the very process that I see taking place not only in Japan, but also with conservative Catholicism. Only by having experienced the loss of that for which they create a longing can traditionalist Catholics come to argue that that for which they long has never been lost. Asserting that nothing has changed and that the Ark of the Church has weathered modernity without swaying course is the trope in which those who have experienced loss deny this loss. Such desire, both in Japan and among contemporary traditional Catholics, “sustains vanishing (but not yet vanished) forms of modernity” (237). Just as *taishu engeki* and the trances at Mount Osore “exist as ghostly reminders, as potentially scandalous presences that, by all rights, should not be there—yet which *must* be there, vanishing, to act as constitutive reminders of modernity’s losses” (243, emphasis original), so too do neo-Baroque conservative Catholics serve as a reminder of the losses incurred through modernity. I, however, worry about the future of the Catholic Church following the same path that Ivy presents as the postmodern condition of Japan: “not only has the imagined object of loss vanished, but even the sense of loss itself. All voices and forms of language seem equally present, equally homogenous. Within this mass-mediated space, the very possibility of complex dialectical images is thus foreclosed” (246). We must not cling to practices of an era gone by, nor should we forget what we have lost in coming to modernity; a dialectic is necessary, a dialectic that recognizes both the future orientation of modernity and the nostalgic longing for tradition verified through dead ancestors. It must not be forgotten, however, that both of these longings are the product of the experience of modernity.