HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

JAPANESE POETRY

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Part I : CLASSICAL PERIOD

Overview: The Classical Age of Japanese Culture

Japan during the Heian period (ca 800-1200) has long been heralded as a Golden Age of classical civilization. Its wide range of literary, artistic, and artisanal products are indelibly associated with courtly style, elegance, aristocratic refinement, and exquisite aesthetic sensitivity. Overall, Heian arts and culture are suffused with what may be termed a feminine aura of emotional depth, nuance, and elegant understatement. This in part reflects the fact that a number of their treasured products are the work of aristocratic women who served in the imperial court.
Aside from literary pursuits, Heian courtiers indulged themselves in a variety of creative activities— music and dance, painting, calligraphy, textile design, and so forth. Much of this work reflects the influence of Chinese prototypes and models— part of the centuries-long process of absorbing the language, political institutions, and arts of China. A key inspiration emerged from the Chinese-based Buddhist sects that took root among the Japanese elites and became widely patronized. This led to the eventual mastery of Buddhist religious arts— sculpture, painting, ritual objects, sutra copying, and of course architecture.

In short, Heian culture, in its stunning variety, would become an enduring civilizational legacy, inspiring artists, writers, and craftsmen over the centuries. A fundamental aspect of Japanese national identity, to the present day, can be said to tap into Heian classical roots.

Heian Literature and the Role of Poetry

Heian literature both mirrored and celebrated the world of the court aristocracy. Courtly sensibility and bearing were highly valued, and these would be channeled chiefly through poetry and lyrical expression. Earlier experiments with Chinese-inspired poetry led to the primacy of the *waka* poetic form— a thirty-one syllable lyric in a 5-7-5-7-7 syllable prosody. *Waka* poetry, which aimed at the subtle evocation of one's emotional and aesthetic sensitivity through the use of natural and seasonal imagery, served as a model of interpersonal communication and an index of one's breeding and cultural sophistication. Prose writing across the spectrum of genres would typically incorporate *waka* in order to express *kokoro*— one's inner being. And court poets routinely gathered to exchange poems, critique them, and engage in poetic competitions. The pinnacle of poetic recognition was having one's poetry included in one of the official *waka* anthologies commissioned by the Emperor himself.

Poetic expression thus emerged within the Imperial court over thirteen centuries ago as a key index of one's character, and the Heian tradition of *waka*-based court poetry occupies a privileged place in the canon of Japanese classical literature.

Roots: The *Man'yôshû*

The heartland of Japanese poetry can be traced to the eight-century Nara period, a time of intense poetic activity among the aristocratic class, who by that time had studied the great Chinese poets and crafted

their own verse as well— in both Chinese *and* Japanese. The Nara courtiers aimed at demonstrating the 'coming of age' of Japanese poetry through an anthology of vast proportion— the *Man'yôshû*, A Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves (ca 760), comprising well over four thousand verses. Meant to represent the entire range of the native poetic voice— from the anonymous, seemingly crude efforts of ordinary folk to the highly crafted work of court poets— the *Man'yôshû* speaks to the exquisite refinement and sophistication of these early poets. Their most celebrated figures— Hitomaro, Akahito, Okura, Tabito, and Yakamochi, among others— succeeded in channeling the grandeur and artistry of admired Chinese verse through their own language and circumstance, in a powerful and resonant voice. The cardinal virtue of *makoto*— a sense of unalloyed sincerity and unmannered emotionalism— would subsequently be attributed to this great collection and, by extension, to the age for which it stands.

The *Man'yôshû* contains many examples of 'long verse'— *chôka*— a genre that would gradually be displaced by the shorter *waka* form. The acknowledged master of this longer form, and a figure renowned as something akin to Japan's first poet laureate, is Hitomaro. His work has been celebrated for a depth of spirit and moral integrity within an intimate, personal compass. One of his *waka* poems conveys something of the subtlety, economy, and understatement of Japanese lyrical expression:

honobono to	In the dim, dim light
Akashi no ura no	Of the early morning mist
asagiri ni	On Akashi Bay
shimagakureyuku	A boat fades behind the isles—
fune wo shi zo omou	My heart following in its wake

Other *Man'yôshû* poets favored a more direct and impassioned personalism. Okura was such a poet. His longer narrative poems reflect upon life's ephemerality, on poverty and aging, and on human vanity and self-deception. But his most moving *chôka*, composed as an elegy to his deceased son Furuhi, expresses the raw, searing grief of a bereaved parent:

> Then suddenly a mighty storm blew up,
> Caught us unawares, overwhelmed us with its blast.
> Helpless, distraught, not knowing what to do,
> I tucked back my sleeves, I took in my hand
> A clear, spotless mirror.
> With upturned face, I beseeched the gods of the sky.
> Forehead to the ground, I implored the gods of the earth. . .
>
> But though I begged them in frantic supplication. . .
> His body wasted, changing little by little.
> He uttered no more the words he had spoken
> With each new morning.
> And his life came to an end.
>
> I reeled in agony, stamped my feet, screamed aloud,
> Cast myself down, looked up to heaven, beat my breast.
> I have lost my son, the child I loved so dearly.
> Is this what life is about? [Based on Carter, TJP 37, 49-50]

In subsequent periods, the *Man'yôshû* would assume canonical status as the repository of a pure Japanese spirit, unsullied by foreign cultural borrowing. The work would serve as a touchstone for nativist evocations of Japanese uniqueness and superiority, to help bolster a sense of national identity and collective memory.

Heian Court Poetry and the *Kokinshû*

Inspired by their *Man'yôshû* poetic predecessors, ninth-century Kyoto court poets gravitated toward *waka* composition, embracing the thirty-one syllable form with a dedication that would transcend mere

avocation and become a way of life— a *michi*. What is more, the shared passion for poetic expression was such that correspondence, especially among lovers, would include the obligatory exchange of *waka*. In stark contrast to the mundane world of political and economic affairs, Heian literature attests to the 'soft power' of poetry as a gateway into a transcendent realm of beauty.

Yet the Heian court poets did indeed have a political agenda of their own. Their dedication to virtuosity sought a tangible form of recognition. This came in the form of the *chokusenshû*— imperially-commissioned anthologies of *waka*. The first such anthology, compiled under the imperial aegis by the poet Tsurayuki, was the *Kokinshû* (Collection of Poems Old and New, 905). The collection's carefully organized sequence of one thousand *waka* poems, centering on the two key categories of seasonal and love poetry, became the standard for poetic anthologies produced over the centuries.

Tsurayuki's preface to the *Kokinshû* famously enunciates the transcendent value of lyrical expression: 'Poetry moves heaven and earth, stirs the feelings of the invisible gods and spirits, smooths the relations of men and women, and calms the hearts of fierce warriors.' The two key terms here are *kokoro*— depth of emotion, interiority; and *kotoba*— proper poetic diction. Hereafter, Japanese poetry would be composed— and judged— with respect to its proper balance of these essential components.

The special place of nature as a touchstone of Japanese culture, with ancient ties to Shintô myth and ritual, is reflected in the ubiquitous role of the seasons in its classical poetry— not to mention pictorial arts, textile design, *ikebana*, lacquer ware, and so forth. Spring and autumn were accorded particular prominence, on account of their aesthetically-pleasing 'transitional' qualities, and *waka* on these lyrically rich seasons have been prized over the centuries.

Narihira

Among the ranks of Heian court poets, several stand out— Ariwara no Narihira, Ono no Komachi, and Tsurayuki himself. Narihira's stature rivaled that of his great predecessor Hitomaro, but for very different reasons. The following verse, among Narihira's best-known *waka*, is a miniature masterpiece of lyrical subjectivity, featuring a poetic speaker who expresses the appropriately elegant tone of artful indirection.

tsuki ya aranu	Is this not the moon?
haru ya mukashi no	And is this not the springtime,
haru naranu	The springtime of old?
waga mi hitotsu wa	Only this body of mine
moto no mi ni shite	The same body as before [TJP 80]

Narihira's artful ambiguity has led many to judge the *Kokinshû*, and Heian court poetry overall, as overly 'precious'— excessively mannered and affected. Yet this poet ranked as a cultural paragon. And despite the virtually nonexistent biographical record, Narihira and his poetry would be immortalized in an anonymous classic of the mid-tenth century— *Ise monogatari* (Tales of Ise, 950).

Tales of Ise

Tales of Ise is a hybrid work. Bearing the *monogatari* label, it comprises 125 short narrative episodes centering on Narihira's legendary romantic affairs. But each episode is highlighted by one or more of Narihira's *waka* compositions, the effect of which is to render the work as a cleverly-wrought poetic anthology. It also bears consideration as a form of fictionalized literary biography. The following is a representative episode:

> Once in the days after the move from Nara, when people were still not settled in the new capital, a certain man [*aru otoko*] discovered a woman living in the western part of the city. She was charming to look at, and her disposition was even more delightful than her appearance. It seemed that she was not single, but the man made love to her anyway, even though he was an honorable fellow. His conscience must have bothered him after he got home, because he sent her this poem. It was early in the Third Month and a drizzling rain was falling.

oki mo sezu	Having passed the night
ne mo sede yoru wo	Neither waking nor sleeping,
akashite wa	I have spent the day
haru no mono tote	Brooding and watching the rain—
nagamekurashitsu	The unending rains of spring
	[McCullough, CJP 41]

In this second episode of *Ise*, the 'certain man' (*aru otoko*) is understood to represent Narihira, given that he had composed the featured verse— one that had previously appeared in the *Kokinshû*. *Ise*'s author removed it from that context and placed it within this series of narratives concerning the amorous exploits of Narihira's surrogate, the 'certain man.'

Komachi

Narihira's female counterpart, Ono no Komachi, combined poetic virtuosity with an explicitly sensuous and passionate persona.

ito semete	When carried away
koshiki toki wa	By passionate desire
nubatama no	I wear my bedclothes inside out—
yoru no koromo wo	Dark as the darkest
kaeshite zo kiru	Pitch-black night

A fixed star in the Japanese literary firmament, Komachi has been endlessly anthologized, appropriated, and depicted in iconic images. She has figured as the protagonist of no less than five Noh plays, not to mention film and *anime* adaptations. The Komachi legend contrasts the passionate young lover and her transformation into a wretched old woman reduced to bitter memories and unrequited longings. Be that as it may, Ono no Komachi's poetic achievement is of the very highest order.

The work of Heian poets is a vast tapestry, and it should not be judged summarily. Yet the weight of its formal rules and practices has led some to blame Tsurayuki for having in effect strangled the life out of Japanese poetry.

As the Heian era progressed and the Kyoto aristocracy grew increasingly removed from affairs of state and the world beyond the capital, courtiers became ever more dedicated to their poetic pursuits. This would play out in the establishment of rival poetic factions and in the proliferation of poetic gaming and competition. Over the ensuing centuries, the court-centered poetic world would take on a curiously feudal quality, marked by closely-guarded poetic 'secrets' and at times embarrassingly competitive and petty squabbles. With the modern period, however, factional rivalries and hair-splitting trivialities would give way to an expansive field of poetic expression that continues to draw inspiration from the time-honored *waka* medium.

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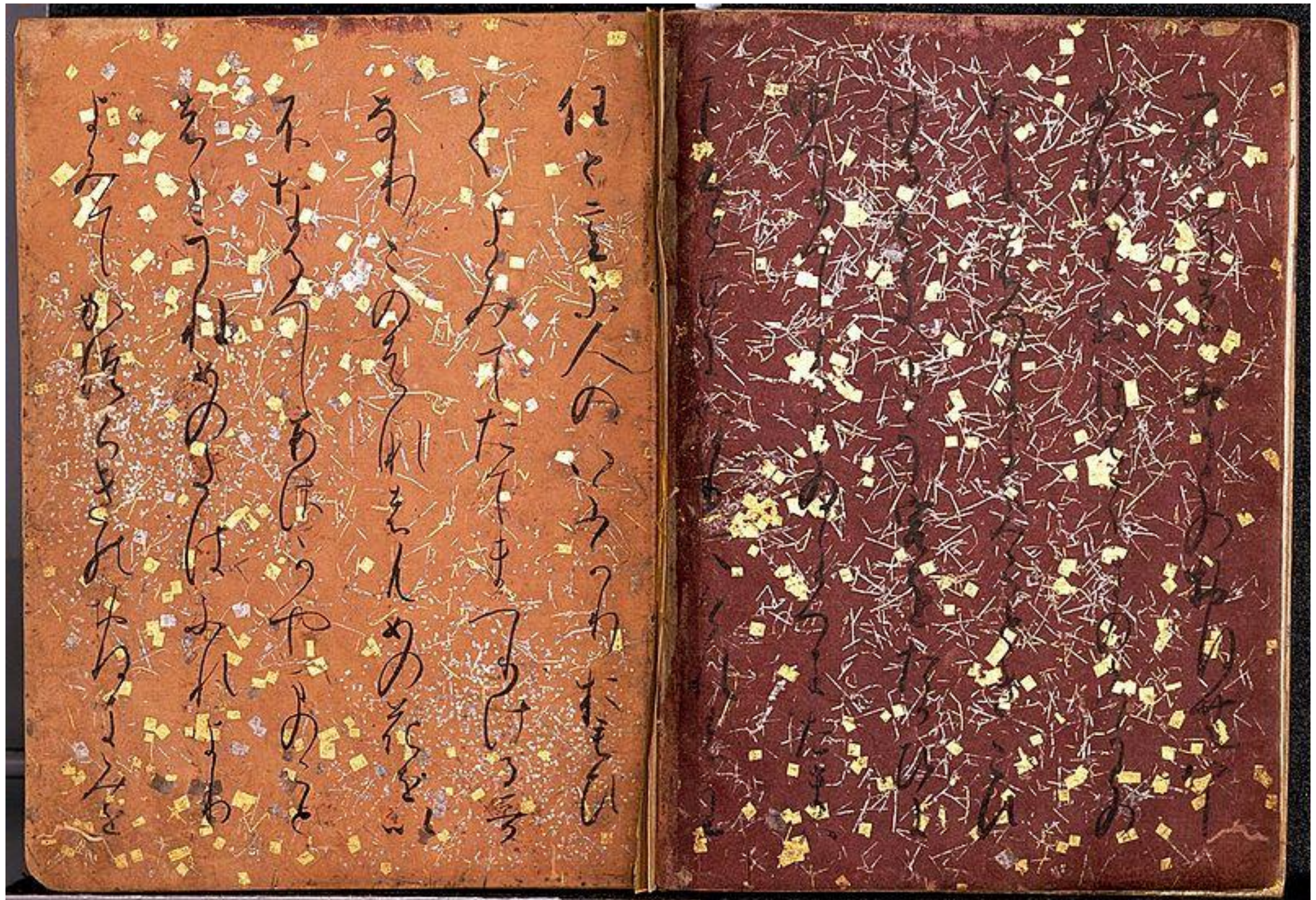
Discussion Questions and Topics

What aspects of classical Japanese poetry do you find particularly attractive? What do you regard as most daunting and difficult to understand? In other words, what appears to qualify as 'uniquely Japanese,' as opposed to that which strikes you as 'universal'?

Consider the ways in which seasonal and natural imagery were used to suggest, rather than 'proclaim,' one's feelings and emotions. Give thought to the strong contrast with the more 'unmediated' personalism that marks Western poetry. How might this reflect our privileging of direct emotional expression?

Classical poetry, in its heyday, was not regarded as 'literature' per se, but was seen as a fusion of artful calligraphy, an elegant choice of paper, a skillful manner of reciting the verse in question— and, of course, the proper choice of word and image to suit the season and the poetic occasion. Are there vestiges of such refined artistry in the contemporary world, or is this precisely part of the exotic, other-worldly aura of the Heian court and similar cultural 'utopias'?

Images



Selection of verse from the oldest extant complete edition of the *Kokinshû* (ca 1120). Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Woodblock print depiction, by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, of Narihira looking for
the ghost of Komachi on an autumn night (1891). Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Woodblock print depiction of Ono no Komachi as an old woman, by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, 1886. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

PART II : MEDIEVAL POETRY

Overview: The Medieval Age of Japanese Culture (1200-1600)

The gradual decline of the Heian court in the twelfth century corresponded with the rise of the warrior (*bushi*) clans and the dawn of a centuries-long feudal history. Medieval Japan was governed by two parallel political centers— the imperial center in Kyoto and a new warrior administration, the shogunate. The period was marked by the growing power of provincial warrior chiefs (*daimyô*) and their domains (*han*), which numbered well over two hundred. The dominance of the samurai class inspired a warrior code— *bushidô*— that extolled the virtues of dedication, loyalty, and honor. Variants of this ideology would have important ramifications in Japan's subsequent history and culture.

The samurai elites emulated the cultural sophistication and artistic dedication of the Kyoto aristocracy. And their embrace of the meditative discipline inspired by Zen Buddhism would generate a distinctive artistry marked by austerity and solemnity, and a mood of evanescence and ephemerality (*mujô*). As with the Heian era, the cultural legacy of Japan's medieval period has long had a privileged place in the nation's collective memory and is well represented in its trove of literary and artistic treasures.

Medieval Literature and the Role of Poetry

The Heian literary legacy was much in evidence during the medieval period. Poetry and lyrical expression remained prominent, but the preëminence of courtly styles and conventions gave way to more austere and introspective modes of expression, reflecting the new social and political order. The dominance of the samurai class gave rise to the production of warrior tales and legends, with the epic *Tale of the Heike* (early 13th century) ultimately rivaling the *Tale of Genji* as a national classic.

While *waka*-centered court poetry remained the dominant literary mode, new forms— in particular, linked verse— reflected the temper of the times. A strongly Buddhistic taste for meditative reflection and solemnity developed, and it would be brilliantly evoked in the uniquely lyrical and other-worldly Noh drama. Hence, Heian and medieval literature— spanning eight centuries of Japan's cultural history— constitute a unique 'yin-yang' complementarity that reflects the complex interplay of Japan's courtly and samurai-based elites.

As with its prose counterparts, medieval Japanese poetry combined established forms and techniques with themes that reflected the prevailing order— 'new wine in old bottles,' in other words. The *Kokinshû* prototype remained the standard for poetic anthologizing. But in 1205, precisely three centuries after its compilation, a new imperial anthology—the *Shinkokinshû* (literally, 'a new *Kokinshû*')— would provide the fresh poetic vintage poured into this time-honored receptacle.

Shinkokinshû

Comprising some two thousand *waka* spanning *Man'yôshû* verse and the work of contemporary poets, the *Shinkokinshû* in effect took Tsurayuki's poetic vehicle and moved it into overdrive. Thanks to the genius of its compiler, retired Emperor Gotoba, its poems were arranged according to a remarkably sophisticated technique of association (of image, language, rhetoric) and progression (through geographic locale and the four seasons). What is more, the poems were sequenced so as to take into account the source poems (*honka*) to which they alluded— a higher-order technique that presumed unusual virtuosity on the part of the audience.

A favorite trope of the early medieval court poets, and one that epitomizes their fascination with the dimly seen, the transitory, the spare and understated— is 'autumn dusk' (*aki no yûgure*). The following verse is one of many contributions to the *Shinkokinshû* by the renowned poet-priest Saigyô:

kokoro naki	Even one who claims
mi ni mo aware wa	To no longer have a heart

shirarekeri	Feels this sad beauty—
shigi tatsu sawa no	Snipes flying up from a marsh
aki no yûgure	On an evening in autumn [Carter, TJP 161]

The lonely, barely visible scene, with its muted, drab landscape, pointedly evokes the classical '*aware*' response of poetic receptivity. With the very next verse in the collection, Fujiwara no Teika provides his own variant on the autumnal theme:

miwataseba	Looking far, I see
hana mo momiji mo	No sign of cherry blossoms
nakarikeri	Or crimson leaves—
ura no tomaya no	A reed-thatched hut on a bay
aki no yûgure	On an evening in autumn [Carter, TJP 197]

With these strikingly unstriking verses, two of Japan's most celebrated poets helped establish a new aesthetic of *sabi*— that which is 'artfully' aging, rusticated, and unadorned. *Sabi* resonates with the Buddhistic ephemerality at the heart of medieval narratives such as *The Tale of the Heike*.

Admirers have exalted the *Shinkokinshû* as a crowning literary achievement. But this is poetry that does not yield to facile understanding, in part owing to the fierce dedication of a circle of poets to an art that held transcendent value and to a level of technical virtuosity that would exclude the uninitiated. For these individuals, poetry was life itself. Here, after all, was the very wellspring of tradition, and as its 'conservators' they were tasked with preserving elite literary cultivation in the face of forces threatening its decline.

Hyakunin isshu

Fujiwara no Teika, a poet of unparalleled reputation and authority, is responsible for compiling a collection that stands as *the* defining work of Japanese poetry. In 1235, Teika compiled the *Hyakunin Isshu*— a chronological ordering of one hundred *waka*, comprising one representative verse by a hundred major poets. In short, this is both a 'greatest hits' collection and a history in microcosm of five centuries of court poetry.

Although Teika tended to favor love poetry, the verse by the Heian poet Ryôzen underscores the lyrical melancholy of the medieval age:

sabishisa ni	Out of loneliness
yado wo tachiidete	I got up and left my hut
nagamureba	Just to look around
izuku mo onaji	But outside it was all the same—
aki no yûgure	Evening in autumn [Carter, TJP 228]

While properly belonging to the *hyakushu uta* genre of hundred-verse sequences, Teika's *Hyakunin Isshu* would become established as a popular game played as part of the traditional New Year's celebration. Featuring a set of playing cards— each with a poem and an image of the poet— the game, which requires a mastery of Teika's collection, entails identifying and claiming the card belonging to the poet whose verse is being recited. The game is still played, although among a declining segment of the population— an example of the 'half-full, half-empty' approach to interpreting the survival of cultural traditions in the modern age.

Renga

Japanese poetry developed early on as a group endeavor, which occupied Heian courtiers as of the ninth century. With the medieval period, a new variant of this group-based poetic practice emerged— the genre of linked verse, *renga*.

Prolonged civil strife in fifteenth century Kyoto forced many courtiers to leave the now-imperiled capital and find positions as tutors and mentors to local elites in the provinces. What grew out of this cross-fertilization process was a uniquely creative 'collaboration,' with poets engaging in a round-robin of alternating verses of 5-7-5 and 7-7. Themes and topics were adopted from the established tradition, but a new artistry of verse linking— *tsukeai*— developed, and over time it engendered a complex and demanding process of rhythmic pacing and variation. The participating poets were expected to mix both 'striking' (*mon*) and 'plain' (*ji*) links, and to vary the relatedness of contiguous links— mixing those with a close association (*shin*) and those with a remote connection (*so*). The cultural emissaries from Kyoto were to serve as mentors and judges.

Renga became widely popular throughout medieval Japan. Among the finest sequences is 'Three Poets at Minase' (*Minase sangin hyakuin*, 1488), the work of the noted poet Sôgi and two disciples, Shôhaku and Sôchô. The first six verses suggest the manner in which these poets related their link to that which preceded it, which gets to the heart of *renga* artistry. The initial 5-7-5, the so-called *hokku*, served in effect as the first domino in the hundred-link sequence.

Hokku:
Some snow still remains
As haze moves low on the slopes
Toward evening (Sôgi)

#2
Flowing water, far away—
And plum-scented village (Shôhaku)

#3
Wind off the river
Blows through a clump of willows—
And spring appears (Sôchô)

#4
A boat being poled along,
Sounding clear at break of day (Sôgi)

#5
Still there, somewhere—
The moon off behind the mist
Traversing the night (Shôhaku)

#6
Out on frost-laden fields
Autumn has come to its end (Sôchô) [Carter, TJP 307-8]

Suggesting a Zen-inspired exercise in ego deflation, the art of *renga* envisions a finished product whose collaborative integrity would exceed the sum of its individual parts. This fusion of poetic cultivation, intuitive interaction among like-minded practitioners, and mastery of complex rules and techniques calls to mind jazz improvisation at a virtuoso level of group performance. Yet there remains the seeming paradox of an art form hinging upon creative synergy and spontaneity yet requiring highly restrictive and complex rules and procedures.

The formal practice of *renga* essentially disappeared as of the twentieth century. Yet poets— in Japan and around the world— continue to link verse in new ways using contemporary media and methods. And what is more, not all classical traditions of the medieval period have vanished. For one, Noh theater is very much alive and well.

Noh

Rooted in the aristocratic culture of Kyoto during the second shogunal epoch, the so-called Muromachi period (ca 1340-1570), Noh is an austere, elegant, richly symbolic theatrical form that integrates acting, dance, musical performance, religious ritual, and lyrical composition. Its repertoire largely derives from the received literary tradition— notably, dramatic episodes from *Genji* and *Heike*.

Noh is ripe for iconic representation— the ornately robed, masked protagonist (*shite*), moving with grace and solemnity across a bare stage to the accompaniment of a flute and a drum, with a chorus intoning the text almost as a solemn liturgical rite. The parallels with classical Greek drama are striking. And in its austerity, quasi-religious symbology, technical virtuosity, and spiritual elevation, Noh has a strong affinity with the late-medieval tea ceremony (*chanoyu*).

Although fundamentally a performance tradition, Noh is built upon a fixed repertoire of texts. Largely the work of the great fifteenth-century playwright Zeami, Noh texts provide actors and musicians with the vehicle for a unique aesthetic synergy. And they themselves are counted among the treasures of Japanese literature.

Experiencing actual Noh performance is of the essence, but a textual example will serve to convey its flavor. Moved by the *Heike* tale of Atsumori, the hapless Taira lad who meets his tragic end at the hands of Kumagai, Zeami composed a play that both retells the episode and gives it (and its protagonist) new life. The play concludes as follows:

Atsumori: I was stranded. Reining in my horse,
I halted, at a loss for what to do.

Chorus: There came then, galloping behind me,
Kumagai, shouting ‘You will not escape my arm!’
At this Atsumori wheeled his mount
And swiftly, undaunted, drew his sword.
We first exchanged a few rapid blows,
Then, still on horseback, grappled, then fell,
And wrestled on, upon the wave-washed strand.
But you had bested me, and I was slain.

Now karma brings us face to face again
‘You are my foe!’ Atsumori shouts,
Lifting his sword to strike; but Kumagai
With kindness has repaid old enmity,
Calling the Name to give the spirit peace.

They at last shall be reborn together
Upon one lotus throne in paradise.
Kumagai, you were no enemy of mine.
Pray for me, O pray for my release!
Pray for me, O pray for my release!

[Tyler, *Japanese No Dramas* 47-48]

Zeami’s text, with its masterful blending of dramatic reenactment, spiritual reconciliation, and liturgical solemnity, demonstrates the power and majesty of the Japanese language as a literary vehicle. As for the Noh repertoire— it would find a privileged place in the canon, and its individual plays would themselves be subject to a host of appropriations and adaptations, up to the present day. Strictly adhering to centuries-old performance practices, Noh plays remain a staple of the Japanese cultural scene.

While paying homage to the great Heian lyrical tradition, Japan's medieval poetry captured the unique meditative and spiritual qualities of the age. Deeply incorporated into the visual, musical, and performing arts of the age, this poetry ranks among Japan's greatest cultural legacies.

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Discussion Questions and Topics

It can be argued that the Buddhist-inspired qualities of medieval Japanese poetry present formidable barriers to appreciation and understanding. Can you identify aspects of this poetry that you find readily comprehensible and moving? In what sense does it seem strange and 'foreign'?

Compare and contrast Japan's medieval poetry with the court poetry of the Heian era. In particular, how does the natural and seasonal imagery function in these two poetic domains?

How might we appreciate the 'poetic' qualities of cultural products such as Noh theater, tea ceremony, and monochrome landscape paintings? How might we define the 'medieval aesthetic' that can be said to inspire these and other Japanese cultural products?

Images

A selection of *Hyakunin isshu* (One Hundred Poems by One Hundred Poets) cards. Source: Web-Japan.org

Early 19th-century woodblock print, by Kikuchi Yôsai, of Priest Saigyô, together with a representative *waka*. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Noh performance, with the masked central character (*shite*) in the foreground. Source: Wikimedia Commons

PART III : EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Overview: Japanese Culture in the Tokugawa Period (1600-1868)

Japan's medieval era was marked by complex feudal divisions and an increasingly weak central control, with neither Emperor nor Shogun capable of ruling the fractious nation. It was the sixteenth century that witnessed a gradual process of national reunification.A succession of three powerful warlords— Oda Nobunaga, ToyotomiHideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu— managed to consolidate power and pave the way for the creation of a stable, productive, and culturally-vibrant nation— albeit one that was subject to strict authoritarian control. The sixteenth century also witnessed Japan's first encounter with the West, in the form of Christian missionaries and emissaries from Western nations in pursuit of colonial and commercial interests in addition to spreading the gospel.

The Tokugawa period can be traced to the victory of its clan chief Ieyasu over his rivals in 1600. This eventuated in his establishing a new Shogunal regime in the town of Edo— modern-day Tokyo. A brilliant political strategist, Ieyasu oversaw a comprehensive program of central authority, regulation, and social order. The samurai class sat atop a fixed, Confucian-style hierarchy, and a policy of 'national seclusion' (*sakoku*) led to the expulsion of Westerners and a cordoning-off of the country that lasted for centuries. An important exception was the Dutch trading mission in far-off Nagasaki— Japan's sole window onto the West until the late-nineteenth century.

Despite the repressive samurai rule and the nation's centuries-long isolation, Tokugawa Japan witnessed a burgeoning domestic economy centered in the rapidly-growing cities— most notably, Edo and Osaka— and the rise of a new class of merchants and townsmen, the so-called *chônin*. The material and secular interests of these affluent city dwellers led to the emergence of a remarkable culture of entertainment, whose locus was the urban pleasure quarters, with its geisha houses, theaters, and assorted fleshly delights. The centerpiece was the Yoshiwara in Edo, an entertainment mecca accessible to anyone with money to burn. It became the setting for all manner of literary and pictorial representation and stood in sharp contrast to the samurai elites and their code of self-restraint and austerity.

Tokugawa Literature and the Role of Poetry

Notwithstanding its iconic culture of pleasure-seeking, the Tokugawa period witnessed a flourishing of cultural pursuits across the spectrum. There emerged sophisticated connoisseurship, exquisite aesthetic sensibilities, and masterful arts and crafts of every description. The literature of the period clearly reflects the intersection of refinement and vulgarity, the spiritual and the mundane.

For one thing, Tokugawa literati were understandably inspired by the look and feel of their society— the world of merchants and money-making, stylish amusements, romance and escapism, and the comic posturing and hypocrisy of smug samurai.Poetry, the centerpiece of Japan's age-old literary tradition, was in evidence. But the cumulative effect of a millennium of stultifying rules and conventions had taken its toll. The new social order called for fresh inspiration and up-to-date avenues of poetic expression. The key figure here is Matsuo Basho, a Japanese cultural icon of the first magnitude.

Bashô and the Haiku Moment

In this land of poets, Matsuo Bashô (1644-94) stands head and shoulders above the rest, and he surely ranks among the great Japanese cultural ambassadors to the world. The head of a poetic coterie, Basho mastered a genre of group-centered poetic composition— *haikai*— which grew out of a prominent medievallinked-verse genre, *renga*. The idea here is for like-minded poets to produce 'collective' poetry through the spontaneous composition of poetic verses, in a round-robin format.

Mastery of this genre required intimate familiarity with the expanse of Japan's poetic tradition and unswerving dedication to perfecting one's art. This was Bashô's achievement. But the man is far better known in our own day for his individual haiku poems— those seventeen-syllable poetic morsels said to embody transcendent meaning. In short, Bashô has been canonized as the 'god of haiku.'

Yet Matsuo Bashô by no means invented the haiku. It is essentially a truncated *waka*— the orthodox 5-7-5-7-7 poetic form, minus the final 7-7 syllable lines. But his mastery of this minimalist form has achieved almost mythic proportion. An oft-cited example is the following:

furuikeya The ancient pond

kawazutobikomu A frog jumps in
mizu no oto The sound of water

Frogs, alas, had not been welcome in the refined, courtly *waka* domain of the Heian period. But these and other humble creatures and ordinary objects would become the raw material of artistic creation in the hands of this master poet who realized that the world of poetic expression had to expand beyond the confines of courtly elegance and propriety.

Another iconic haiku, among thousands that Bashô composed, can be said to valorize the poetry of old and the elegant melancholy embodied in the medieval aesthetic of *sabi*:

kareedani On a withered branch
karasu no tomarikeri A crow has come to perch—
aki no kure Autumn dusk

How, then, are we to understand the 'haiku aesthetic' suggested by Bashô's verse, which subjects a humble image— be it frog or crow— to a certain alchemy of transformation? In one reading, the seemingly random, unremarkable incident takes on deep meaning— a poetic intersection of the infinite and the instantaneous, requiring no explication, no commentary, and calling forth a spiritualized sense of enlightenment, *satori*.

Others, though, might opt for a less transcendent response to these seventeen syllables. They will examine the frog and crow and find— precisely nothing at all. The more cynical among us will choose to dismiss the 'haiku mystique' as a game of smoke and mirrors, a Ponzi scheme of hyper-inflated value based on little more than hero worship, with no basis in actual literary merit.

What, after all, makes for a 'good' haiku? Beyond the received wisdom of a tradition that separates the wheat from the chaff, how are we to judge? For those drawn to haiku merely as a 'fun activity,' judging quality is beside the point. One can easily think of haiku as mereword doodles— oriental limericks, so to speak. After all, there are computer programs that can generate them instantaneously, and in massive quantities.

Bashô himself was likely spared such doubts. Thanks to the accounts of his many disciples, we know that their mentor was deeply beholden to atradition that he had inherited, lamenting only that poetic practice had fallen on hard times. And despite his attempts to expand the horizons of poetic composition, Bashô insisted on dedication to mastering one's poetic craft and respectfor the artistic standards of revered forebears. One such figure was Saigyô, the great poetic wanderer of the early medieval period.

Among Bashô's greatest literary achievements are his poetic travel diaries, which trace his sojourns in the Japanese countryside, following— literally and figuratively— in Saigyô's footsteps, observing the passing scene, and leaving a haiku record of his spiritual communion with the places and people he met along the way. [See
Tokugawa genres: Autobiography]

Poets of the Late Tokugawa

Notwithstanding his eminent stature, Matsuo Bashôby no means exhausted the field of Tokugawa poetry. The work of three noteworthy poets— Buson, Issa, and Ryôkan— pays homage to their great predecessor while advancing poetic expression in new directions.

YosaBuson (1716-83) was a cultivated dilettante (*bunjin*) equally adept at painting and poetry. He mastered a haiku style that privileged a kaleidoscope of images and a playfulness of spirit. The following verse is emblematic:

tsuriganeni On a temple bell
tomaritenemuru It has stopped, and gone to sleep—
kochô kana A butterfly

Here the hushed tranquility of the scene is undercut by the inevitable *gong, gong* that will provide the rude awakening. And in the following verse,Buson, a great admirer of Bashô, provides a gentle parody of his signature verse:

furuike no At that old pond
kawazuoiyuku The frog is growing old
ochiba kana Among fallen leaves

Another perennial favorite is Kobayashi Issa (1763-1827), whose haiku evoke a gentle, childlike innocence with which he has long been identified. The following verse puts our reliable amphibian to a new poetic use:

yasegaeru You, skinny frog—

makerunaissa Don't give up just yet.
koreniari Issa's here!

The crafted artlessness of Issa's haiku, which seeks to cheer up the downtrodden creature, contrasts with the work of Priest Ryôkan (1758-1831). Ryôkan, who never strayed far from his home in the provinces, was a Zen priest known for using poetry as a vehicle for spiritual awakening. Together with Bashô and Issa, Ryôkan was regarded as an avatar of enlightenment and essential wisdom by generations of admirers and spiritual seekers— Japanese and foreign alike. The following poem, a *waka*, speaks to his poetic roots:

yo no nakawa Our life in this world—
naninitatoen To what shall I compare it?
yamabiko no To an echo
kotaurukoe no Resounding through the mountains
munashikigagoto And off into the empty sky

While presenting a Zen image of vast emptiness as its 'answer,' the poem's rhetorical question is an allusion to a famous *waka* from the great eight-century*Man'yôshû* anthology. A village priest of early nineteenth-century Japan, Ryôkan thus inscribes his name in a poetic genealogy going back twelve centuries.

Haiku in the Modern Day

Haiku underwent a significant transformation in the modern period, emerging as an accessible form of poetic expression across all sectors of Japanese society. And its easy adaptability has made this iconic cultural export a popular vehicle for creative wordplay world-wide, in all languages and across the social spectrum. The old rules and conventions need no longer apply. What counts is an interest in looking at one's world in fresh, new ways.

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Discussion Questions and Topics

In view of its simplicity, on the one hand, and the deep lyrical tradition that has inspired it, on the other hand, how are we to read, understand, and appreciate haiku poetry? Should we be concerned about that which is lost in translation?

What qualities may be said to distinguish a 'good' haiku from a 'bad' one? Is it possible to make such judgments?

In what sense can haiku poetry be considered a 'modern' genre? A 'Japanese' genre? How would you define 'haiku' and the sort of 'vision' that it calls forth?

How do our haiku examples compare with the *waka* poetry of the Heian and medieval periods? How are the respective social and cultural contexts revealed?

As with the poets of earlier periods, Tokugawa poets generally worked in groups, preferring the linked-verse practice that downplayed individual creativity in favor of the collective voice. What questions does this raise regarding the nature of poetry and aspects of Japanese society and culture that appear to privilege group identity and conformity?

Images

Whimsical portrayal of MatsuoBashô and his famous ‘frog’ haiku, byKinkoku(circa 1820)

Statue of Bashô in Hiraizumi, Iwate Prefecture (site of a famous haiku composition)

Image of YosaBuson by Matsumura Goshun (late 18th century)

Image of Kobayashi Issa by MuramatsuShunpo (early 19th century)

Note: The source for the above images is Wiki Commons.

PART IV : 19TH CENTURY

Overview: Japanese Culture in the Nineteenth Century

Japan in the nineteenth century underwent an all-but unprecedented social, political, and cultural transformation. The centuries-old Tokugawa shogunal regime, predicated upon the privileged status of the samurai class and a policy of national seclusion, went into decline in the early nineteenth century. The shogunal leaders were unable to reform their outmoded regime, and they were equally incapable of fending off the incursion of Western powers— most notably, Commodore Perry and the American 'Black Ships' (*kurofune*). But they did succeed in promoting a strong sense of native identity and a credo of Japanese uniqueness based upon the Shinto faith and the Emperor as a living god— a *kami*.

Fifteen years following Perry's arrival on Japanese shores, the Tokugawa shogunate fell, in what was a relatively bloodless transition to Japan as a modern nation. The advent of the Meiji era (1868-1912) set in motion a process of modernization that eventuated in the establishment of Japan as a powerful empire that succeeded in rivaling the Western imperial powers. The shogunal center of Edo was 'reinvented' as the modern nation's new capital— Tokyo.

Japan's modernizers, though, were largely erstwhile samurai who sought to preserve and promote traditional values and a strong national identity at the same time that they embarked on a comprehensive program of nation-building, industrial development, urbanization, and Western-inspired political, educational, social, and cultural institutions. Their rallying-cry of 'Civilization and Enlightenment' (*bunmeikaika*), which trumpeted the virtues of science, technology, and modernity, was tempered by a state-sponsored embrace of duty and dedication to the Emperor and to the imperial state— *Nippon teikoku*. This seemingly incongruous embrace of tradition and modernity, epitomized in the motto of 'Japanese spirit, Western know-how' (wakonyôsai), marks the new age.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Japan had in place a sophisticated rail system, a powerful military, and a productive industrial economy. It had established a representative parliamentary system, political parties, and a modern Constitution. A modern educational system provided a standard Western-style curriculum to the nation's youth, and modern print and entertainment media were available to all Japanese. Japan gradually absorbed the material and intangible culture and institutions of the West. But the identity question— the contest between individualism and personal autonomy and the fact of an authoritarian regime intent upon maintaining order and discipline— remained unresolved. The death of the Meiji Emperor in 1912 marked the end of a truly unique chapter in world history.

The Place of Poetry in Nineteenth-Century Japan

Poetic production in late Tokugawa Japan was impressively varied and enjoyed widespread popularity among various segments of society. (See Tokugawa Literary Genres: Poetry) Poets composed in both Japanese and Chinese, and they continued to engage in group versification, much as their Heian era and medieval forebears had done centuries earlier. Yet the conventions and styles of what was a twelve century-long lyrical tradition had lent a degree of predictability and staleness to this poetry. The innovations achieved by figures such as Bashô and Buson had largely given way to imitation and poetic factionalism. The dominant role of natural imagery and seasonal reference remained unchallenged, as did the orthodoxy of the five- and seven- syllable poetic form— be it the *haiku* (5-7-5) or the *waka* (5-7-5-7-7).

However, with the waning of the Tokugawa regime and the advent of Japan's modern era with the Meiji Restoration, things changed. The old poetic forms and techniques were retained, but they would be imbued with a new language and spirit that reflected the Meiji Westernization agenda and the rapid growth of cities and urban modernity. New poetic forms were introduced, and a new openness to innovation freed poets from the constraints of the old conventions and regulations, while poetry itself would gradually give ground to prose fiction inspired by the work of major Russian, German, French, and British authors. Yet a strong current of lyricism and poetic sentiment, which had so long undergirded Japan's literature throughout the ages, would persist even in the face of the torrent of Western imports and influences.

Late Tokugawa Poetry

Late-Tokugawa literati (*bunjin*) remained devoted to poetry in the traditional styles, but harbingers of a new approach to self-expression can be gleaned. Among the countless poets and poetic circles, two individuals stand out— Kobayashi Issa (1763-1827) and Priest Ryôkan (1758-1831).
Issa is something of a Japanese patron saint, whose poetry speaks to a gentle, childlike innocence that has endeared him to devotees over the centuries. Among his best-known *haiku* are the following:

yasegaeru	Skinny frog—
makerunaissa	Don't give up just yet
koreniari	Issa's here!

tsuyu no yowa	This world of dew
tsuyu no yonagara	Is a world of dew, and yet
sarinagara	And yet. . .

Ryôkan, a Zen priest who never left his home in the provinces, was equally adept at Chinese verse (*kanshi*) and Japanese *waka*. His poetry has been regarded as channeling a humble spirit and an enlightened soul. Two representative poems are as follows:

yo no nakawa	Our life in this world—
naninitatoemu	To what shall I compare it?
yamabiko no	To an echo
kotaurukoe no	Resounding through the mountains
munashikigagoto	And off into the empty sky

kazewakiyoshi	The breeze is fresh
tsukiwasayakeshi	The moonlight bright
izatomoni	Let's dance together
odoriakasamu	The whole night through—
oi no nagorini	A keepsake for my old age

Based on Marcus, p 59; and Shirane, pp 952-3

Poetry of the Meiji Period

The Meiji 'mission statement' of 1868 envisioned a modern Japan that would be advanced in material terms while retaining a distinctive Japanese identity and spirit (*seishin*). The Meiji literary community can be said to have implemented this through their poetry, which effectively grafted new, Western-inspired elements onto the native stock of form, image, and sentiment whose roots extended some thirteen centuries into the past. No longer restricted to fixed styles and conventions, Meiji poets typically composed in both the traditional and modern forms.
Late nineteenth century literary Westernization hinged on locating exemplary works, translating them, and eventually adapting them to the native language and cultural milieu. This would be a laborious process. As for poetry, the British Romantics— Wordsworth, in particular— were widely read as of the 1890s, as were the French symbolists (most notably, Baudelaire and Mallarmé). The unrestricted form of this poetry, its broad poetic diction, and the expressive voice of the poetic speaker— these crucial elements helped inspire a new, free verse genre, the *shintaishi*.
Shintaishi free-verse poetry
The pioneering *shintaishi* poet, ShimazakiTôson (1872-1943), was associated with the Bungakkai coterie of young Romantics. Tôson would go on to become a leading novelist toward the end of the Meiji period, but his poetry in the new style, composed in the 1890s, helped pave the way for this Western-inspired lyrical genre. Perhaps his best-know *shintaishi* verse is one entitled *On Traveling the Chikuma River*:

By the old castle of Komoro
Among the white clouds, a wanderer laments. . .
Ah, what does the old castle tell?
How do the waves on the riverbank reply? . . .
Alone I walk among the rocks
And bind fast my sorrows to the riverbank.

Based on Keene, *Modern Japanese Literature*, pp 201-2

Echoing a mournful Wordsworthian refrain, Tôson's poetic wanderer, alone in the world, foreshadows the melancholic interiority that would become a hallmark of Japan's modern literature. Yet one senses as well the profound aesthetic and emotional quality of precisely such lyrical melancholy.

Modern poetry in traditional forms

The radical transformations of Japan's modern condition challenged poets to discover ways to pour 'new wine' into the 'old containers' of seventeen and thirty-one syllable verse. The latter, earlier referred to as *waka*, became known as *tanka* as of the Meiji era. Among the leading 'modernizers' of this traditional poetry are three individuals: Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902), Yosano Akiko (1878-1942), and Ishikawa Takuboku (1885-1912).

SHIKI

Masaoka Shiki can be credited with expanding the horizons of Japanese poetic imagery, which had long been tied to a fixed vocabulary of nature and seasonal image. The final years of Shiki's life, cut short by tuberculosis, were spent in his sickbed. Freed by his convalescent state to explore the horizons of his fertile imagination, Shiki crafted a rich lyrical voice, in both *haiku* and *tanka*, that centered on the close observation of his confined space and personal incapacity; and of the odd intersection of disease and immobility, on the one hand, and a passionate and replete vision of life, on the other. Several examples— a *tanka* and two *haiku*— will suggest these qualities:

kamenisasu	Sprays of wisteria
fuji no hanabusa	Arranged in a vase—
hanatarete	The blossoms hang down
yamai no tokoni	And by my sickbed
harukuren to su	Spring is coming to an end
kawoutte	I swat mosquitoes, as
gunsho no ueni	Bloodstains appear
chiwo in su	On the warrior tale I read
ringokute	I think I'll die
botan no maeni	Eating applies
shinankana	In the presence of my peonies

Based on Rimer and Gessel, pp 309-10

AKIKO

The wife of a noteworthy Meiji poet, YosanoTekkan, Yosano Akiko emerged as an even more celebrated poet and essayist. Indeed, she ranks as perhaps <u>the</u>preëminent modern Japanese literary woman— although one hesitates to assign her to a seemingly subordinate gender category. Equally fluent in the 'language' of *tanka* and *shintaishi*, Yosano Akiko is best known for her proud and passionate voice, which challenged the orthodox code of female subservience. For this reason she was regarded as a 'second coming' of the great Heian poet, Ono no Komachi. (See Classical Literary Genres: Poetry)

Akiko is widely recognized— and admired— for her poetic challenge to Japan's war with Russia (1904-05), in the form of a plea to her younger brother not to die uselessly in battle. The following excerpt includes a startling indictment of none other than the Meiji emperor himself:

Ah, my brother, I weep for you.
Beloved, you must not die—
You the last born, and so cherished. . .
You must not die!
How could our great emperor. . .
Not himself do battle, but instead
Ask other to spill their blood,
To die like beasts
And think those deaths a glory?

Brother, you must not die in this war

Based on Rimer and Gessel, p 302

Akiko's passionate voice in the following pair of *tanka* speaks for itself:

This hot tide of blood	Pressing my breasts
Beneath my soft skin, and you don't	I kick aside the
Even brush it with a fingertip—	Curtain of mystery—
Aren't you lonely then,	How deep the crimson
You who preach the Way?	Of the flower there!

Based on Rimer and Gessel, p 313

TAKUBOKU

Ishikawa Takuboku, the son of a Zen priest in the remote northern provinces, established himself as a poet in the 'new style' (*shintaishi*), which served to channel his left-wing political views. He would become known, too, for a private diary, written in Roman alphabet transcription, that detailed his involvement with the Tokyo poetic circles and revealed a range of anxieties and obsessions. (See: Autobiography)
Takuboku also earned acclaim for two late-Meiji collections of *tanka*— *A Handful of Sand* (1910) and *Sad Toys* (1912). As with Akiko, his *tanka* verses openly bare the speaker's self— his isolation and alienation, and his tenuous and awkward connection with others. Consider the following:

akiyaniiri	I once went into
tabakonomitaru	A vacant house
kotoariki	And smoked a cigarette
awaretadahitori	Only because I longed
itakibakarini	To be alone

kyôshitsu no	Escaping through the
madoyorinigete	Classroom window
tadahitori	I lay down
kanoshiro-atoni	All alone
neniyukishikana	Amidst the castle ruins

Based on Keene, *Modern Japanese Literature*, p 208

hatarekedo	I work and
hatarakedonao	I work and
wagakurashi	Life never gets
rakuninarazari	Any easier—
jittotewomiru	I stare at my hands

Based on Rimer and Gessel, p 308

Conclusion

Despite the rising prominence of fiction in the Meiji period, Japanese poetry in the nineteenth century maintained its enduring value, as poets demonstrated a capacity to adjust to the changing times. The 'cultural capital' of the late-Tokugawa *bunjin* literati class gradually declined during the Meiji, in line with the rise of modern media and a national readership attuned to the consumer economy and leisure activities. Nonetheless, elevated literary expression— in particular, traditional poetic cultivation and sophistication— was prized by many in the *bundan* community who sought to promote Japanese cultural exceptionalism via literary means.
The fact remained, though, that the practice and appreciation of poetry— together with many other arts— was now accessible to the broad Japanese public, irrespective of social class, gender, and locale. As for poetry, in its many forms— the print media regularly published work submitted by individuals from every corner of the nation. Their poems spanned the creative spectrum and effectively democratized what had been a cultural property of the privileged elites. That said, many purists held that the 'heartbeat' of the

traditional 5-7-5 poetic cadence and the homage to the seasonal cycle and the images of nature embodied a transcendent value as part of the Japanese national identity.
In short, the domain of Japanese poetry and lyrical expression in the nineteenth century is marked by many contesting and converging forces, which yielded a rich and varied harvest.

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Discussion Questions and Topics

How best to compare the ‘new-style’ poems and the traditional 17- and 31-syllable forms? What if anything do these two categories share?

What might account for the survivability of *haiku*and *tanka*— not to mention the host of other Japanese traditional arts and crafts? How does the Meiji project of creating a strong and resilient national identity figure here?

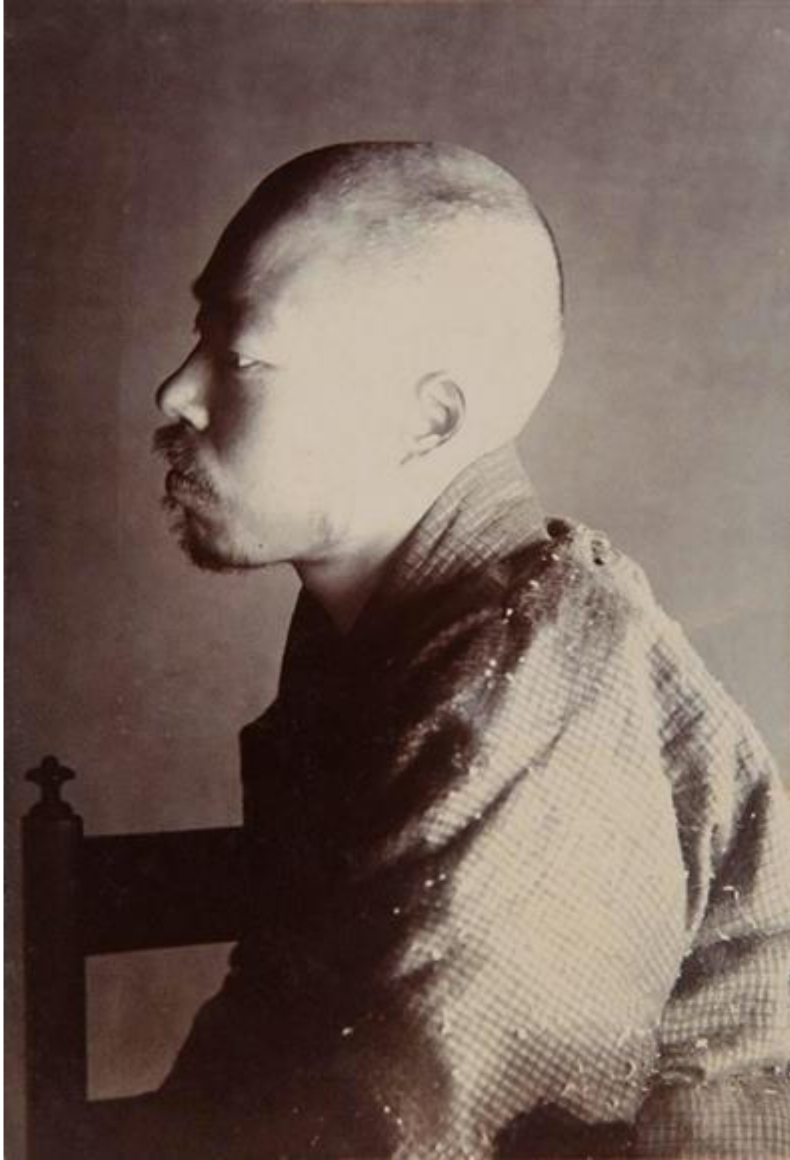
What do you find most ‘relatable’ about this diverse body of poetry? How does it reflect the rapidly-shifting historical context? What aspects of Japanese society and character does it fail to reveal?
How does the quality of selfhood expressed in this poetry relate to literary selfhood in the prose writings (essay, fiction, autobiography) of nineteenth-century Japan? How does it harken back to the ‘golden age’ of Heian and medieval poetry?

Images

Image of the poet Kobayashi Issa, early 19th century (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Statue of Zen priest-poet Ryôkan, early 19th century
(Source: olympiazencenter.org)

ShimazakiTôson, early 20th century
(Source: Wikimedia Commons)


Masaoka Shiki: Final photograph (December 24, 1900)
Source: Terebess Asia Online

Yosano Akiko and husband, Tekkan (early 20th century)
(Source: Wikimedia Commons)

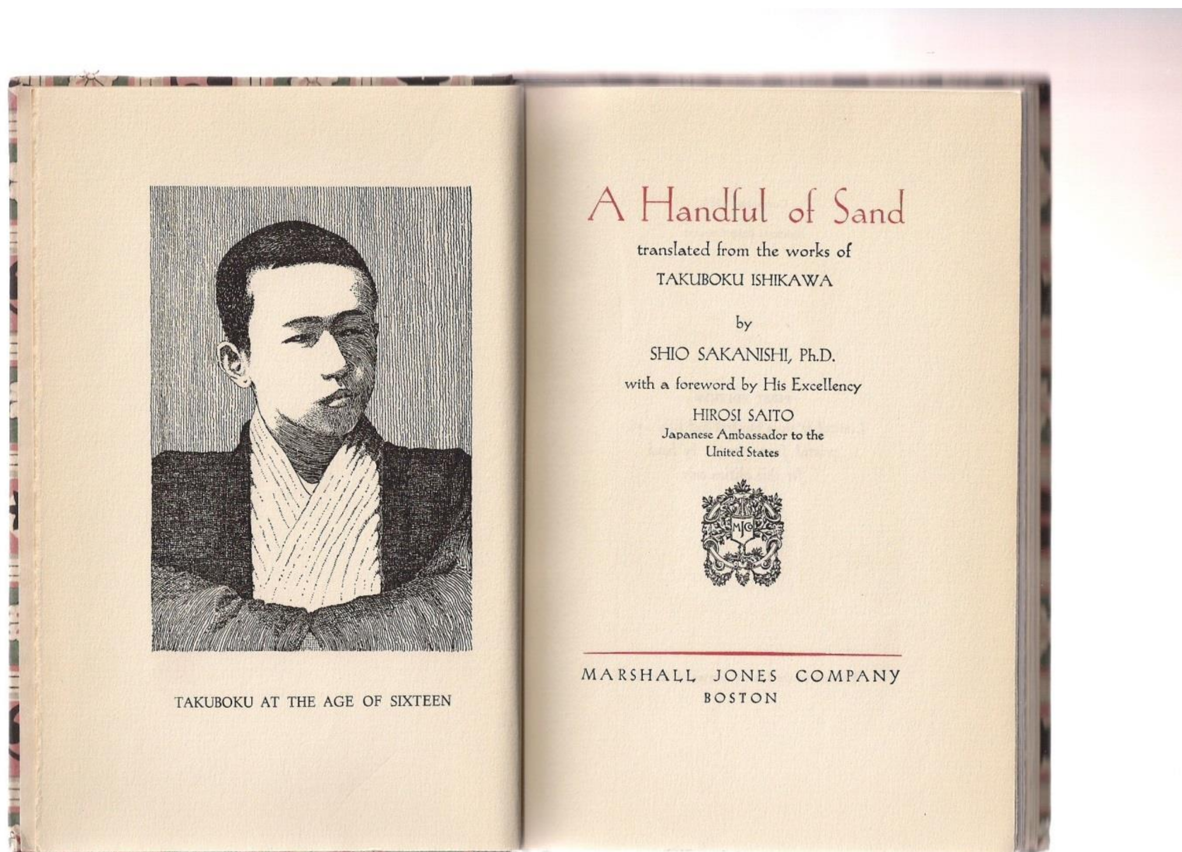


Image of Ishikawa Takuboku as frontispiece of an English translation of his 1910 *tanka*collection, *A Handful of Sand* (Ichiaku no suna)

PART V : 20TH CENTURY

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 Taishô 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 Poetry in Twentieth-Century Japan

By the turn of the 20th century, the mainstream of Japanese literature underwent a shift from poetry, which had been the dominant literary genre for many centuries, to prose fiction. The Westernization agenda of the Meiji regime encouraged the adaptation of exemplary Western literary and artistic products. Poetry was no exception, insofar as its centuries-old traditional verse was regarded by the literary vanguard as outmoded and antiquated. And so the work of the British Romantics and French Symbolists, which greatly appealed to a new generation of so-called 'literary youth,' began to circulate. The role of translation here cannot be overemphasized, and the careers of many Meiji writers and poets were inspired by published translations of admired Western works.

Notwithstanding the ascendency of fiction in Japan at the outset of the 20th century, its poetry— even the earliest verses dating back to the 7th century—was by no means eclipsed. Indeed, the range of poetic

production would continue to expand, underscoring the strong affinity that Japanese have long had for poetry and lyrical expression. In line with the Meiji modernization agenda, verse forms that broke with the traditional poetic styles and conventions began to appear. Derived from Western models— Wordsworth was especially admired— this new-style '*shintaishi*' poetry appealed to those won over by the promise of a new, Western-inspired poetic modernity.

Yet the appeal of the traditional forms— the 17-syllable *haiku* and the 31-syllable *tanka*— remained strong. Pioneering poets such as Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902), Yosano Akiko (1878-1942), and Ishikawa Takuboku (1886-1912) set about repurposing these forms as modern genres capable of expressing contemporary concerns and themes while maintaining the time-testedvehicle of five- and seven-syllable lyrical lines. (See the essay on 19th-century poetry for coverage of the above poets.)

With the Taishô period, which ushered in a host of innovations in the arts and culture, a new modernist poetry, which sought a definitive break with traditionalism and encouraged bold experimentation, emerged on the scene. Of note are KitaharaHakushû (1885-1942), Hagiwara Sakutarô (1886-1942), and Miyazawa Kenji (1896-1933). It was Hagiwara whose 1917 collection of new-style (*shintaishi*) verse, *Howling at the Moon*, was widely regarded as a watershed moment in the history of modern Japanese poetry.Miyazawa, for his part, is an especially esteemed figure— Buddhist devotee, ardent social activist, author of admired youth-oriented fables and folktales, and beloved possessor of *kodomo no kokoro*— a childlike spirit and pure soul.

The Postwar Scene

Pre-war poetry thrived in the open and innovative cultural milieu of the Taishô years. But the rise of militarism in the 1930s put a damper on creative expression, in poetry as elsewhere. Japan's radical transformation in the wake of the Pacific War— the loss of empire and national sovereignty, and a profound sense of dislocation and desolation— served to inspire, paradoxically, a new creative impulse. For instance, a circle of poets centering on Tamura Ryûichi (1923-98) assumed the name *Arechi* (wasteland), acknowledgingT. S. Eliot's poetic masterpiece and underscoring the theme of desolation and vacuity that marked the postwar scene in the Fifties. Among the most popular and prolific poets of the postwar era is TanikawaShuntarô. With well over sixty collections of verse to his credit— most notably, *Two Billion Light years of Solitude* (1952)—Tanikawa is also known as translator of Charles Schulz's *Peanuts*.

Women Poets in the Vanguard

In line with Japan's resurgence as of the Sixties, poets went on to explore new avenues of expression. And as a reflection of movements for social change and calls for gender equality, women poets— as did their counterparts in the realm of fiction— assumed prominence. Among the most noteworthy is IshigakiRin (1920-2004), a Tokyo bank teller for over forty years who— incongruously, perhaps— emerged as a poet of unusually creative gifts. Younger poets such as IsakaYôko (1949-) and TawaraMachi (1962-) achieved wide acclaim. Tawara, a high-school teacher turned poet, published a collection of contemporary *tanka*— *Salad Anniversary* (1987)— that sold millions of copies.

Poetry and the People

The members of Japan's poetic elite are widely read and admired, but their work is in a sense insignificant compared to the production of verse by ordinary citizens in cities and towns across the nation. Poetry on the local scene is alive and well—countless groups, clubs, organized readings, and the like. And there is an astonishing array of internet-based blogs and networks— everything from traditional haiku and tanka, to linked verse, to prose poetry and edgy, 'post-modern' verse, to rap and poetry slams.

In short, Japan's reputation as a land of poetry most certainly has a basis in fact. Then again, such a claim can be made about any nation, any people, insofar as poetic expression is a universally human capacity— and need.

What follows is a sampler of 20th-century verse by representative poets.

Prewar poets

KitaharaHakushû(1885-1942)

TheKiss(1911)

A woman of rich aroma approaches
Her body rubs hot against me
At that instant the lilies beside me
Flushed red, glittering
Dragonflies ceased their movement
The wind stopped
I recoiled in fear
Her palms, wet with perspiration,
Suddenly and forcefully lifted me up
And kissed me
Painful, cruel, longed-for, as a
Grasshopper leaps
At the hot evening sun (Based on Rimer&Gessel, *Modern Japanese Literature*, Vol 1, p 298)

HagiwaraSakutarô(1886-1942)

Sickly Face at the Bottom of the Ground(1917)

At the bottom of the ground a face emerges—
a lonely invalid's face emerging
in the dark at the bottom of the ground
Soft vernal grass stalks beginning to flare,
a rat's nest beginning to flare,
and entangled with the nest
countless hairs begin to tremble
From the lonely sickly ground,
roots of thin blue bamboo begin to grow,
begin to grow,
looking pathetic, blurred,
truly, truly pathetic (Based on Rimer&Gessel, Vol 1, pp 586-87)

Miyazawa Kenji(1896-1933)

Undaunted by the Rain(1933)

Undaunted by the rain, by the wind
By snow or summer heat
Stout of body and without greed
Never angry, always smiling
Content with my portion of rice and bean paste
And with no concern for myself
Content to look, listen, and try to understand
To live in the shadow of pines in a thatched hut
If to the east a child is sick, I will go and nurse him
If to the west a mother is exhausted, I will care for her
If to the south someone is dying, I will go and say:
Fear not
If to the north people are quarreling, I will go and say:

Stop this nonsense
Content to be known as a person of no account
Incapable of inflicting pain on others—
This is all that I desire (Based on Rimer&Gessel, pp 592-93)

Postwar and contemporary poets

IshigakiRin(1920-2004)

Life (1968)

To live we must eat— rice, veggies
meat, air, light, water,parents,
sisters and brothers, teachers,
money, and hearts, too
I pat my full stomach
wipe my lips
survey my kitchen littered
with carrot tops, chicken bones,
Daddy's intestines
Pushing fifty, my eyes for the first time
overflow with a wild beast's tears (Based on Rimer&Gessel, Vol 2, pp 416-17)

Tamura Ryûichi(1923-98)

4000 Days and Nights(1954)

For a single poem to be born we must kill
We must kill many things
We must murder, assassinate, and poison those we love. . .

Remember: just because we craved the terror
of a stray dog that sees what our eyes cannot see,
hears what our ears cannot hear,
we poisoned the imagination of 4000 nights
and the cold memories of 4000 days

To give birth to a single poem
we must kill those we care for—
Only then can we revive the dead
This must be our chosen path (Based on Rimer&Gessel, Vol 2, pp 435-36)

TanikawaShuntarô(1931-)

Growth(1952)

Three years old: I had no past
Five years old: My past went as far as yesterday
Seven years old: My past went as far as topknots
Eleven years old: My past went as far as dinosaurs

Fourteen years old: My past was what the textbook said it was
Sixteen years old: Frightened, I stared at the infinity of my past
Eighteen years old: I did not know what time was
(Based on Rimer&Gessel, Vol 2, pp 437-38)

IsakaYôko(1949-)

Fingers(1979)

When I was little my father
Extended his index finger and I grasped it
With my five hot fingers and walked,
Letting the landscape of the days go past—
His finger possessing slightly more speed

Men tangle me up slowly, and
In the hollow of my palm, heat builds up
And exudes moisture
I bend my five fingers so they do not overlap
I size them up by the degree of heat and moisture
With the passing years, my fingertips
Have become bone dry (Based on Rimer&Gessel, Vol 2, p 733)

TawaraMachi(1962-)

Four tanka

At breakfast
The coffee on my table
Smells so,so good—
What's all this about a life
With room only for love?

Changing trains
As if folding up
An umbrella—
Making my way back
To my hometown

I remember your hand
Your back
Your breathing—
White socks left
Where you took them off

Fireworks, fireworks—
Watching them together,
One of us sees only the flash
The other,
Only the darkness

(Based onRimer&Gessel, Vol 2, pp 747-49)

Conclusion

Poetry in 20th-century Japan amply reflects the nation's dramatic, traumatic, and remarkable modern history. A distinguishing feature is the survival and persistence of classical poetic forms and lyrical sentiment. Haiku, tanka, and linked-verse renga continue to thrive— among Japanese poets of every description and around the world. Indeed, haiku poetry must be regarded as one of Japan's great cultural exports.

One could argue that poetry and the 'poetic moment' have given way to the immediacy and image-centered world that increasingly dominates our lives. Yet the vibrancy and sheer output of poetic production in Japan is evidence to the contrary.

What is it, then, that we look for in the poetry of Japan (or elsewhere)— be it the explicitly modernverse or the unapologetically traditional? Some of us are drawn to the beauty of a scene from nature.Or the

strange, unforeseen encounter.Or the calming, reflective moment.Or the stark, shocking image. Perhaps all of these.What is it, then, about the language of poetry that moves us?

As we attempt to make sense of the 21st century, how do we relate to the world of poetry? Do we relate to it at all? The electronic media and networking modalities have opened up a new universe of poetic expression. This is a good thing, although some might disagree. On the societal level, the phenomenal increase of Japan's aging population, together with the isolation of many who live anonymous and lonely lives, have inspired a return to 'poetic roots' and to the pleasure of composing verse in the company of kindred spirits— be they together in a physical space or as part of a virtual, on-line community.

Poetry can most certainly be therapeutic— a means to an end. But it is perhaps more crucially understood as an intrinsic good, a life-affirming necessity.

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Discussion Questions and Topics

What questions are raised by the notion of old, traditional forms— such as haiku and tanka— serving as vehicles of modern poetic expression? What, in short, are we to understand by the term 'modern poetry'?
Give thought to the manner in which poetry expresses personal voice, social and ethical concerns, and a sensitivity to human relations and spiritual longings, in comparison with works of prose fiction. Is this a complementary relationship? Should we necessarily prefer one over the other?
What themes and concerns can you identify in the modern Japanese poetry introduced here— and available in great abundance elsewhere? How significant is gender here, and the role that poetry can play to advance a feminist agenda?
Given the centrality of language and linguistic qualities to producing the 'poetic effect,' does the fact of reading poetry in translation constitute a handicap to one's appreciation? Given that even the best possible translation is still only that— a simulation, an approximation— must a poem be read in the original in order to truly 'get it'?

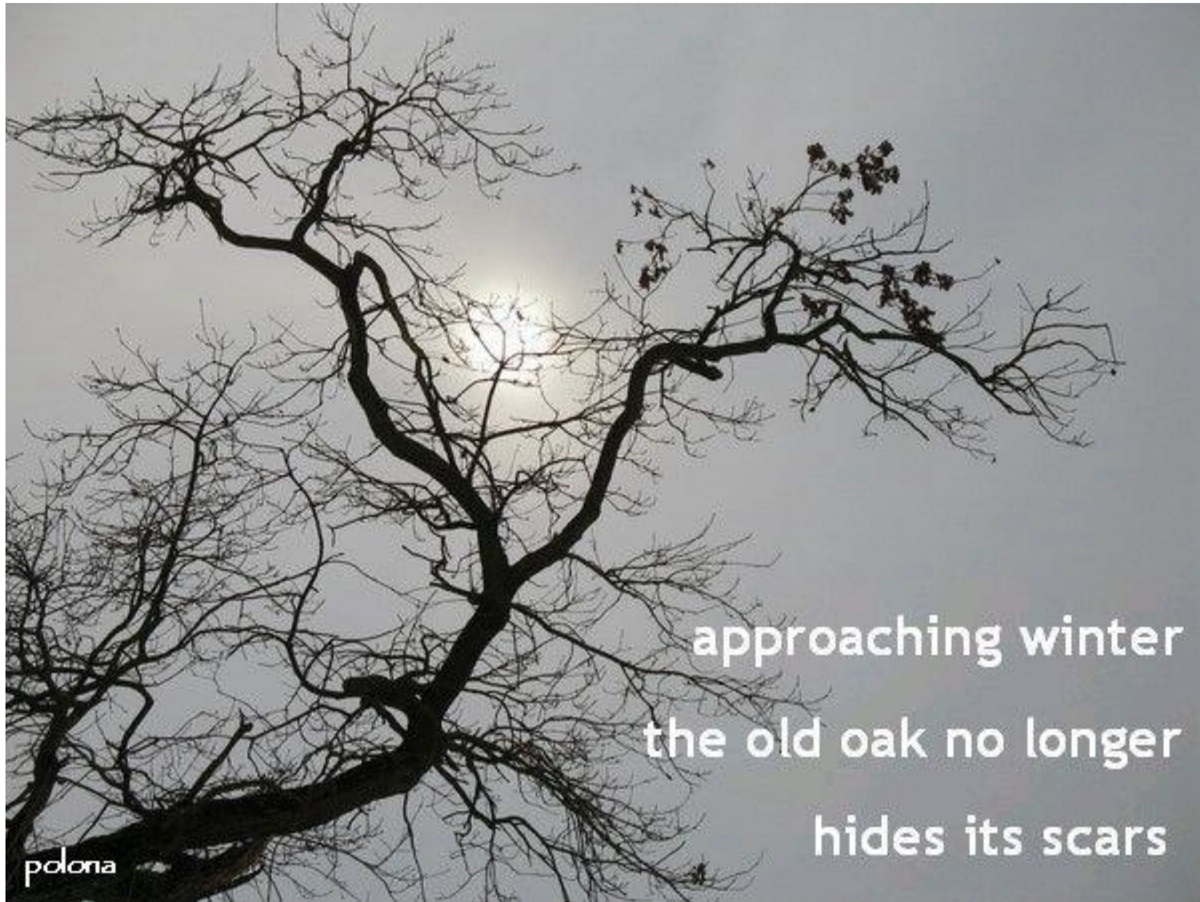
Images *

Hagiwara Sakutarô

Miyazawa Kenji

Tamura Ryûichi

TawaraMachi(Source: Japan Times, Inc.)



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