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To begin with a truism of postcolonial studies that is relevant to the themes of this book: representation of other cultures involves self-representation. The codes, narratives, and genres of representation mask the ‘real’ object of scrutiny, making clear instead the observer’s subject position. Politically, such cultural representation means a naturalising of ideology, translating power into tropes of description, analysis and observation. Such a mechanism is clearly akin to what, since Said, we mean by Orientalism. This is a useful starting point for discussing the relationship between life-writing, Orientalism and nostalgia. However, it may preclude other less immediately obvious dynamics of representation and identity from being recognised. What, for instance, are the implications if self-portraiture is the intention to begin with?

And to be more specific, what do the expressions of nostalgia and nationalism in the writings of Hal Porter signify with regard to ‘selves crossing cultures’? The question is worth asking in the first place since Porter’s writings are marked by a pronounced interest in both identity and place. A prose stylist who produced his most important work in the 1950s and ’60s, Porter wrote one of the most significant Australian autobiographies, *The Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony*. He offers a different, though equally stylised, Australian literary subjectivity from that of Patrick White. Less interested in the metaphysical realm than White, Porter’s sociological interests and materialist approach saw him attracted not to interiority (as in White’s case) but to what might be termed a kind of ‘egotistical exteriority’. One major expression of this is found in Porter’s writings on Japan. The heterogeneity of these writings is worth noting. They are varied in terms of genre, and their cultural representations are produced by a complex mix of autobiographical and nationalist perspectives. Japan or Japanese characters feature in Porter’s autobiographies, short stories, poems, essays, his first novel (*A Handful of*
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Pennies), a play (The Professor) and a book-length piece of reportage (The Actors: An Image of the New Japan).

Where do these writings fit into the recent upsurge of writing on identity and place? Porter’s ‘Japanese’ writings are not strictly writing on migration or diaspora, nor are they part of the literature of expatriation, auto-ethnography or even conventional travel writing. Their heterogeneity may reflect the fact that Japan features strongly, if diversely, in Porter’s biography. Porter was attracted to this country from childhood, especially through his mother’s 1920s japonaiserie and the Victorian-era books about Japan that Porter inherited from his grandfather. Porter also lived in Japan, from 1949–50 in Kure, where he taught officers’ children for the Australian Army Education Unit. He also visited Japan in subsequent years, most notably in 1967, when he travelled there under the auspices of the Department of External Affairs. It was during this trip that he wrote notes for what became The Actors, a book that, at the time of its release, attracted comment in the press for its unremittingly negative picture of post-war Japan.

While Porter’s Japan stands for many things, it is manifestly an important index of subjectivity, in terms of its relation to memory, nationalism, and alterity. The place of Japan in Porter’s oeuvre is conspicuous given his self-professed ambition to focus on Australia; to ‘record clearly an extraordinary country and (once one is beyond the common factors of human behaviour) its unique enough inhabitants’—by which he means Australia and Australians.¹ Later he placed greater emphasis on the latter, stating that the ‘ultimate thing I want to write (from the terrifying limitations I have) is something about Australians, more than Australia’.²

Despite his nationalism, Porter’s Japan is notable because it is represented not merely in a univocal manner through ideology, or a particular historiographical model, or discourse of race (though such things are present). We should remember that Porter is characteristically a contradictory writer. Outrageous in terms of the content of his writing, he calls on the authority of the real for his fictions. Baroque in style, he claims to have no imagination; intensely moved by the past, his detached narrative style produces something we could call ‘anti-sentimental nostalgia’. To this we could add a nationalist subjectivity that is partly defined in terms of the other. In addition—and despite the emphasis noted above on character rather than place—Porter was a notably early regionalist in Australian literature. Most of his work, he writes, is ‘based
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on characters and landscapes of southernmost Australia, the less
distraught, arid and intractable part, the greener, colder, well-combed
terrain with its nineteenth-century provincial cities and country towns,
its seaside resorts on a littoral touched by Antarctic winds. His
disingenuous and oft-repeated description of himself as a ‘simple
country boy’ links a number of key elements: his interest in his regional
background, the relationship between self and past experience, and his
constant use of the theme of innocence and its loss, all of which coalesce
into a profoundly nostalgic sensibility.

From an un-ideological, nostalgic regionalist, then, Porter’s Japanese
writings may seem curiously out of place. But one way to write Australia
and Australians is through alterity, to view Australians in ‘alien’ terri-
tory. To someone as occidental (indeed, as openly racist) as Porter, Japan
could hardly be less alien. The attraction of Japan is also partly
determined by a documentary aesthetic and by his use of personae such
as the dégagé or the ‘simple country boy’ (especially the ‘Australian
abroad’), so that to be writing about Japan offers both exotic to
document and a world—Asian, urban, and ancient (or ultra-modern)—in
which to lay bare the workings of the ingenuous self. Indeed, at one
level, Japan is simply one of a number of exotic locations strewn
throughout Porter’s fictional and non-fictional writing that show the
country boy to be an anti-cosmopolitan. Porter shows travel and other
cultures as functions of a repetitive self-definition. One of the interesting
aspects of Porter’s Orientalist fiction is how little appears to be learnt
(something Bruce Bennett notes). With a few notable exceptions, Porter’s
rites de passage leave him or his persona relatively unchanged. The only
passage that is unambiguous is the passage of time.

While Japan is central to Porter’s nationalist, regionalist and auto-
biographical projects, its function is not simple. It both defines and
corrodes Porter’s tropes of selfhood. Its definitional aspect can be seen in
Porter’s first volume of autobiography, The Watcher on the Cast-Iron
Balcony, published when Porter was fifty-two. In this work there are
numerous references to Japan. Many, such as the ‘large japanned tray’
and the ‘compressed bits which expand to Japanese flowers on the
surface of saucers of water’ originate from the maternal, domestic realm.
The Watcher is as much an elegiac biography of the mother as an
autobiography of the young artist, and the two ‘original’ sources of
Porter’s interest in Japan suggest the importance of gender to Porter’s
construction of self and Japan. Porter sees his interest in Japan as
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stemming from his mother’s Japanese wind-bells and his grandfather’s books. The wind-bells are outside the front room, and

... hang from the passage ceiling, a dangle on threads of triangular and rectangular slices of glass from which air in motion splashes delicious scraps of sound. Thirty years later, in a brothel street by a canal in Osaka, I hear wind-bells through the giggles of drunkards and the sound of the samisen and, there, under paper-lanterns large as oil-drums, see again the front room and its ritual garnishings.6

If that wasn’t charged enough there is, in the parents’ bedroom, a ‘four-fold Japanese screen, reeds and cranes embroidered in greenish gold on linen, [that] conceals a cabinet that contains the chamber-pot into which, sometimes, from my own next-door bedroom, I half-asleep hear, dispassionately yet with some interest, my father or my mother urinating’.7 The books from his dead grandfather—Mitford’s Tales of Old Japan, Bird’s Unbeaten Tracks in Japan, MacFarlane’s Japan and Reed’s Japan—‘quicken in me the infusion of footloose blood Grandfather himself has handed on to me’.8 Finally, Porter describes beginning an affair, aged sixteen, with a woman in her forties: ‘Beneath a Japanese kimono patterned with wisteria, white on black, she is, he thinks, palpably naked. Palpably, he thinks, palpably’.9

Japan here is primarily a site in which the exotic and the erotic intermingle, but as the parents’ urinating, the brothel street and the lover’s age suggest, this eroticism is primarily concerned with the body’s material condition: its carnality, and mortality. That the gendered nature of these things should be so pronounced (the male rational and scholarly; the female decorative and sexualised) is an important feature of how Japan operates in Porter’s subjectivity. The reference to Porter’s ‘footloose blood’ suggests the figure of the masculine wanderer, the heroic figure not weighted down by family. In addition, Porter’s experience in Occupied Japan, as Porter represents it, is a largely masculine affair: the officers’ mess, the solitary Porter occupied by Japan like a latter-day Hearn. But, as the linking of an Osaka street to the front room’s ‘ritual garnishings’ suggests, Porter is more interested in the domestic and maternal realms. Of course Japan, and Asia generally, have long been figured by the West in feminine terms, and the late, popular expression of japonaiserie that Porter experienced in early childhood came from an
artistic movement that made greater headway in the female-dominated arts and craft area than in the mainstream masculine art world.

The link between these gendered associations and the autobiographic self is nostalgia. As feminist theory has emphasised, in patriarchal discourse the maternal realm is a nostalgic realm. Lynne Huffer, in *Maternal Pasts, Feminist Futures*, describes nostalgia as a structure that ‘both creates and obliterates a lost object’ and that ‘requires an absent mother’. Patriarchal subjectivity is based on this link between the maternal and the nostalgic. Nostalgia ‘begins with the idea of return, from the Greek nostos: “the return home”, but home can’t be returned to. As Huffer writes, ‘behind the hero lies the maternal void’. Since patriarchy privileges men over women as thinking subjects, women are silent and other. This ambivalence means that the masculine search is a search for the lost mother, but also a fear of the deathly that is ascribed to the maternal realm, the ‘void’ behind the hero. Since the most important event in *The Watcher* is the death of the mother, and since Porter is consistently both attracted to the feminine and threatened by it (sex is always shadowed by death in *The Watcher*), it is clear that structural nostalgia is at work in Porter’s autobiographical writings. Porter’s autobiography is simultaneously the biography of his mother, while Japan—as both sexualised and associated with the mother—is a highly-charged site for nostalgic longing. It is clearly an index to Porter’s subjectivity in terms of both nationalism and sexuality. The addition of ‘Old Japan’, and of masculine exploration, means that Japan also represents the aesthetic and the worldly.

The sense of Japan as an expression of worldliness is seen in Porter’s first major work, his novel *A Handful of Pennies* (1958), which was written out of his experience in Kure. As with all his ‘Japanese’ work up to *The Professor* (1966), *A Handful of Pennies* deals with the clash between two opposing cultures, showing sympathy for the Japanese in the face of barbaric Westerners. In a sense Japan is the main character, since the book’s episodic structure means that the five principal protagonists (the ‘handful of pennies’) are linked more by place than plot. The characters, all returning to Australia (dead or alive) on the same flight, represent a failure of relations between Australians and Japanese. Interaction between ‘victor and vanquished’ is almost always tragic in consequence. It is clear that Porter is more interested in the Australian characters than the Japanese, and while the latter do not always offer merely comic relief, the novel suggests that the traditional Japan that is
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valorised in the book may in fact be less attractive than appears on the surface of the narrative. Even in this early and apparently sympathetic work on Japan it may be the case, as Megumi Kato has it, that Porter attributes the gap between Australian and Japanese ‘to Japanese cultural traditions rather than otherwise’.12

Porter’s second volume of autobiography, The Paper Chase (1966), covers his time as a teacher in Japan. Despite its documentary moments, the work illustrates Porter’s characteristic nostalgia. Inevitably, he arrives in Japan in what he describes as the ‘last-rose-of-summer stage’ of the Occupation.13 Even his satirical image of the Occupationaires living life as if on a luxury liner with millions of servants has a nostalgic undertone to it.14 As an autobiography of education, however, The Paper Chase may be seen to be generically inimical to nostalgia. But a sense of paradox is notable here also, as the work’s climatic moment of self-realisation centres on nostalgia. In this case the nostalgia surrounds the relationship between Porter and his Japanese ‘housegirl’, Ikuko Sakamoto, who gives back his identity by waking him from his moral sleep. Porter, who treats Ikuko-san with indifference and contempt, is shocked into knowledge through her farewell, which he does not deserve. The loss of Porter’s housegirl is, bizarrely, akin to the loss of another idealised mother figure.

I have loved few people as much, and none in the same way, as I do this squat, bandy Japanese woman who knows more about me, evil and good—if she is still alive—than any living creature. It cannot be that I know all about her for I know nothing but good. To remember her is a distress I prefer to avoid for, in knowing her, I learn the final unpleasant truths about myself ... I am now less liberal to others because I was more illiberal to her, and more stern with my great imperfections because I was stern with her infinitesimal ones. One does not strike angels without burning one’s hand.15

It is significant that Ikuko-san had given back Porter’s identity, since the beginning of The Paper Chase shows the young Porter in Williams-town haunted by his mother’s ghost. Though ‘dead as mutton’ (a phrase Porter applies to a Japanese character in a later short story), Porter’s mother has come back not only to haunt him, but also to ‘mulct’ (that is, cheat or deprive) him of his identity.16 Given this, and the fact that in The Paper Chase and the story ‘House Girl’ the intimate male–female relations of the domestic setting are the main focus, Japan acts as both
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mother and anti-mother: a mother who can be given into, because the representative woman in question is in fact powerless.

A Handful of Pennies and The Paper Chase, despite their formal and ontological differences, both illustrate a similar textual strategy. Porter’s position regarding the Occupationaires, made explicit in The Paper Chase, is that the Australians were the lesser of two evils. While other nationals were outwardly civilised but actually barbaric, Australians were the reverse: outwardly barbaric, but actually civilised. This is an interesting spin on Porter’s own characteristic image of the innocent watcher, paper chaser, or extra. The innocence/experience antimony shows that the primary nostalgic trope of Porter’s fictional and non-fictional writing (the loss of innocence) is also central to his Japanese writings.

Toda-San, the play that was later performed and published as The Professor (1966), is Porter’s most outré expression of Japanese themes. The eponymous professor, Gilbert Medlin, is a self-obsessed Australian who causes destruction around him. He and his sister run a boarding house in Kyoto where a number of Australians are staying. Medlin expects fanatical devotion from his students and shares his room with one of them, Toda Inagaki. Toda’s sister Fusehime Ishimoto prostitutes herself so that Toda might buy the fine woodcuts that the professor covets. When Medlin discovers the source of the money for these gifts he accuses his student of lying. In the aftermath to this accusation Fusehime tries to kill herself and her brother—in the play’s bizarre closing moments—presents his severed tongue in a box to the professor, indicating he will not lie again.

Within the play is a play-within-a-play allegedly based on an ancient Japanese source. The text states that this should be ‘orientally formal and ritualistic in movement and posture’. The theme of the artist and the masks that we wear (from necessity and vanity) clearly comments on the action of the main play and leads to the work’s conclusion. As in A Handful of Pennies, the Australian characters apparently come off second-best. Their callousness and self-obsession contrasts with the selflessness of the Japanese characters. As the above plot summary suggests, however, the equanimity of the Japanese characters masks a latent and dramatic hysteria. This is Porter’s last gasp at presenting Japan in traditionally sentimental Orientalist terms: ancient, ritualistic, selfless. But even here we see the ambivalence of sentimental Orientalist positions, in which the very ‘oriental’ qualities that are admired are seen to be part of an otherness that eventually is
found to be repulsive. Porter’s inability to deal with the homosexual nature of his own plot is striking in this regard.

However ambiguous the play may be, it lacks the obvious venom of *The Actors: An Image of the New Japan* (1968), which today reads like the work of a man who returned to Japan after many years to be inevitably disillusioned. ‘New Japan’ is squalid, plastic; its material affluence masks spiritual hunger. Worst of all, Japan has been Americanised: ‘Outside America there is no city on earth which so reproduces all the worst aspects of American civilization, or more grotesquely burlesques them. Devoid of originality, lacking the explorer nature, uncreative, the Japanese have paraphrased the West, now blowing hot, now blowing cold, on and off since the sixteenth century’.18 Such statements have the ring of a spurned lover, a right-wing nostalgist. The levity of the young, the city’s bustle, is hysterical: Japan has become a series of symptoms. But in fact this is classic Porteresque territory: the inner emptiness caused by experience is covered by the histrionic, theatrical display of self, where the display is the most important feature of subjectivity. Porter’s excoriating image of Japan is remarkably close to his image of himself as an actor, a man more interested in manners than philosophy (as Bruce Bennett puts it).19

*Mr Butterfly and Other Tales of New Japan* (1970) is a fictional response to Porter’s disillusionment with Japan. The title story concerns an expatriate Australian who has married a Japanese housegirl. Mr Butterfly’s name signals a reversal of the *Madame Butterfly* story, ubiquitous in Western imaging of Japan. He is known as ‘Blue’: a clichéd Australian name, an Australian term for a fight, and an American word for an emotional condition. It becomes apparent to the narrator that Mr Butterfly’s moral shortcomings and repugnant personality are due to an error of judgement: marrying a rapacious Japanese woman. (Other characters in the collection suffer from similar errors or flaws in the personality.) As the narrator witnesses the couple arguing he realises that ‘Mr Butterfly’s misfortunes have not been caused by his own moral or mental debility nor by a fateful mis-mating of Japanese stars but by a glutonously ambitious Japanese mother, the former oh-so-sweet-and-cute housegirl bred on rice slops and pickled radish in a penurious and primitive village’.20

The housegirl is now no angel in the house, and it is surely significant that she is the Australian’s legal equal. This aspect to Porter’s writing is probably what Alison Bronowski has in mind in her study of
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Australian responses to Asia, The Yellow Lady, when she writes that ‘Porter’s literary strategies protected a complex personal vulnerability, and seemed to reassure him of his superiority’. But Porter had no strategy to deal with Japan’s later outstripping of Australia. Clearly, Porter’s satire has become two-pronged and these Japanese characters represent not simply a lost world, but a lost sense of self. Even the brothel street with the wind chimes was sufficiently exotic to remain a feature of nostalgic longing. What is wrong with ‘New Japan’ is that it is real, palpably real, and its characters’ aping of Western ways is a form of decadence (the flip-side of nostalgic fantasies).

With reference to the truism that opened this discussion, Porter’s cultural representations do legitimate power in various ways, but they also lay bare the workings of power, especially in Occupied Japan. But what if—as I have tried to suggest—we see these texts not as cultural, but as self-representations? The paradox of cultural representation as self-representation is discussed in David Richards’s Masks of Difference. Richards argues that the self-fashioning within cultural representations is in fact never complete, but ‘partial, temporary, fragmentary and fragile’. Clearly Porter’s writings about Japan imply an imperialist position, but one that is based on an ongoing and complicated model of selfhood and nationalism, the fragility of which is apparent in both its nostalgic and disillusioned instances. While seemingly conscious of the two-way economy (albeit unequal) of transculturation, Porter’s Japanese writings employ a form of romance that illustrates a version of the Orientalist romance, in which loss and nostalgia are the central motifs. Porter’s autobiographical nostalgia is inextricably linked with a nostalgic construction of Japan. It is surely significant that in one of Porter’s last books, an evocation of his home-town of Bairnsdale, expressions of nostalgia and Orientalism occur briefly, but simultaneously: ‘Oriental poppies and apple trees and Frau Karl Druschki roses? Too late; gone years ago’.

Inevitably one must ask if Porter is representative or exceptional. Porter’s writing could be seen in generic terms as nostalgic Orientalism. There are no doubt related works produced from other sites of colonial (or pseudo-colonial) engagement, such as America/China, France/Africa, and Britain/India (and it need not always come politically from the right; I am thinking of Derek Jarman’s references to India in his autobiographical works). Works such as Porter’s show us the contradictions of literary and imperialist subjectivities. They are at once defined
by and corroded by the other. However much the writing subject may berate the image of the other, the other can also be the source of a nostalgic longing, especially a maternal longing.

When these cultural representations are already self-representations we can see more clearly that power is not the only trope (and material condition) at stake. Porter’s Orientalism, his disillusionment and the relationship between mother and other, show that selves crossing cultures are complex entities. Subject positions are not fixed or even simply repetitive. Rather, the figure of the self representing itself within cultural representation is one in which power can be laid bare, or even sometimes be beside the point. If this is the case, then cultural representation can become more than merely accidental self-expression but the locus for real engagement with the self, however difficult, idiosyncratic, nostalgic or even ugly that may be.

3 Contemporary Novelists, p. 996.
6 Ibid., pp. 13–14.
7 Ibid., p. 15.
8 Ibid., p. 87.
9 Ibid., p. 222.
11 Ibid., pp. 14, 10.
14 Ibid., p. 277.
15 Ibid., p. 269.
16 Ibid., p. 3.
17 Ibid., p. 277.
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19 ‘Australian Perspectives on the Near North’, p. 133.