

JAPANESE ESSAY – 20th Century

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Overview: Japanese Society and Culture in the Twentieth Century

Japan in the twentieth century experienced a degree of dramatic— and traumatic— change virtually unparalleled in world history. Ushering in the century as a newly-minted imperial power under the aegis of a 'divine' Emperor Meiji, Japan ending the century as an established post-imperial, post-industrial power. But the nation's modernization agenda, forged during the Meiji period (1868-1912) took a dramatic turn in mid-century, in the form of an imperial expansionism that ended in war and cataclysmic defeat. Yet this very defeat eventuated in an extraordinary postwar reconstruction and renaissance that was set in motion by the American victors, under the aegis of their Occupation regime (1945-52).

In other words, twentieth-century Japanese history is conveniently reducible to a pre-war, imperialist component; a postwar, 'de-imperialized' component; and the intervening war, which began in China and ended with the nation's unconditional surrender in August 1945, in the wake of two atomic bombings. Prior to the militarist regime of the 1930s, however, Japanese society and culture were surprisingly open and vibrant. This was especially true during the Taishō period (1912-26), which was marked by unfettered creativity in the arts and a free and open society. 'Tokyo chic' was all the rage, as evidenced by the thriving popular media (including film and radio) and consumer marketplace. Notwithstanding the official rhetoric of imperial divinity and Japanese exceptionalism, Japan was a seemingly 'normal' nation, with a secure place in the global order.

The war put an end to all of this. And so it was that nearly a century following Japan's first encounter with the United States— and Commodore Perry's ultimatum to the Shogunal regime— Japan found itself subject to the Occupation authority of General Douglas MacArthur. Its cities had been destroyed, its economic and social infrastructure was in ruins, and its fate hung in the balance. In order to ensure the end of a virulent Japanese militarism, a new Constitution was put in place in 1947, which sought to establish an egalitarian and peaceful society— women were accorded equal rights, under a modern political and social order, and the nation renounced the use of military force. No longer a Shinto divinity, Emperor Hirohito was 'repurposed' as Japan's patriarchal figurehead and the imperial system was allowed to remain.

Japan's economic resurgence, as of the 1960s, is well known, as is its dominance on the world economic stage in the 1980s— the 'Japan as Number One' era. There was a corresponding resurgence on the cultural level, with an outpouring of literature, art, and film that has earned international recognition since the 1950s. And Japanese pop culture products have long been at the center of the global marketplace.

Japan's exuberant national pride, though, has diminished in the interim, with a relatively stagnant economy as of the 1990s and looming problems that offer no easy solution— for instance, the demographic 'time-bomb' that forecasts steady population decline and raises the question of the nation's viability. Then there is Japan's role in East Asia— the fraught relationship with China, for instance, and the existential threat posed by a nuclear-armed North Korea.

What, then, of Japan in the twenty-first century? What of the perennial 'identity' question, and the schizophrenic identification of Japan as both perpetrator and victim of the Pacific War? Then there is the nuclear question— and the specter of Hiroshima and Nagasaki recently revisited in the wake of the 2001 Fukushima catastrophe. One thing is certain: We can look to Japan's writers, artists, and performers to grapple with these questions in their respective ways.

The Place of Essay Writing in Twentieth-Century Japan

Once established during the Heian period, most notably through the *Pillow Book* writings of Sei Shōnagon, the essay has remained a privileged literary genre with a time-honored classical pedigree. But the style

and substance of essay writing underwent a major transformation in the modern period. The Meiji period witnessed a new voice for the literary essay, which centered on the author's engagement with the rapidly-transforming societal and cultural milieu and the imperial nation's new political and global circumstance.

By the early twentieth century, a distinctive genre of modern essay— *kindai zuihitsu*— drew the attention of writers across the literary spectrum. Ranging from political and philosophical discourse to personal and lyrical reflection, the modern essay privileged the voice of the narrator and the discursive flow of formal commentary, impressionist observation, and personal reflection.

Essay writing, however, was not restricted to the literary elite within the Tokyo *bundan*. The multifarious periodical press solicited essays covering a broad range of topics— literary and otherwise. Of particular note are the writings of politically radical Japanese women who recounted their travails in the face of the unyielding and punitive imperial state. The essays of spirited, self-aware, and fearless women such as Fukuda Hideko (1865-1927), Kanno Sugako (1881-1911), and Kaneko Fumiko (1903-26)— some of whom gave their lives in order to advance the cause of social reform and women's liberation— belie the pernicious stereotype of compliant, submissive Japanese womanhood.

Within the *bundan* literary community, writers were expected to hold forth in a personal voice on all sorts of topics— and they were paid for their efforts. Incidentally, much of this material originated as interviews subsequently transcribed by the interviewer and published in the periodical press.

One noteworthy category of pre-war essay is the so-called *bunmeiron*— observations on modern Japanese society and politics. Noted writers such as Natsume Sôseki, Shimazaki Tôson, and Nagai Kafû wrote probing, often skeptical assessments of the temper of the times and the circumstance of their fellow Japanese. Kafû, for his part, emerged as a strident critic of Japanese modernization and its tawdry, dehumanizing cityscapes. His essays conjure a nostalgic affection for the byways and forgotten locales of an earlier Tokyo.

Predictably, the dramatic course of Japan's 20th-century history is reflected in the themes and narrative voices of its essayists. The rise of militarism and literary censorship in the 1930s severely restricted freedom of expression, and the post-war construction of a free society witnessed a resurgence of essay writing, in line with other literary and cultural products.

The Convergence of Essay and Fiction

One crucial feature of the modern Japanese essay is its close affinity with personal fiction— especially the I-novel (*shishôsetsu*) genre— and with the various genres of life writing (autobiography, diary, and the like). Accounts of personal reflection and retrospection, presented in a typically rambling, discursive manner, defy the establishment of clear-cut genre boundaries. For instance, the work of authors such as Shiga Naoya (1883-1971) is marked by a lyrical connection between a sensitive, empathic narrator and one's natural and social environs that is seamlessly fictive, authentically personal, and lyrically elevated.

A Gathering of Essayists

What follows is a sampler of noteworthy Japanese essay writing that spans much of the 20th century. None of the authors was a professional essayist, but each had a strong penchant for essay writing marked by a distinctive personal voice. Three of them— Kôda Aya, Mukôda Kuniko, and Sakai Junko— are notable woman writers of the postwar and contemporary period. Sakai's essay on the essay genre itself, an homage to Sei Shônagon's classical precursor, is excerpted below.

Incidentally, Aya is the daughter of Kôda Rohan, a towering figure of Meiji literature. Many of her personal essays reflect upon her conflicted relationship with her father.

Two of the essay selections— by Kawabata and Ôe— are drawn from the addresses they delivered on the occasion of their being awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. These landmark essays can be said to express two fundamental— and strongly contrasting— approaches to understanding modern Japan.

Kikuchi Kan(1888-1948)

Selections from *My Moral Precepts for Everyday Life*(1926)

Whenever I am treated to dinner, I eat as much as I can. At such times, I do not feel the need to comment on things not to my taste, but I always mention explicitly whatever I think is delicious.

I strive to keep my promises at all costs; otherwise, social existence would not be possible. As such, I have never broken a promise except in cases when I truly had no choice. Come to think of it, though, there is one category of promise that I have indeed broken— my promising to finish a manuscript on time. Here I am indeed guilty of not keeping my word.

If asked to critique a work that is simply bad, I'd rather die than say it is good— no matter how much it might hurt the writer. But if it happens to be even passably good, I will give it exorbitant praise, so as to encourage the writer.

(Based on Carter, *Columbia Anthology of Japanese Essays*, pp 414-16)

Tanizaki Jun'ichirô(1886-1965)

From *In Praise of Shadows*(1934)

Every time I am shown to an old, dimly lit, and impeccably clean toilet in a Buddhist temple in Nara or Kyoto, I am impressed with the singular virtues of Japanese architecture. Indeed, the Japanese toilet is a place of spiritual repose. . . No words can describe the sensation as one sits in the dim light, lost in meditation. . .

The genius of our ancestors was that by cutting off the light from interior spaces they imparted to this world of shadows a quality of mystery and depth superior to that of any painting or ornament. . .

Why should this propensity to seek beauty in darkness be so strong for us Orientals? The West, too, has known a time before the advent of electricity, gas, and petroleum, and yet so far as I know, Westerners have never been disposed to delight in the world of shadows. . .

And yet I am aware of, and grateful for, the benefits of the modern age. I have written this essay out of a desire to call back, at least for literature, this world of shadows that we are losing. . . Perhaps we may be allowed at least this one mansion, constructed of words, where we can turn off the glaring electric lights and delight in that which is only dimly visible.

(Based on Lopate, *The Art of the Personal Essay*, pp 337, 347-48, 353-54, 361)

Uchida Hyakken(1889-1971)

From *A Long Fence*(1938)

It's still cold out, so the time for peeing along the roadside hasn't yet arrived. I probably shouldn't be talking about doing this sort of thing in the city, no matter how balmy the weather. But even if I myself manage to control the urge, the fact is that I do catch sight of other men indulging themselves in this manner. This must explain the signs that adorn every fence of any length, enjoining people not to pee there.

I'm reminded of the droll haiku that goes as follows: 'A long fence/ Suddenly I feel/ The urge to pee' (*nagai hei/ tsui shôben ga/ shitake nari*). A clever little verse— though I must admit that if I happen to recall the poem while walking by a long fence, I feel that certain urge come over me.
(Based on Carter, p 424)

Kôda Aya (1904-1990)

From *Kitchen*(1966)

Counting up the years, I am amazed at how much time has gone by since I first started working in the kitchen— forty-eight years, to be exact. I was thirteen when I started helping out, and by age sixteen I'd become a full-fledged cook. I've been in the kitchen ever since and find myself wondering how long I shall continue to stand here, washing the vegetables, wielding my knife, and repeating the same routines. . . Yet I must confess that doing these tasks fills me with a sense of relaxation and calm— of sheer enjoyment, truth be told. . .

What, then, was my frame of mind as I worked in the kitchen? For one thing, it served to hide my private feelings of desire and resentment, my jealousies and transgressions, my indifference and anger. Through these mundane activities of a normal woman, I came to understand the calm that follows perseverance, the relief that follows grief, the guilt that follows anger, the emptiness that follows jealousy. While I was busily preparing fish or radishes, I was also doing the woman's work of the heart. The kitchen was my schoolroom.

(Based on Carter,pp 468-69)

Kawabata Yasunari(1899-1972)

From *Japan the Beautiful and Myself*(Nobel Prize essay, 1968)

In the spring, cherry blossoms
In the summer, the cuckoo
In the autumn, the moon
In the winter, the snow— cold and clear

Winter moon, coming from the clouds
To keep me company
Is the wind piercing?
Is the snow cold?

The first of these poems is by the priest Dôgen (1200-1253) and bears the title 'Innate Spirit.' The second is by the priest Myôe (1173-1232). When I am asked for specimens of my handwriting, it is these poems that I tend to choose. . .

When we see the beauty of the snow, when we see the beauty of the full moon, when we see the beauty of the cherries in bloom— in short, when we are awakened by the beauty of the four seasons, it is then that we think most of those close to us and want them to share the pleasure. . . The Japanese tradition has given us words evoking the changing seasons and the myriad manifestations of nature— and of the human spirit. . .

In Zen there is no worship of images. . . The Zen disciple sits for long hours silent and motionless, with eyes closed. Presently he enters a state of impassivity, free from all ideas and thoughts. He departs from the self and enters the realm of nothingness. This is not the nothingness or emptiness of the West. It is rather the reverse— a universe of the spirit in which everything communicates freely with everything, transcending bounds, limitless.

(Based on Kawabata, pp 74, 69-68, 56 [reverse pagination])

Ôe Kenzaburô(1935-)

From *Japan the Dubious and Myself* (Nobel Prize essay, 1994)

I believe that an important reason for Kawabata's notably ambiguous and obscure Nobel lecture was his indifference to the fact that he was addressing an audience of Europeans and Americans. His speech unfolded a grand panorama of aestheticism that he embraced— an aestheticism that he drew from time-honored Japanese classics and traditional practices. My sense is that Kawabata had abandoned all desire to actually communicate the qualities of 'beautiful Japan' to his audience. And I equally doubt his interest in having his fellow Japanese understand what he was talking about. . .

The irony remains that Kawabata himself fully understood that such a Japan did not exist. He had constructed an imaginary Japan and an apparition of the beauty it embodied. And by doing so, he shut out the real world and severed all ties with living and breathing human beings. . .

I therefore believe that it is essential for Japanese to radically re-created the literature that we have been producing ever since our nation's modernization. We must produce a literature that can communicate with the West— and with the peoples of Asia as well. . . The world must know that the Japanese people cannot remain complacent with outmoded notions such as 'Japan the Beautiful and Myself.'

(Based on Ôe, pp 317-18, 324)

Mukôda Kuniko(1929-81)

From *Looking for Gloves*(1976)

Since childhood, I have been picky and vain. I like only the finer things and often craved what was beyond my reach. Never satisfied with what I had, I was always on the lookout for something better. Whether some toy or a sweater, I wanted only the best. I remember adults frowning at me and saying that a child should not be so obstinate. . .

Yes, I'm embarrassed to admit that my worldly desires are quite strong. I want fine clothes, fine food, fine paintings. Nothing less will do. If it crosses my mind that I want a black cat, I've got to have one. I can't be satisfied until I get what I want. This ceaseless craving bothered me when I was younger, and I resolved to live on a higher, more spiritual plane. But I didn't make much progress, on account of the nagging desires that got in my way. Much as I thought about seeking help, I finally gave up, once and for all, on the notion of trying to reform myself. . .

Then there is my seemingly endless quest for the perfect pair of gloves. For years I've searched in vain for just the right pair. And I will continue, undaunted, until I get what I want.

(Based on Carter, pp 483, 485, 490)

Sakai Junko(1966-)

From *On Zuihitsu*(2004)

Sei Shônagon is widely regarded as Japan's first essayist. One wonders why she decided to write essays rather than tales. I've concluded that she has the disposition of an essayist. To my mind, the difference between the essayist and novelist is akin to the difference between a sushi chef and one who prepares meals for formal dining— the *kaiseki* chef. . .

The sushi chef, when he surveys his ingredients lined up neatly in their case, wondering how things will work out when the guest arrives— here is the very essence of being an essayist. Unless asked by a guest, the sushi chef will say nothing about the effort that went into preparing and combining the ingredients, nor will he give directions concerning how to eat the items he presents, or in what order. Yet the sushi chef does pay careful attention to what and how the guest eats. And depending on how the guest meets the challenge, the distance between guest and chef will either achieve a degree of intimacy or become hopelessly remote. Such is the relationship between essayist and reader.

(Based on Carter, pp 532-34)

Conclusion

Sharing the borders of fiction and autobiography and marked by a diversity of narrative voice, theme, and tone, 'essay' is notoriously difficult to identify as a discrete genre. Yet such writing has the capacity to reveal much about the author and the prevailing social and cultural milieu. In short, essay writing provides a window onto identity— ranging from the intimately personal to the more broadly national and, perhaps, universal.

It is noteworthy that the male-centered essay genre of the imperial pre-war period gave way to the more egalitarian postwar and contemporary production of essays and other personal narratives. Overall, though, the propensity for Japanese writers to favor relatively short, episodic, and discursive narratives has long endured. Yet the rapid transition to electronic media, graphic and imagistic display, and social networking as platforms for such personal expression may be said either to have enriched the possibilities for personal expression or impoverished its narrative qualities.

Sources

Carter, Steven (ed. and transl.), *Columbia Anthology of Japanese Essays* (Columbia, 2014) [Material for this article was drawn from this excellent source.]

Kawabata Yasunari, *Japan the Beautiful and Myself* (Kodansha, 1969)

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Questions and Issues

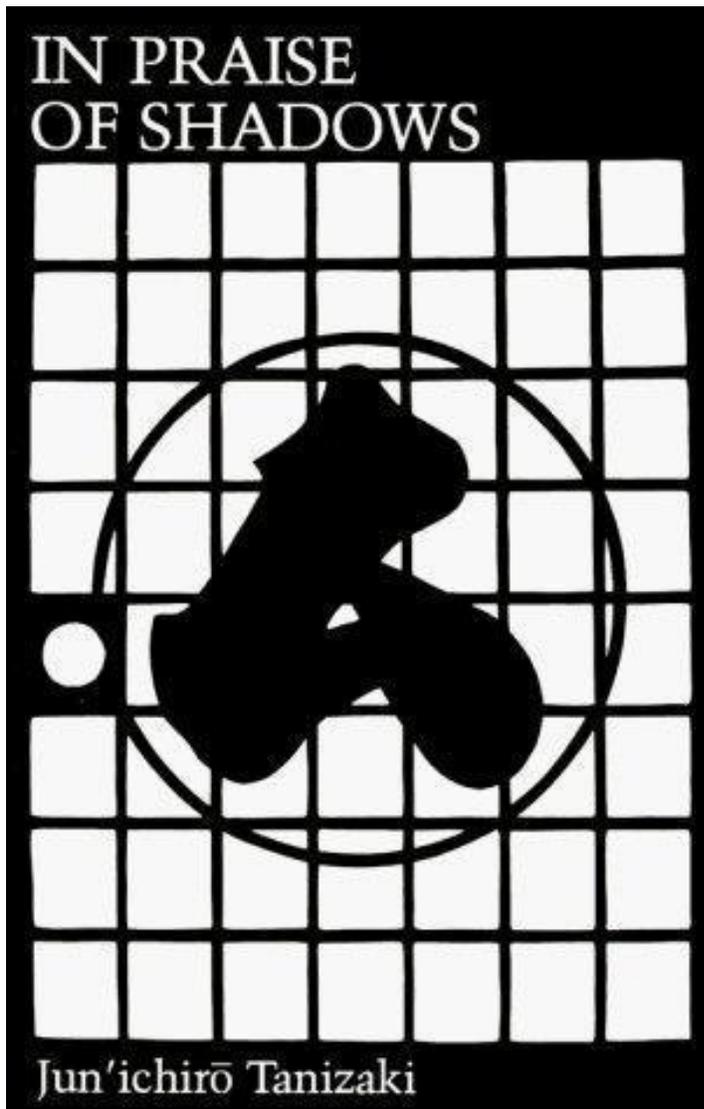
What do you regard as especially appealing about the essay form? What are its drawbacks?

Which of the Japanese examples presented above did you particularly like? Which did you dislike? What factors are involved here?

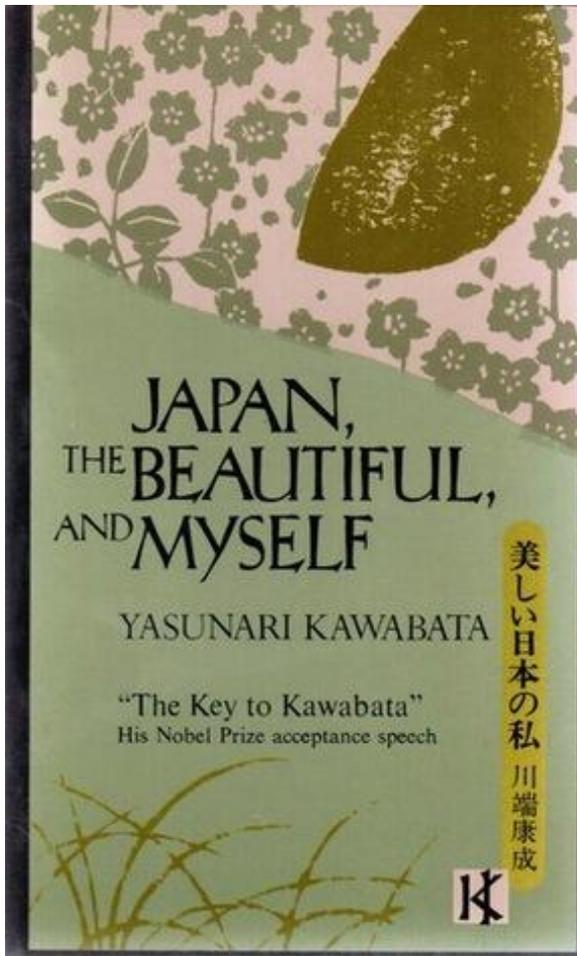
In what sense can the Kawabata and Ôe essays be said to represent a fundamental binary quality of Japan and its people?

What do you consider the most productive and valuable aspect of essay writing? How would you define its borders and its essential qualities?

Images



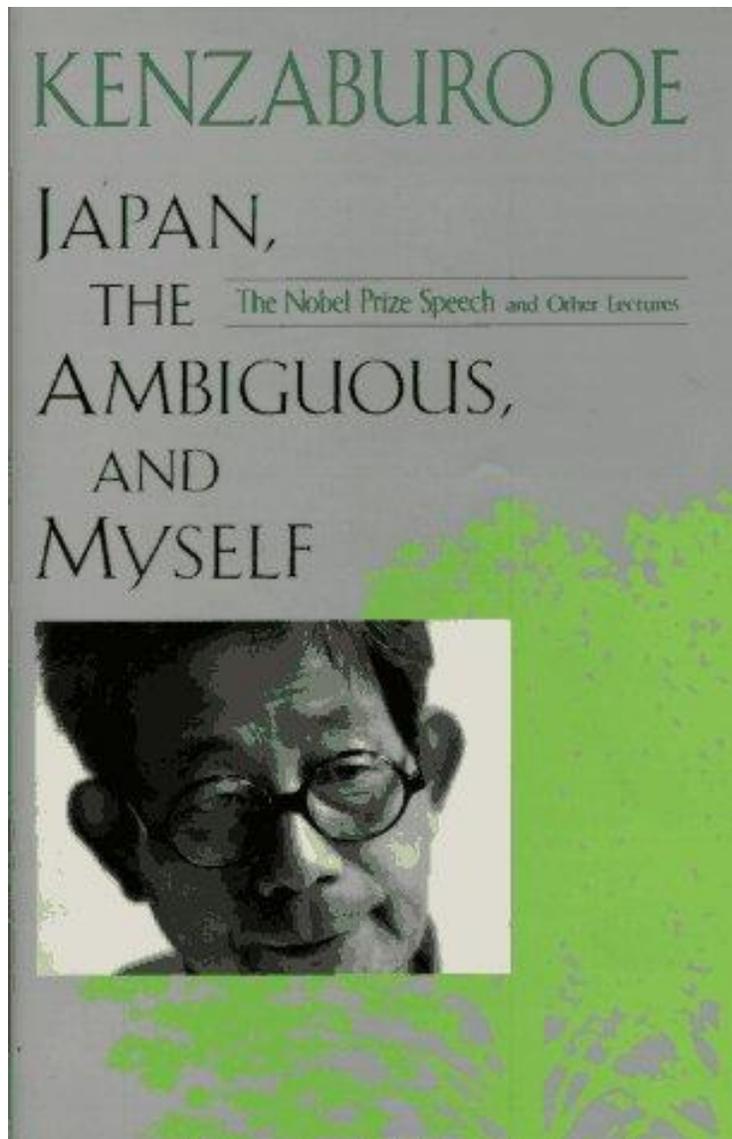
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Ôe Kenzaburô, Nobel Prize speech/ essay (Source: Goodreads)