HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

JAPANESE LITERATURE

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SECTION I : CLASSICAL PERIOD

Contents

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.

PART I : POETRY

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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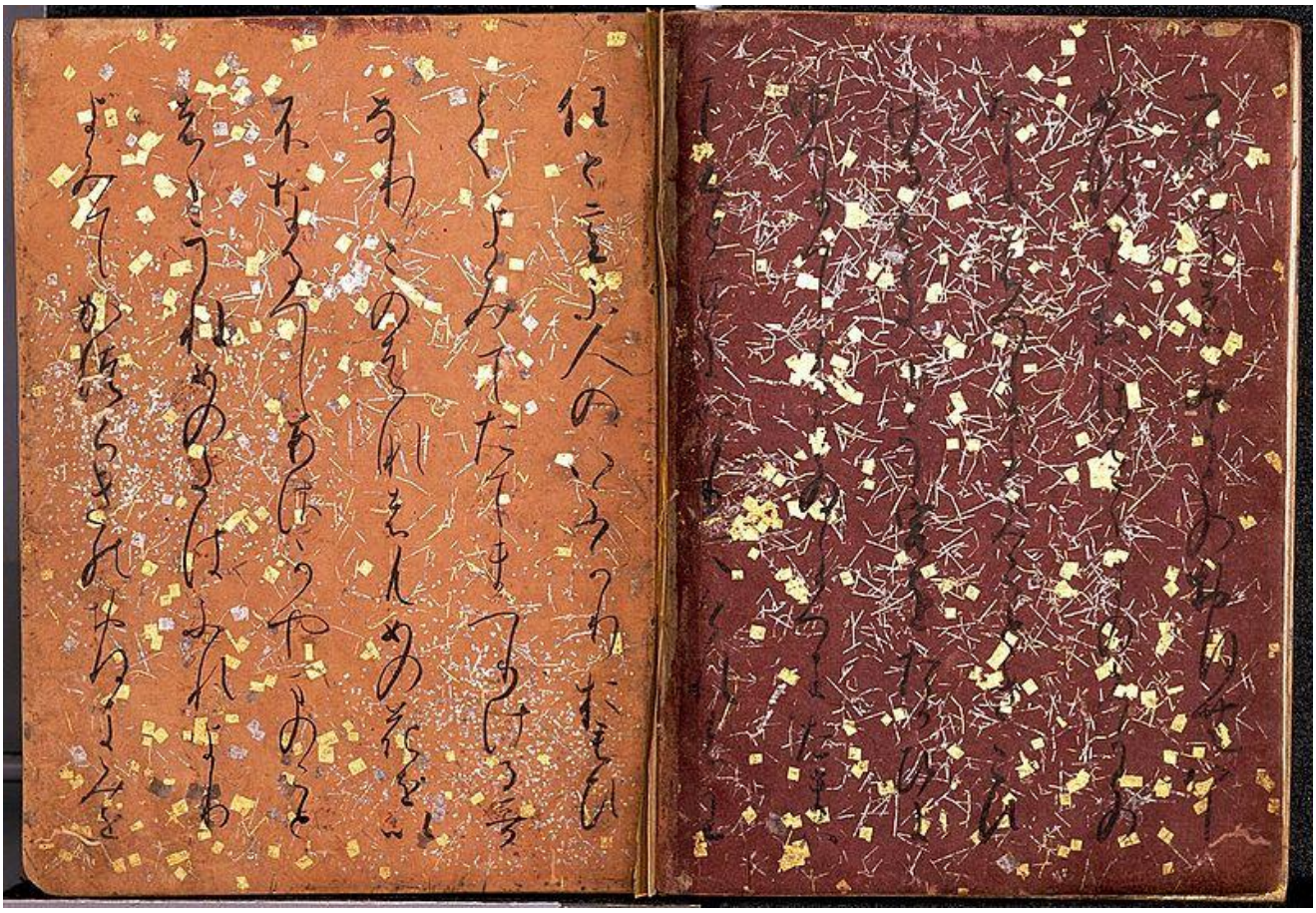
Discussion Questions and Topics

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 : MONOGATARI (Fiction)

Heian Literature and the Role of *Monogatari*

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. Poetry in the formal *waka* style (31 syllables) became the orthodox standard, and it served as a key mode of communication. Heian courtiers also indulged themselves in a variety of personal writing— chiefly, diary (*nikki*) and essay (*zuihitsu*).

However, the pinnacle of Heian literature— *The Tale of Genji*— is a work of fiction, a *monogatari.* As with so many other cultural products, Heian fiction bore the mark of Chinese literary precursors. And as was the case with Heian prose narrative in general, poetry would figure prominently. Furthermore, these narrative works were rendered in an artful calligraphy hand and were typically accompanied by pictorial illustrations that helped enhance the reading experience.

The *monogatari* genre, which was oriented around romantic fiction but included historical and personal elements as well, developed during the ninth century, early in the Heian period. As with poetry, relatively crude early examples became increasingly sophisticated, culminating in Murasaki's crowning achievement. The first noteworthy *monogatari* romance is the anonymous *Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* (Taketorimonogatari, ca 880).

Tale of the Bamboo Cutter

This early Heian romance begins with the account of a miraculous discovery:

> Once upon a time, there was an old bamboo cutter who went into the mountains and fields to cut bamboo and put the stalks to various uses. . . It came to pass that one stalk of bamboo shone at the base. Puzzled, the old man noticed that the light came from its interior. Upon closer inspections, he saw a dainty little girl, just three inches tall, sitting inside. [Based on McCullough, CJP 28-29]

Essentially an extended folk tale, the story goes on to relate how the bamboo cutter and his wife raise the tiny girl, who quickly grows into a stunningly beautiful woman named Kaguyahime. What ensues is a conventional romantic narrative recounting the vain attempts of her many suitors to woo the young beauty. Eventually, Kaguyahime assumes her true identity as a moon maiden and is escorted back to her celestial home by lunar emissaries cloaked in garments of incomparable beauty.

> The heavenly beings had brought with them a box that contained a heavenly feathered robe. They dressed Kaguyahime in the robe and had her drink an elixir of immortality. She then entered the celestrial carriage and soared into the heavens. [Based on CJP 36-37]

Subsequent *monogatari* would eschew such supernatural elements and center instead on the 'real' world of courtly romance. This line of development would culminate in MurasakiShikibu's masterpiece of Heian fiction.

The Tale of Genji

The 'alpha' of Japanese literature and the epitome of nearly two centuries of Heian courtly writing, *The Tale of Genji* both embodies and instantiates classical Japanese aesthetics, style, and literary virtuosity. It is arguably the first great novel of world literature. Although Lady Murasaki was influenced by earlier romantic tales, her chief inspiration was the anonymous mid-tenth century *Tales of Ise* (Isemonogatari). While 'technically' a *monogatari*, the work is in effect an anthology of *waka* by the great Heian court poet Ariwara no Narihira, distributed among 125 brief narrative episodes detailing the exploits of 'a certain man' (*aruotoko*), understood to be Narihira. The figure of this 'certain man' would emerge as the prototype for Murasaki's Prince Genji.

Commencing with the formulaic phrase *Izure no ontokinika* (‘once upon a time’), *The Tale of Genji*comprises fifty-four chapters that evoke the world of Heian court society. A densely lyrical novel, *Genji*includes a thousand poems, which constitute an virtual anthology of court poetry.

How, then, to do justice to a work of such magnitude? First, the title is significant. Lady Murasaki has elevated one individual— Genji, the ‘Shining Prince’— as a paragon who epitomizes the ideals of noble birth, elegant demeanor, poetic refinement, and exquisite sensitivity. And much as our view of Victorian London is filtered through the novels of Charles Dickens, Murasaki has created a convincingly realistic representation of a certain time and place.

The novel’s romantic paragon is cast in a distinctly feminized matter, as the following passages make evident:

> Genji. . . was leaning against an armrest, attired in an informal cloak that was draped with deliberate negligence over some soft white inner robes, its cords untied; and his beauty in the lamplight made it tempting to think of him as a woman. To see him was to sense the difficulty of choosing a woman who could be completely worthy of him, even if she were the highest of the high. . .
>
> Everyone felt drawn to Genji, even strangers who barely caught a glimpse of him. Of those who beheld his radiant countenance, not one well-born father but longed to send him his precious daughter, not one humble man with a presentable sister but hoped to have her serve him, in whatever menial capacity. . .
>
> Tears of deep emotion filled Genji’s own eyes as he pondered the many implications of human ephemerality, but they did not mar the beauty and elegance of his appearance. . . [McCullough, Genji *and* Heike 44, 64, 151]

With an eye to the Chinese cosmological pairing of *yang* (the assertive, active male principle) and *yin* (the yielding, passive female principle), Murasaki cast her work as a ‘*yin*’ novel, set in private interior spaces and animated not so much by dramatic encounters and dynamic plot turns as the ebb and flow of sentiment, reflection, and a wistful awareness of the passage of time. It juxtaposes resplendent displays of beauty and style (of which Prince Genji is the standard-bearer) and a depth of feeling and poignancy of longing. What may be termed Genji’s elegant passivity stands in stark contrast to the corrosive emotions of certain women— for instance, the spurned Rokujô Lady and her fits of jealous rage— that transform into supernatural agents of lethal revenge.

The novel’s distinctive aura of longing centers on Genji’s quest for his mother, the Kiritsubo Lady, who died when he was a young boy. And much of its plot recounts relationships with women who remind Genji of his mother and hence serve as surrogates and substitute figures. The poignancy recalls what many regard as the novel’s defining quality— *mono no aware*, the capacity to be moved by the beauty and pathos of existence. This quality, which relates to the Buddhistic notion of ephemerality and a corollary aesthetics of transience, suffuses the novel from start to finish.

The singular ‘representative man’ of the Heian court, Genji is perfectly formed,all but divine in certain respects. Yet he is deeply flawed and vulnerable. Although portrayed in many scenes as transcending the mortal realm, Genji remains exquisitely sensitive to the passage of time and is prone to a melancholy that finds expression in lyrical soliloquy and poetry. In short, Murasaki’s paragon is a mortal human being. Following a curiously veiled account of his death, the novel’s concluding ten chapters turn to an account of two Genji-esque courtiers— Kaoru and Niou— who reconstitute the world of the Shining Prince through their respective romantic encounters.

Little is known, though much is speculated, concerning the composition of *Genji*, the sequencing of its chapters, and the way it circulated among the Kyoto aristocracy a thousand years ago. Early on the text was rendered as an illustrated picture scroll (*emaki*), to be read aloud and enjoyed for both its pictorial

and literary artistry.

It is abundantly clear that Japanese culture would thereafter become a repository for Genji-inspired variants and retellings. The work has inspired medieval Noh drama, kabuki and puppet theater adaptations, modern-day films, anime, and pop culture spin-offs of every description. Indeed, the Genji 'brand name' has helped elevate the Heian era to an iconic status, in the absence of any actual remnants of this golden age of Japanese aristocratic civilization.

Murasaki's novel, all but unreadable in the original language, has been rendered into modern Japanese by a number literary figures powerfully drawn to its fictional world— most notably TanizakiJun'ichirô, who produced no less than three complete renderings. And there are three complete English translations. Although quite daunting in its narrative complexity, the novel's qualities of mind, heart, and spirit have become an integral part of the Japanese cultural legacy. And if there is such a thing as a Japanese national identity, or cultural memory, Genji and his world have surely earned a place of honor.

Readings

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Discussion Questions and Topics

The Tale of Genji can be read as both reflecting the unique lifestyles and practices of the Heian court, and the more universal qualities of human interaction and romantic sensibility. Give thought to how these two 'readings' intersect and interrelate.

Many have noted Prince Genji's androgynous persona and the overall 'feminine' aura of Murasaki's novel. What might account for this quality? Is Murasaki's work ultimately a 'feminist' response to what was a society dominated by male power and privilege?

How might one argue for and against claims regarding certain works of literature, such as *The Tale of Genji*, as having earned a place in a nation's 'cultural legacy.' In view of our increasingly globalized and integrated world, what significance should we give to the very notion of 'cultural legacy'?

Similarly, how might works of art and literature be considered to reflect and mold 'national identity'? Must we have actually read the work in question in order to internalize a sense of its cultural value? For that matter, does such 'traditionalist' thinking have a place in today's world?

Images

Detail from the *Genjimonogatariemaki* (picture scroll) of the mid-twelfth century. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

MurasakiShikibu as depicted in an 1880 woodblock print by Hiroshige III.
Source: Wikimedia Commons

Image taken from the 1951 film version of *The Tale of Genji* directed by Yoshimura Kôzaburô. Source: Wikimedia Commons

PART III : AUTOBIOGRAPHY

***NIKKI* (Diary)**

Heian Literature and the Role of *Nikki*

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. Yet there was a broader interest in expressing one's personal voice, and producing narrative accounts of one's experiences, recollections, and musings became standard practice among the courtier class. Such accounts, though, would be subject to Heian codes of propriety and restraint, which placed certain constraints on what we might regard as 'freedom of self-expression.'

Diary literature (*nikkibungaku*) has long been a fixture of the Japanese canon. And as with other genres, the role of Chinese models and influences must be acknowledged.

Heian courtiers were avid diarists. In their role as court officials burdened with various administrative duties, the males were expected to keep a relatively factual record of daily events, written in the business-like *kanbun* genre of Chinese-style narrative. Court women, on the other hand, were free to express themselves in their 'native language' and with a more explicitly personal voice than was the case with their male counterparts. And they collectively succeeded in crafting a style that adhered to aristocratic conventions while achieving a high level of literary excellence.

Of the many examples of Heian diaries written with a clear literary purpose, three stand out— *The Tosa Diary* (Tosanikki, 930) by Ki no Tsurayuki; *The Gossamer Journal* (Kagerônikki, 974) by the mother of Fujiwara no Michitsuna, and the *Diary of Lady Murasaki* (MurasakiShikibunikki, 1010).

The Tosa Diary

This is the work of one of the great Heian court poets, Ki no Tsurayuki— the chief compiler of Japan's first Imperial waka anthology, the *Kokinshū* (905). Interestingly, Tsurayuki's account of the return voyage to Kyoto from his governorship in the province of Tosa adopts the fictive voice of a woman who was part of the ship's company. Incorporating some sixty poems attributed to many of the passengers, which provide a lively verse counterpoint to the daily record of the two-month voyage, the diarist pays particular attention to one of the passengers— the mother of a child who had died in the provinces.

> 12th month, 27th day: During the bustle of departure. . . one member of the party had looked on in silence, thinking of a little girl, born in the capital, who had died suddenly in the province. It ought to have been a cause of joy to be setting out toward the city, but the parent was lost in grief for the absent child. The others were deeply sympathetic. A certain person wrote a poem and brought it out:
>
> At long last, I think,
> We head toward the capital
> And yet this sadness,
> Because of one among us
> Who will not be going home [Based on McCullough, CJP 75-76]

Tsurayuki's fictive diary thus plays on the joy and anticipation of return to the capital, juxtaposed against the grieving parent and the solicitude of her fellow travelers. Yet it incorporates very mundane concerns as well— for instance, the scene that greeted the diarist upon returning home: "When we reached the house and entered the gate, the disrepair that greeted us was terrible. . . The sheer desolation of the scene evoked exclamations of grief and despair."

Overall, though, Tsurayuki's*Tosa Diary* is noteworthy for its many poems, which run the gamut from the halting work of children who were aboard the ship to highly polished verse, together with critical

commentary. The density of poetic content and criticism suggests that Tsurayuki's underlying aim was to have his 'diary' serve as a handbook of poetic style and technique.

Moreover, the *Tosa Diary* is recognized as the pioneering work of an important subgenre of personal narrative— the travel diary (*kikônikki*). Japanese poets often took to the road, and their travels would inevitably inspire poetic production along the way. In fact, it could be argued that the very purpose of travel, in some cases, was to inspire fresh new avenues of poetic production. Be that as it may, the poetically-dense travel diary has long been a fixture of the Japanese literary canon.

The Gossamer Journal

One of the most remarkable works of Heian prose is the *Gossamer Journal* (Kagerônikki, 974), an account of a woman's loveless marriage to a high-ranking courtier, Fujiwara Kaneie. The diarist/ wife is known to us only as the mother of Michitsuna, in keeping with the practice of referring to court women by reference to a male relative. Praised as a great beauty, she was regarded as a poet of the first magnitude. Her 'journal,' which bears a closer resemblance to personal reminiscence, comprises episodes written over a span of twenty years (954-74). These episodes are interspersed with lively and often acerbic poetic jousting between the peevish wife and her philandering husband. Overall, the journal affords a moving account of domestic tedium, jealousy, melancholia, and righteous indignation that is stunningly contemporary in its feel.

> [956] So the days went by. Kaneie's visits did not cease entirely, but it was impossible for me to feel at ease with him, and our relations grew more and more strained. There was even a time when he turned around and left, declaring himself vanquished by my sulkiness. . . And now that his affections had strayed, he removed his belongings from my house. [CJP 113-14]
>
> [966] Although this apparently secure marriage had lasted eleven or twelve years, I had lived in constant misery, tormented day and night by the inferiority of my position. . . With no one to order repairs and look after things, my house and its environs had become more and more dilapidated, and it upset me that Kaneie should come and go blithely in such a place, without seeming to care whether its condition bothered me or not. [CJP 142-43]

Despite the evidence of male prerogative and the relatively confined circumstance of courtier wives, the *Gossamer* diarist, together with the poet Komachi, belie the pernicious stereotype of eternally meek, compliant Japanese womanhood. Indeed, through her frank and at times scathing remarks, she exacts a certain literary revenge on her boorish, uncouth husband. Yet the diarist's melancholic and brooding voice dominates the work as a whole and is recapitulated in the final entry for the year 968:

> So time passes, but the advent of a new year brings no joy to one who is sunk in grief, her life far from what she would have desired. When I reflect on the perpetual uncertainty in which I exist, it seems to me that this has been the journal of a woman whose fortunes are as evanescent as the gossamer shimmer of a heat wave in the sky. [CJP 155]

Something akin to the *Gossamer* diarist's anxieties and insecurities would mark the diary of MurasakiShikibu.

Diary of Lady Murasaki

What we know of the otherwise anonymous author of *The Tale of Genji* is largely based on her diary, which she composed around the year 1010. Her personal accounts of life in the Heian court, with a focus on the comings and goings of her great patron Fujiwara no Michinaga, are immediately reminiscent of the writings of SeiShônagon. In fact, these two court ladies were literary rivals with evidently scant regard for one another. Murasaki remarks as follows:

> SeiShônagon is dreadfully conceited and thinks herself so clever. . . Those who think of themselves as being superior to everyone else will inevitably suffer and come to a bad end.

But the diarist then proceeds to become moody and dispirited:

> And so it is that I criticize others [such as Shônagon], yet here is one who has survived thus far without having achieved anything of note. I have nothing to look forward to in the future that might afford the slightest consolation. . . Everything conspires to make me unhappy. [Based on Shirane, TJL 449, 452]

Murasaki's melancholia recalls that of the *Gossamer* diarist. Both of them are unusually candid in their glum self-assessment. Yet for the author of *The Tale of Genji* to lament her failure to achieve anything of note strikes one as ironic in the extreme.

As the above examples attest, Heian diaries provide a running commentary upon events and experiences, emotions and musings. They combine frank self-expression, reflective commentary, poetic counterpoint, and fictional license. Bordering the domains of fiction (*monogatari*) and essay (*zuihitsu*), and a congenial vehicle for poetic expression, the classical diary is anything but a self-contained genre but rather points to the integrated quality of creative expression among the Japanese court aristocracy. Notwithstanding Murasaki's lament, the achievement of women writers across the literary spectrum is among the chief legacies of Heian culture.

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Discussion Questions and Topics

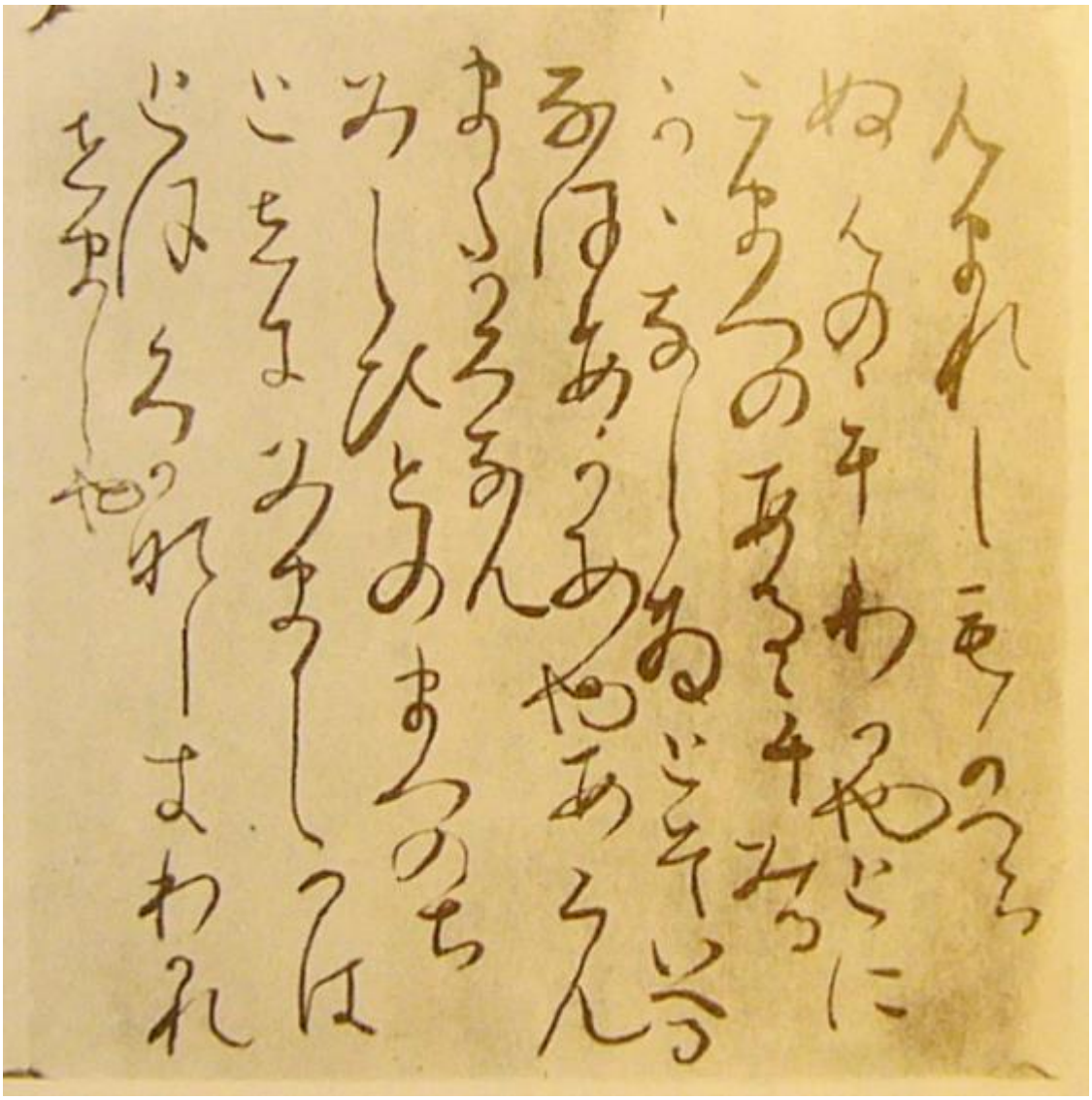
Compare the role of poetry and poetic expression in the three diary examples.

Does Tsurayuki's adoption of a female persona result in a convincing evocation of a woman's perspective, or is the persona transparently fictional? What might be gained from such a strategy?

Compare the perspective of a courtier wife living in her own household (*Gossamer* diarist) with that of a serving lady within the court (Murasaki).

What most appeals to you about these diaries? What strikes you as disappointing or difficult to grasp?

Images



Detail from Fujiwara Teika's early 13th-century transcription of Tsurayuki's *Tosa Nikki*. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

PART IV : ESSAY

***ZUIHITSU* (Essay)**

Heian Literature and the Role of *Zuihitsu*

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. Personal narratives, too, gained wide currency, and once established they would maintain their privileged status over the centuries. There developed a particular interest in the so-called *zuihitsu*, or essay form—writing that recounted one's opinions, reminiscences, and reflections in a seemingly random and spontaneous fashion. As with other Heian personal writing, the accomplished *zuihitsu*would achieve a fusion of 'in-the-moment' improvisatory invention and a mastery of courtly style and elegant diction. The inclusion of details regarding day-to-day events and experiences points to the interconnectedness of Heian essays, diaries, and memoirs. In a sense, these so-called 'genres' are best understood as variants of personal narratives crafted in the 'courtly style,' intended both as a mode of private expression and a literary produce to be shared and appreciated among the impressively literate courtly class. It bears nothing, however, that poetry and poetic sentiment were an integral component of these narrative forms.

The Heian *zuihitsu* genre has long been associating with a single work that epitomizes the genre— *The Pillow Book* of SeiShônagon (Makura no sôshi, ca 1010).

The Pillow Book

Paralleling *Tale of Genji*, *The Pillow Book* was highly regarded in its own day and has ever since been regarded as the unrivalled classic of its genre. We know little of its author, a contemporary of MurasakiShikibu who served Lady Teishi, the Imperial consort. But her collection of personal musings and reflections, numbering over three hundred in the standard edition, contain some of the most-cited passages in all of Japanese literature.

The Pillow Book begins with a classic statement regarding the seasons and how they are to be properly appreciated:

> In spring, the dawn. As the light gradually increases, the rim of the hills reddens just a bit, and we see slender purplish-red clouds trailing in the sky.
>
> In summer, the night. I need no mention the times when the moon is visible, but it is pleasant also to watch fireflies flitting to and fro in the darkness. Even the falling rain has its charm.
>
> In autumn, the evening. When the bright setting sun has sunk very close to the mountaintops, it is moving to see crows flying toward their roosts. Still more delightful is a file of wild geese looking very tiny.
>
> In winter, the early morning. When the frost is white, the sight of servants hastily kindling fires and carrying glowing charcoal here and there seems peculiarly appropriate to the season. [Based on McCullough, CJP 158-59]

SeiShônagon was no shrinking violet, and her acerbic and witty commentary on the manners of courtly contemporaries has a pungency and flamboyant confidence that time has not diminished. Although attuned to the religious practices of the day, she had no hesitation in calling attention to very down-to-earth concerns regarding the Buddhist clergy and the religious pretensions of her contemporaries. For instance, consider Episode 39 of *The Pillow Book*:

> A preacher ought to be handsome. It is only when we keep our gaze fixed firmly on a good-looking monk's face that we feel the holiness of the text he expounds. If the man is ill-favored,

> our gaze wanders and we lose track of what he is saying. For this reason, it seems to me that listening to an ugly monk's sermon may actually lead us into sin. . .
>
> I wonder, too, about the honesty of those who make a point of being the first to arrive wherever there is to be a sermon, informing us that sutra expositions are holy occasions and that they themselves are simply bursting with piety. [Based on CJP 165]

The largest and most distinctive category of *The Pillow Book* is its many lists of items under set topics (*monozukushi*). Shônagon was a great list-maker, itemizing things that she found depressing, elegant, embarrassing, adorable, and awkward. These wonderfully idiosyncratic expressions of her tastes and attitudes have come to epitomize her work, and they have generated various forms of imitation over the centuries.

Under the category of 'Hateful Things,' for instance, she includes: a hair that has got caught in the stone on which one is rubbing one's ink stick; an elderly person who warms the palms of his hands over a brazier and stretches out the wrinkles; a flight of crows circling about making loud caws; people who snore and sneeze; mosquitoes; fleas; scurrying mice, and the husbands of nurse-maids. She observes that oxen should have small foreheads, that page-boys should be small with loosely hanging hair, and that palm-leaf carriages should move slowly.

The following items are listed under the category 'Things That Make One Uncomfortable':

- While conversing with a guest whom one has received, one hears people inside the house saying all sorts of indiscreet things. It is irritating to have no way of shutting them up.
- A man of whom one is fond gets frightfully drunk and keeps repeating the same thing with a sagacious air.
- The doting parents of an unattractive young child pet him, play with him, and repeat what he says, imitating his voice.
- With a knowing air, an ignoramus drops the names of historical figures in front of a learned person.
- Someone makes another person listen to a mediocre poem of his own and announces that so-and-so has praised it.
- A conspicuously neglectful son-in-law encounters his father-in-law at a public function. . . [Based on CJP 178-79]

Everything in Shônagon's world is subject to her unflinching judgmental gaze, and her pronouncements bespeak an exacting standard of decorum and style. What we might regard as superficial and merely modish is rendered as something akin to a moral imperative— surface remade into substance. SeiShônagon's unique work did much to establish propriety, decorum, and good taste as important cultural properties. And her brilliant fusion of social satire, wit, and wisdom is reminiscent of 'stylish' writers of our own day— among others, one thinks here of Dorothy Parker, Diana Vreeland, and M.F.K. Fisher.

In conclusion, the essayistic Heian *zuihitsu*genre, as mastered by SeiShônagon, provides a compelling and convincingly authentic glimpse into the rich interiors of courtly life and the tastes and peculiarities of the aristocratic class. As with the other classical genres, the fusion here of fictive, poetic, and diary-like passages and episodes is worth noting.

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Discussion Questions and Topics

What are the similarities and differences between the classical Japanese essay form and Western examples with which you are familiar?

What are the qualities of 'selfhood' that emerge in SeiShônagon's work? What does her work say about the life styles of Heian courtiers— their tastes, attitudes, and interactions? Can it be argued that the work chiefly conveys a female perspective, which should not be attributed to the world of the male courtiers?

If Shônagon's work can be said to constitute a handbook of courtly style and deportment, what are the chief attributes of this style? Do the qualities that Shônagon admirers have any parallels in our own world? Are her own tastes and standards ultimately superficial and elitist?

How does this work serve to express the lyrical and poetic sensitivity that ostensibly underscores Heian literature in general?

Images

Iconic representation of SeiShônagon and a representative poem, included in Fujiwara Teika's early 13th-century *One Hundred Poems by One Hundred Poets* (HyakuninIsshu). Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Depiction of SeiShônagon and a courtier in a woodblock print attributed to TsukiokaSettei, 1760s.
Source: Public domain.

SECTION II : MEDIEVAL PERIOD

Contents

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.

PART I : POETRY

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 II : DRAMA

Noh Drama and its Antecedents

Medieval Japanese culture represents the amalgamation of many centuries of literary and performative styles and genres, together with the profound and aesthetically-rich Buddhist meditative traditions. *Noh* drama can be said to representative the confluence of these influences and inspirations.

As with so much of Japan's great cultural legacy, elite patronage played a key role. The emergence of Noh drama is closely associated with one of the early Ashikaga shoguns— Yoshimitsu (1358-1408)— who emerged as an influential patron of the arts in late 14th-century Kyoto. Yoshimitsu is noteworthy for having sought out talented and culturally-sophisticated commoners, providing the wherewithal for their entrée into the elite ranks. Such an individual was the brilliant performer and playwright Zeami (1363-1443), who would go on to establish a new dramatic genre— *Noh*— which would become a fixed landmark on the Japanese cultural map.

Adapting established musical and dramatic conventions and incorporating a range of Buddhist themes, literary allusions, and a rich lyrical vocabulary, Zeami achieved an extraordinary syncretism in his plays for the *Noh* stage. His texts, which have long been considered literary classics in their own right, are performed verbatim, with no improvisatory embroidery. It is the actors, in conjunction with a chorus and musical accompaniment, who collectively breathe life into the words and create the other-worldly atmosphere that Noh has come to represent over the centuries.

Noh Staging and Performance Styles

The *Noh* stage is conspicuously spare and unadorned. The single— and singular— image of a pine tree serves as the conventional stage backdrop. The effect is that of a sacred, meditative space, appropriate for austere ritual and inspiring a deep engagement on the part of the audience. The language of the *Noh* text— with Zeami's work as the pinnacle— is difficult and highly allusive, requiring a high level of literary and cultural sophistication. In short, *Noh*is anything but popular theater, and it has long been considered an aristocratic entertainment. Indeed, its patronage was for centuries restricted to the elite classes, who were expected to have attained sufficient background in, and appreciation of, Japan's classical traditions and texts.

Noh performance is conspicuously non-mimetic; actors' movements are deliberate and highly stylized, conveying solemnity, deep significance, and lyrical depth. Actors share the stage with a chorus— seated individuals who intone portions of the *Noh* text in a manner reminiscent of classical Greek theater. Indeed, the affinity of these two great theatrical traditions has long been noted and appreciated.

Additionally, *Noh* performance includes an important musical component— flute and drums, which generally accompany the various dances (*mai*) that are a fixture of the performance. *Noh* music and dance complement the narrative and recitative core of the play— the story being enacted on stage. Zeami's genius lay in the manner in which he selected key episodes and figures from the classical literary tradition and 'repurposed' them for the *Noh* stage. His two chief inspirations were the twin masterworks of Japanese fiction— the mid-Heian *Tale of Genji* (Genjimonogatari) and the early 13th-century *Tale of the Heike* (Heike monogatari). Additionally, Zeami composed plays inspired by Japan's canonical poets— legendary figures such as Narihira, Komachi, and Saigyô. Indeed, it can be argued that *Noh* drama is irreducibly lyrical in its language and staging, serving as a vehicle for the preservation and advancement of Japanese poetry as the bedrock of Japan's cultural heritage.

Up until modern times, *Noh*was almost exclusively a male performance genre, subject to elaborate conventions and role types. Harking back to Greek theater, the distinction between the lead and supporting roles is crucial. The *Noh* protagonist— the so-called *shite*— is a figure who appears in the first act as an 'ordinary' individual who is encountered by the supporting 'deuteragonist' figure, the so-called *waki*— typically a traveling priest who establishes the identity of the *shite* and elicits his or her story. In the second act of the play, the *shite* appears bearing a mask that signifies one's transformed identity as a ghostly figure, apparition, demon, or wandering spirit seeking healing and salvation. Here the *waki* figure

typically serves in the role of exorcist or priestly healer, through whose agency the *shite* figure— and the play itself— achieves some closure.

Other aspects of *Noh* staging deserve mention. Notwithstanding the austere, spare ambience, the *shite* character is typically adorned in a strikingly ornate garment. Moreover, the *shite* generally employs a fan, in such a way as to enhance the dramatic aura. It is liberally employed in the play's dance segments. And the *shite*'s conspicuous mask— an exquisitely crafted object entrusted to artisans of the highest caliber— can be said to assume a life of its own. The distinctive styles of Noh dance, which have roots tracing back to elegant *gagaku* court performance of the 8th century, often dominate the performance. And the manner of textual recitation— *utai*— which is shared by *shite*, *waki*, and chorus, has long been a pursuit of serious amateur practitioners, for whom the language of *Noh*, appropriately intoned, possesses unique artistic value independent of the play's actual staging.

In a typical *Noh* performance, the two acts are separated by an intermission performance, called the *ai-kyôgen*. In contrast with the solemnity of the Noh, the *ai-kyôgen* in effect provides comic relief in the form of a prosaic rendering of the drama, with actors speaking in informal vernacular and 'behaving' in a more naturalistic manner. In sum, then, the Noh stage provides in microcosm the full spectrum of Japanese performative and narrative arts.

Categories, Repertoire, and Schools of *Noh* Performance

It was during the Tokugawa period that *Noh* drama crystallized into specific role categories and performance schools. The five categories— each with its corresponding masks, dance styles, and narrative conventions— are as follows: 1) god; 2) warrior; 3) woman; 4) mad woman; 5) demon. The entire *Noh* repertoire comprises some 250 plays— although many of them are rarely if ever performed. Again, each play is based upon some classical literary text, legendary figure, or spiritual value.

Four major schools of Noh emerged during the Tokugawa— and they are still active: 1) the Tokyo-based Kanze and Hosho schools; 2) The Kyoto-based Kongo school; 3) and the Nara-based Komparu school. The casual outsider would be hard-pressed to differentiate among performances of the different schools. Rather, this is the domain of arts connoisseurship— as with opera, classical music, and so forth.

Representative Plays

The following plays by Zeami can be said to epitomize the classical quality of *Noh* drama, which hinges upon the masterful retelling of earlier works and episodes in the life of legendary cultural figures.

Atsumori Based upon a famous episode from the *Tale of the Heike*, this play concerns the sad fate of Atsumori, a young Taira clan nobleman who was killed in battle by the Minamoto warrior, Kumagai. In the play, Kumagai appears as the Buddhist priest Rensho, intent upon praying for the spiritual repose of the man he had killed. (Tyler, 37-48)

Izutsu Considered by many to be Zeami's finest play, *Izutsu* (The Well-Cradle) is a deeply moving dramatization of the canonical 10th-century *Tales of Ise* (Isemonogatari). Incorporating *waka* poetry by the great Heian poet Narihira, the play is suffused with romantic longing and a wistful evocation of Heian courtly beauty and sentiment. (Tyler, 120-32)

Nonomiya One of many Noh plays that retell episodes drawn from the *Tale of Genji*, *Nonomiya* (The Wildwood Shrine) concerns the legend of Lady Rokujo, whose unquenchable desire for Genji's affections unleashed a vengeful spirit that cost the lives of her rivals. While recalling the novel's dramatic scenes, the drama ultimately seeks the spiritual reconciliation of the tormented Rokujo. (Tyler, 205-14)

SekideraKomachi One of several plays centering on the legendary figure of Ono no Komachi, the celebrated 9th-century poet known for her beauty and her passionate nature, *SekideraKomachi* presents an homage to the Japanese lyrical tradition and the 'Way of poetry.' Appearing as an old, forlorn woman, the Komachi*shite* figure is animated in the process of recalling her youth and the poetry that epitomized it. (Tyler, 225-36)

The *Noh* Aesthetic

As a syncretic and classically-inspired Japanese cultural tradition, *Noh* drama incorporates elements of Heian courtly beauty (*miyabi*), Buddhist ritual and belief, and prized (albeit highly abstract) poetic values such as *yugen* (mystery and depth), *sabi*(imperfection and rusticity), and *mujo* (ephemerality). More to the point, the playwright Zeami produced a number of treatises on the art and craft of Noh performance. These center on the notion of *hana*— the 'flower' of sublime acting style and perfection of form.

One of the key aesthetic qualities of *Noh* concerns *jo-ha-kyu*, a term that refers to the conventionalized rhythm and pacing of the performance. Deriving from the ancient *gagaku* dance genre, *jo-ha-kyu* is said to govern the interaction of an actor's movements, the musical accompaniment, and the play's narrative flow. The language itself privileges the orthodox convention of five- and seven-syllable lines— the heartbeat, so to speak, of Japan's lyrical tradition.

***Noh* in the Modern Age**

As with other time-honored Japanese arts, *Noh* drama has managed to survive— even thrive— in the modern world. Thanks to the vibrancy of its chief schools, *Noh* continues to be staged in the traditional manner. What is more, a National Noh Theater in Tokyo further ensures the continued viability of a performance art requiring decades of training and apprenticeship. It bears noting that Japan's public media outlet, NHK, regularly broadcasts *Noh* performances. A less rigid style of performance marks the many regional and local *Noh* societies, which welcome the participation of women and young people.

Among Western artists influenced by *Noh*, one can cite the noted British composer Benjamin Britten, whose*Curlew River* (1964) is an adaptation of the play *Sumidagawa*. And modern Japanese writers such as Yukio Mishima have written plays that retell *Noh* in a contemporary idiom and staging. As might be expected, versions and variants of *Noh* have found their way into Japanese pop culture, in the form of *manga*, *anime*, and assorted '*Noh*-esque' products on the consumer marketplace. Finally, one can find hundreds and hundreds of *Noh* performances— long and short— on You Tube.

Ultimately, *Noh* drama can perhaps best be understood as an iconic signifier of 'traditional Japan,' on a par with geisha, samurai, and kabuki. It surely ranks among the most distinguished of Japan's virtuoso arts.

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Discussion Questions and Topics

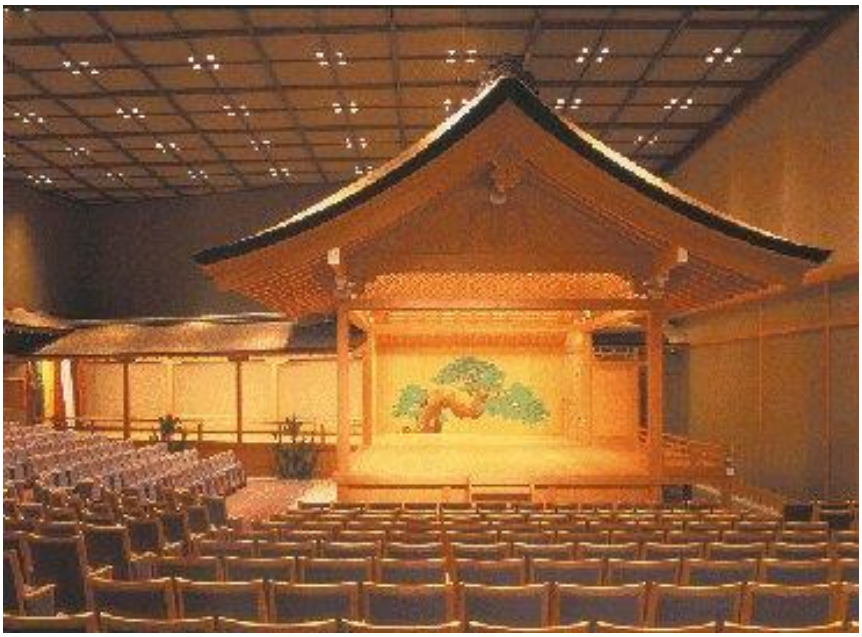
As a classical performance art, *Noh* can be regarded as irrelevant— even intimidating— to those fascinated by Japan but lacking the sufficient background or cultural sensitivity. What would be a good counter-argument here? In what sense can 'esoteric' products such as *Noh* be precisely that which has the power to attract one's interest? How should one go about becoming more knowledgeable and appreciative?

What seem to be the most accessible aspects of Noh? What seems most alien— and alienating? Keeping in mind that *Noh* is ultimately a performance art, allow yourself to take in as many performances as possible. Again, You Tube offers them in abundance.

What does it mean to identify *Noh* drama as a syncretic art? How does it compare, say, with classical Greek drama? Or is there an East/ West divide that cannot be breached?

How is one to gain sufficient understanding of Japanese poetry, which is a chief inspiration for *Noh*? Or, rather, should one not be free to glean whatever is appealing about this fascinatingly complex cultural product?

Images (Source for all: Wikimedia commons)



Contemporary *Noh*theater, with its 'shrine-like' ambience. Note the *hashigakari* walkway to the left, which provides stage access to the actors.

Stylized *Noh* stage, with robed *shite* actor in foreground, chorus on the right, and musicians at the rear.

Noh performance on the stage at Itsukushima Shrine, on the Inland Sea near Hiroshima

Three images of the same Noh mask, demonstrating the range of emotional expressiveness that a masked actor can achieve

Part III : FICTION

PART III : MONOGATARI (Fiction)

Medieval Literature and the Role of *Monogatari*

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 for the place of *monogatari* per se in the larger medieval literary context, it both reflected the influence of Heian fiction and the radically different world of the samurai and accounts— both factual and legendary— of their exploits and intrigues.

Historically speaking, the medieval era was ushered in with the founding, in 1192, of a Shogunal center in Kamakura. It was in the middle of the twelfth century when two powerful warrior clans— the Minamoto and Taira— became embroiled in a decades-long rivalry that culminated in a series of battles ending in 1185. The Taira forces had the upper hand but were eventually vanquished by the Minamoto, led by Yoritomo and his half-brother Yoshitsune. The so-called '*Gempei* Wars,' lasting some thirty years, were marked by battlefield heroics, political intrigues, and social turmoil. These events would be recounted in *The Tale of the Heike*, Japan's great warrior epic and second only to *Genji* as a certified national treasure. It was the victorious Yoritomo who essentially crowned himself, in 1192, as Shogun and established his clan as hereditary claimants to the newly-established shogunal office.

Warrior-centered *monogatari* would subsequently be a fixture of medieval fiction and, as with the *Genji*-centered Heian *monogatari*, they would inspire literary and artistic production to the present day.

Heike Monogatari and the Warrior Myth

If the *Tale of Genji* represents the *yin* pole of a feminized Japanese persona, the *Tale of the Heike* stands as its *yang* counterpart, centering on samurai masculinity and prowess. An anonymous work with a complex textual history, *Heike monogatari* recounts a series of dramatic episodes that mark the climax of the *Gempei* conflict. But despite its basis in historical actuality, the work is in effect a Buddhist parable, whose theme resounds at the very outset: *Gionshōja no kane no koe, shogyōmujō no hibikiari*— 'The sound of the GionShōja bell echoes the impermanence of all things.'

The central theme of *mujō*— impermanence— is then further refined: 'The proud do not endure; they are like a dream on a spring night. The mighty fall at last, they are as dust before the wind.' Thus, the tragic fate of the once-proud Taira clan is sealed at the very outset in this incantatory, almost scriptural pronouncement. And the karmic blame for the Taira's tragic fate is laid at the feet of the clan chief, Kiyomori, whose outrageous behavior and hubris were met with divine retribution visited upon the entire clan.

If *Genji* is marked by a pathos of longing that plays upon courtly sentiment and romantic sensibilities, *Heike* is equally marked by a tragic pathos— the decline and fall of a once-proud family. Its emblematic figures — Yoshitsune, Yoshinaka, and Atsumori, among others— are endowed with a certain 'nobility of failure,' to cite the title of Ivan Morris's illuminating study of Japan's pantheon of failed heroes.

Warrior exploits— and there are many— constitute a first order of dramatic narrative in the *Heike*. The following is a representative episode:

> [Jômyô] let fly a fast and furious barrage. . . killing twelve men instantly and wounding eleven others. . . He then moved down five enemies with his spear and was engaging a sixth when the blade snapped in the middle. He abandoned the weapon and fought with his sword. Hard-pressed by a host of adversaries, he struck out in every direction, employing zigzag, interlacing, crosswise, dragonfly reverse, and waterwheel maneuvers. He cut down eight men on the spot, and struck the helmet of the ninth such a mighty blow that the sword snapped at the hilt rivet. . . [Based on McCullough, Genji*and* Heike 311]

Contrary to one's expectation, however, the warriors are not all men, as the following account dramatically illustrates:

> Yoshinaka had brought two female attendants, Tomoe and Yamabuki, with him. . . Tomoe was the more beautiful of the two. . . She was also a remarkably strong archer, and with a sword she was a warrior equal to a thousand. . . When there was a battle to be fought, Yoshinaka sent her out to act as his first captain. . .
>
> As she sat there, thirty horsemen came into view, led by OndaMoroshige, a man famous in Musashi Province for his prodigious strength. Tomoe galloped in among them. She rode up alongside Moroshige, seized him in a powerful grip, and pulled him down against the pommel of her saddle. Holding him motionless, she twisted off his head and threw it away. . [Based on Genji*and* Heike 378, 380]

One of the most affecting episodes in *Heike monogatari* concerns the sorry fate of Atsumori, an embattled Taira youth who finds himself no match for the great Minamoto warrior Kumagai. Although moved by the lad's beauty and noble bearing, Kumagai is obliged to take his head as a trophy. Discovering that Atsumori had gone into battle carrying only a flute in a brocade bag, Kumagai is deeply remorseful at this sad turn of events, and he resolves to enter the priesthood and pray for the repose of Atsumori's spirit. In other words, *Heike* is not merely a 'warrior epic' but presents a nuanced portrayal of character as well. And here the work can be said to pay homage to *Genji*.

As with *The Tale of Genji*, which was one of many Heian *monogatari*, *The Tale of the Heike* belongs to the medieval genre of *gunkimonogatari*— warrior accounts. Such works were based on historical conflicts and featured heavily dramatized scenes of battle. The *Heike* tales would serve as the model for subsequent works in this genre.

For instance, there is the ironically-titled *Taiheiki*(A Chronicle of the Great Peace; anonymous, late 14thcentury)— an epic account of the prolonged conflict that witnessed the overthrow of the Kamakura Shogunate in the mid-14th century. Interweaving gruesome battle scenes and behind-the-scenes political intrigues, the work is anything but 'peaceful.' But the generic appeal of warrior tales, which was a fixture of medieval literature, has long attracted readers— Japanese and otherwise— with a penchant for the world of samurai exploits.

And so it was that the twin pinnacles of Japan's early *monogatari*tradition— *The Tale of Genji* and *The Tale of the Heike*— would inspire endless retelling, pictorial representation, and performative adaptations. In particular, the *Heike* work, which in effect is a sequence of dramatized accounts, gave rise to a unique tradition of balladry— *Heikyoku*— which adapted famous episodes into what would become a standard repertoire of ballads. These became the property of a guild of itinerant musicians, the *biwahōshi*— blind performers who traveled widely, disseminating *Heike* legend and lore throughout the land.

Notwithstanding the centrifugal forces that extended the reach of literary and cultural materials to the masses living on the periphery, the great works of Japanese literature remained the product of enduring courtly styles, conventions, and techniques. These in turn would be adapted to suit the distinctive medieval aesthetic of transience and ephemerality.

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Discussion Questions and Topics

As both a 'classical' work of Japanese fiction and the most famous literary evocation if its warrior class, how does *The Tale of the Heike* compare with Murasaki's*Genji*?

The influence of medieval Buddhism on the literature and arts of the period is both profound and pervasive. This raises the question of how someone lacking knowledge of the Buddhist 'subtext' can best approach— and appreciate— this literature. Give thought to parallels with examples of Western literature and art that are imbued with Judeo-Christian or Islamic 'content.'

Can Japan's meditative aesthetic, which is typically identified as 'uniquely Japanese,' be seen as having universal relevance?

In what ways has Japan's medieval literature and culture— especially the iconic samurai warrior— been deployed in the modern and contemporary media and pop-cultural context?

Images

1898 woodblock print, by ToyoharaChikanobu, depicting Tomoe takingMoroshige's head. Source: Artelino Japanese Prints.

Woodblock print (ca 1820) depicting the encounter between Kumagai andAtsumori. Source: Library of Congress.

大河ドラマ

NHK

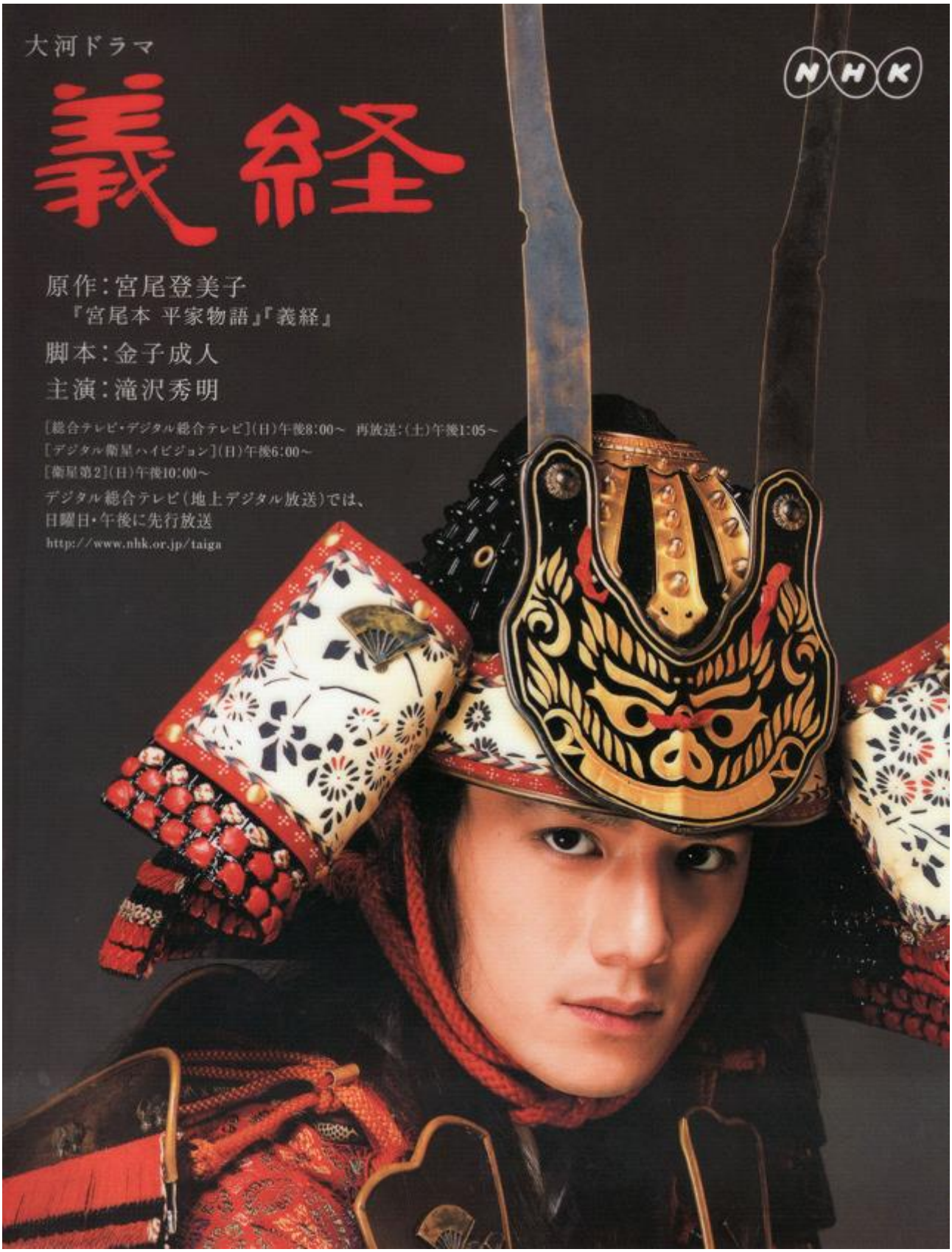
義経

原作：宮尾登美子
『宮尾本 平家物語』『義経』

脚本：金子成人

主演：滝沢秀明

［総合テレビ・デジタル総合テレビ］（日）午後8:00～　再放送：（土）午後1:05～
［デジタル衛星ハイビジョン］（日）午後6:00～
［衛星第2］（日）午後10:00～
デジタル総合テレビ（地上デジタル放送）では、
日曜日・午後に先行放送
http://www.nhk.or.jp/taiga



The figure of Yoshitsune in a publicity piece for NHK's year-long (2005) weekly TV drama featuring the exploits of the great Minamoto warrior. Source: NHK

*Heikyoku*performance in Tokyo, 2000. Source: Kokugakuin University.

Part IV : AUTOBIOGRAPHY

***NIKKI* (Diary)**

Medieval Literature and the Role of *Nikki*

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 for medieval diary literature: In line with the classical Heian diaries, the major texts are the work of women in the imperial aristocracy. Reflecting the ambiguous borders of personal narrative genre categories, this work combines elements of diary and memoir, with the all-but-obligatory poetic content and lyrical sentiment.

Three works are particularly noteworthy. Two are by aristocratic women, Lady Nijô and the Nun Abutsu, who relate very different life experiences. The third is a poetically-dense travel diary by an anonymous male courtier.

The Confessions of Lady Nijô

Spanning forty-five years in the life of a woman of high rank, *The Confessions of Lady Nijô* (Towazugatari, ca 1310) recounts the unlikely vicissitudes and intimate affairs that ensued from her having been orphaned as a girl and hence deprived of parental support. What amounts to an intimate autobiography ends with the lady renouncing the world and taking Buddhist vows.

Written retrospectively, these 'confessions' hardly qualify as a diary in the conventional sense, but the author's diary-like attention to the details of everyday life provides a convincingly authentic glimpse into her emotional makeup. The affinity here with the personal reflections of the mid-Heian *Gossamer* diarist is noteworthy.

In particular, Lady Nijô speaks openly of her initiation into the world of amorous relations:

> His Majesty's behavior that night was callous. I think my thin robes must have ripped rather badly, but he did as he pleased with me. I hated being alive, hated even the dawn moon. . .

Yet her initial revulsion quickly gives way to a more willing acquiescence:

> What tutelage might have been responsible for the sudden attraction I felt as I looked at His Majesty standing there in a red-lined green-banded hunting robe, a lavender inner robe, and a pair of bound-patterned baggy trousers? I marvel at the complexity of a woman's heart. [CJP 297]

Although one is unable to fully appreciate the precise appeal of the lavishly-described courtly fashions, it bears noting that Lady Nijô likens her romantic entanglements to the accounts of Prince Genji and his lovers, recalling MurasakiShikibu's now three hundred year-old classic of courtly romance. In the course of things, she speaks candidly of her willing participation in her romantic affairs, one of which resulted in a

pregnancy and the subsequent death of her infant son. Grief-stricken, Lady Nijô reflects upon the unremitting travails of human existence and imagines abandoning the world of attachment and desire by becoming a nun. This in effect would be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Of the world beyond the confines of the court we learn next to nothing.

The Journal of the Sixteenth-Night Moon

A roughly contemporaneous work, *The Journal of the Sixteenth-Night Moon* (Izayoi Nikki, 1279-80) by the nun Abutsu (1220-83), bears a closer resemblance to Ki no Tsurayuki's*Tosa Diary* of the early Heian period. Both are travel diaries (*kikônikki*) in which poetry is predominant. Abutsu, who had been raised in the imperial court, belonged to one of its chief poetic lineages and was herself a noted *waka* poet. In fact, her journal was written on the occasion of a trip to Kamakura for the express purpose of petitioning the shogunal authorities regarding the disposition of her estate. The precise legal details are beside the point of the journal, whose underlying purpose is utterly clear— to exalt the 'Way of Poetry' in the face of its evident decline and to defend her own poetic faction against rival claims.

In short, the journey to Kamakura served as a 'poetic occasion' par excellence, yielding a trove of *waka* poetry and reverential praise for Japan as a divinely-inspired poetic realm:

> It seemed to me that there might be those who regarded the art of poetry as lacking in seriousness, as mere frivolous amusement. But our wise men have told us that this art has helped to regulate society and to calm unrest in the Land of the Rising Sun from time immemorial. . . [Based on CJP 340]

Beginning her journal account by thus invoking the 8th-century *Kojiki*account of Japan's mythic origins, Abutsu goes on to defend the claims of the Mikohidari poetic lineage, to which she belongs. What ensues is a record of the journey itself, with each stop along the way occasioning the obligatory *waka* and a host of references to the classical poetic tradition— the *Kokinshû* anthology, the *Tales of Ise*, and medieval poets such as Saigyô and Teika. What is more, Abutsu happily notes the delivery of poetic parcels from the capital, which elicit a joyous response.

Abutsu's account contains no mention of the actual legal proceedings in Kamakura and its disposition. Rather, it concludes with a long, 150-line poem (*chôka*) that essentially presents her case in alternating five- and seven-syllable poetic lines. This remarkable poetic deposition reduces to the following four lines:

> With no concern for myself
> I trust the government. . .
> If only it will reach a verdict
>
> Without delay [CJP 374-375]

Although the evidence is unclear, Abutsu appears to have died in Kamakura while awaiting the shogunal verdict. Thankfully, her literary record survives.

A Journey to the East

A somewhat earlier account of a trip to Kamakura is the work of an anonymous courtier with obvious poetic credentials. *A Journey to the East* (Tôkankikô, ca 1242) predates Abutsu's work by almost forty years. But unlike her own explicit rationale for the trip, this anonymous diarist provides no reason for leaving the capital— other than his vague sense of anxiety and restlessness as he approaches his fiftieth year.

As though compelled to cite every possible poetic inspiration— both Japanese *and* Chinese— the diarist provides a dense poetic framework for his journey, making it clear that he is an accomplished court poet imbued with a lyrical spirit. But unlike Abutsu, whose reason for making the trip is made explicit, this

gentleman leaves this to our imagination. Yet both diarists share the same destination and follow the same itinerary, which is rich with poetic and other literary associations.

Foreshadowing the celebrated travel diaries of Matsuo Bashô by well over four hundred years, *A Journey to the East* pays homage to the great poet Saigyô, who left a verse record of places visited by this more recent traveler. The diarist invokes the trope of 'the loneliness of travel,' a lyrical convention associated with one's departure from Kyoto. And he expresses the Buddhistic sentiment of *mujô*— the evanescence of all things.

Yet despite his 'political correctness' as a court poet, the diarist is rather more interested than Abutsu in observing and depicting actual scenes he encounters along the way. For instance, he notes that Mount Fuji's beauty is "even greater than in pictures." Curiously, perhaps, he is more moved by the spectacle of the adjacent marshlands, which appear to strike a responsive chord:

> Sky and water merge, suffused with the reflected green of the mountains. Reed-cutters pole small boats here and there, and huge flocks of waterfowl utter raucous cries.

A view of the coast far to the south is described as follows:

> The surface of the sea appeared as an immense expanse of clouded, hazy waves with no island to obstruct the view. . . Wherever the eye ranges, the scene is lonely. Wavering columns of smoke rise from salt-burners' huts on the plain, and a shore wind moans in the pine trees. . . [CJP 440]

As travel diaries, The *Sixteenth Night Moon* and *Journey to the East* owe a debt to precursors such as Tsurayuki's early-Heian *Tosa Diary.* Yet one struggles to identify a sense of interiority, of palpable selfhood in these works. Rather, we must recognize the loftier purpose of poetic expression and dedication, compared to which the 'mere' portrayal of one's mundane personal concerns pales in comparison.

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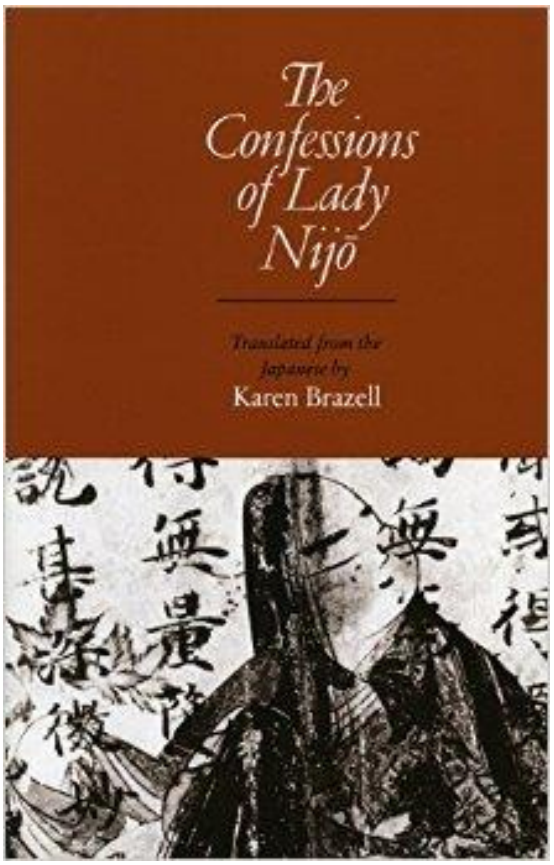
Discussion Questions and Topics

How do our medieval examples compare with the classical Heian diaries? What evidence is there of the samurai-based political and social order? What sort of society does this appear to be?

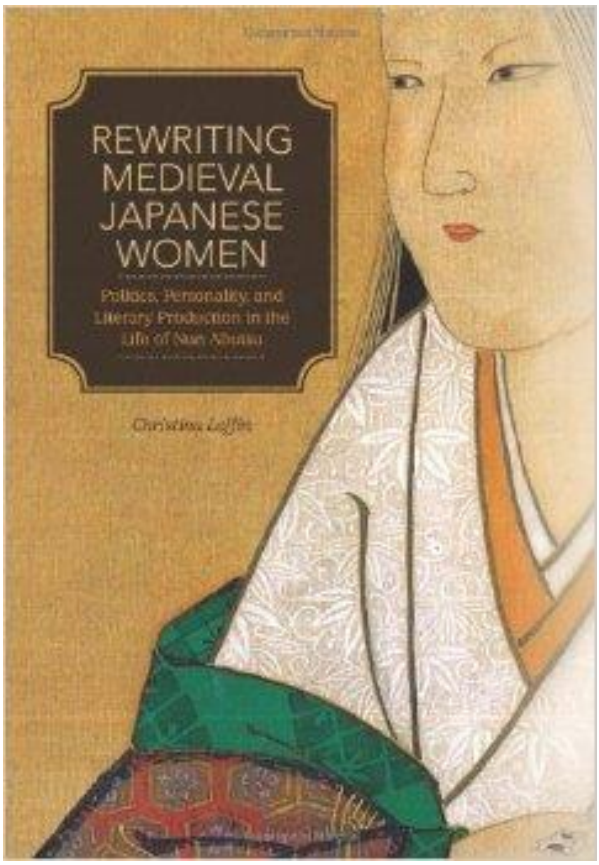
Is there anything distinctive about the day-to-day events recorded in the diaries? What of the poetry, which is so prominent in these works? Do they possess any real substance apart from the poetic content?

What do you regard as the most revealing glimpses of individuals and their private lives? What appears especially 'opaque' and esoteric?

Images



English translation by Karen Brazell of Lady Nijô's *Towazugatari*. Source: Amazon.com



Christina Laffin's study of the life and writings of Nun Abutsu. Source: University of Hawaii Press.

PART V : ESSAY

***ZUIHITSU* (Essay)**

Medieval Literature and the Role of *Zuihitsu*

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 Buddhist-inspired 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 interplay of Japan's courtly and samurai-based elites.

As with the other literary genres, essay writing during the medieval period owed a substantial debt to Heian precursors. In particular, SeiShônagon's*Pillow Book* served as the model of court-based personal narrative. Despite the persistence of an aristocratic aesthetic and overall sense of style and sensibility, the pervasive influence of Buddhist belief and ritual would inspire new modes of personal reflection and reminiscence.

Two canonical works of *zuihitsu*point to these key features of the Japanese medieval essay genre: *An Account of My Hut* by Kamo no Chômei and *Essays in Idleness* by Yoshida Kenkô.

An Account of My Hut

Among the high points of medieval literature is an explicitly Buddhistic essay, *An Account of My Hut* (Hôjôki, 1212), written by the Kyoto courtier poet Kamo no Chômei (1155-1216). Chômei favored the reclusive life, which was in fact a predilection of many of his contemporaries. Inspired by the example of Chinese literary recluses and a long tradition of Buddhist religious reclusion, he set out for the hills north of the capital. As legend has it, he built himself a small hut and therein discovered a spiritual home. The affinity with Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) is striking.

Nothing of the hut remains, if it ever actually existed, but Chômei's essay— *An Account of My Hut*— lives on. Its famous opening lines are equally reminiscent of *The Tale of the Heike* and the book of *Ecclesiastes*:

> The current of the flowing river does not cease, and yet the water is not the same water as before. The foam that floats on stagnant pools, now vanishing, now forming, never stays the same for long. So, too, it is with the people and dwellings of the world. . . We are all like foam on the water. I know neither whence the newborn comes nor whither go the dead. For whose sake do we trouble our mind over these temporary dwellings, and why do they delight our eyes? . . . In competing for impermanence, dweller and dwelling are no different from the morning glory and the dew. [Based on Shirane, TJL 624]

Chômei goes on to recount a series of catastrophes that befell the capital— a great fire, a whirlwind, famine, and a powerful earthquake. The destructive effects are presented in graphic detail— buildings demolished, corpses strewn about. The litany of human travail is relentless, almost liturgical in its narrative momentum. Having thus testified to the futility of human vanity and pride, Chômei arrives at his conclusion:

> Reaching the age of sixty, seemingly about to fade away like the dew, I built a new shelter for the remaining years of my life. . . The result was less than a hundredth the size of the residence of my middle age— a mere ten feet square. . . Knowing myself and knowing my world, I have no ambitions. I do not strive. I simply seek tranquility and enjoy the absence of care. . . But the essence of the Buddha's teachings is that we should cling to nothing. Loving my grass hut is wrong. Attachment to my quiet, solitary way of life, too, must interfere with my enlightenment. Why then do I go on spending precious time relating useless pleasures? [TJL 630, 633, 634]

Kamo no Chômei's literary meditation, at once a moving Buddhist parable and an exemplary personal essay on the theme of ephemerality, conveys a tone of authenticity that would be raised as a standard of literary quality in the modern period.

Essays in Idleness

A century after Chômei wrote of his 'downsized' life outside the capital, the essay genre would reach new heights with Yoshida Kenkô's*Essays in Idleness* (Tsurezuregusa, 1330). In effect a sequel to Shônagon's*Pillow Book*, Kenkô's essays reaffirm the code of courtly ideals while employing a reflective and at times nostalgic voice. The first episode establishes the essayist's nonchalance with a gently ironic touch:

> How foolish I feel when I realize that I've spent another day in front of my inkstone, jotting down aimless thoughts as they occurred to me, all because I was bored and had nothing better to do. [McCullough, CJP 393]

Befitting a literary miscellany, these 'idle essays' vary greatly in length and subject. But Kenkô's narrator repeatedly expresses nostalgic longing for the past.

> To sit alone with a book spread out before you in the lamplight is one of life's greatest pleasures. . . In all respects I am drawn to things of ages past. Nowadays, standards of taste are growing more vulgar all the time. Even in the fine furnishings crafted by our woodworkers, I am most pleased by those done in old style. And when it comes to letters, I prefer the language I find on old scraps left from long ago. . . In times of quiet thought, I realized that of all feelings the most difficult to suppress is the longing for things past. [CJP 397, 400]

As with Shônagon's literary ephemera, some of Kenkô's episodes comment upon aspects of courtly style and fashion. Consider the following:

> Court caps in recent years have become much taller than formerly. People who own the old-fashioned boxes must add an extra lid to accommodate the new caps. [Keene, *Essays in Idleness* 58]

From the 'outsider' perspective, this sort of information will appear almost comically superficial and pointless. Other episodes will strike one as bizarre in the extreme:

> You should never put the new antlers of a deer to your nose and smell them. They have little insects that crawl into the nose and devour the brain. [Keene 134]

Yet it is precisely the sheer variety of observations and reflections, and their seemingly random arrangement, that distinguish the Japanese *zuihitsu*genre. Matters of 'depth' and 'superficiality' were simply beside the point. Together with SeiShônagon's classical *zuihitsu*, Kenkô's essays would become a touchstone of a classical aesthetic that developed over five centuries, as well as a model of essayistic style for generations of writers. Their work is at once a brilliant evocation of the styles and manners of courtly life while reflecting an utter indifference to the 'outside world.' In other words, the insularity and introversion of the Kyoto literary elite during the medieval period sought to preserve aristocratic privilege

and its cultural hegemony while underscoring the growing irrelevance of the imperial center within the larger Japanese political context.

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Discussion Questions and Topics

What are the key commonalities and contrasts in the essays Shônagon and Kenkô?

How does Kenkô seek both to preserve something of the Heian cultural legacy and reflect upon the 'reduced' stature of the imperial court in the medieval era?

What, if anything, is revealed of Kenkô's personality and character in the course of musings? Overall, how would you assess Japan's medieval literature in terms of its presentation of convincingly 'authentic' and 'relatable' personalities?

Give thought to the qualities of mind and spirit as revealed in these classical Japanese texts. How can they be related to your own world and the ways in which you reflect upon your place in it?

Images

Model of Kamo no Chômei's hut, erected in 2012 at the Shimogamo Shrine in Kyoto, in commemoration of the 800th anniversary of Chômei's essay. Source: John Dougill, *Green Shinto* blog.

Early 19th-century woodblock print, by Kikuchi Yôsai, of Yoshida Kenkô composing his essays by lamplight. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

SECTION II : EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Content

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, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, 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.

POETRY

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:

furuike ya The ancient pond

kawazu tobikomu 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*:

kareeda ni 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 mere word 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 a tradition 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 respect for 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 Bashô by 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.

Yosa Buson (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:

tsurigane ni On a temple bell

tomarite nemuru 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

kawazu oiyuku 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—

makeru na issa Don't give up just yet.

kore ni ari 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 naka wa Our life in this world—

nani ni tatoen To what shall I compare it?

yamabiko no To an echo

kotauru koe no Resounding through the mountains

munashiki ga goto 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?

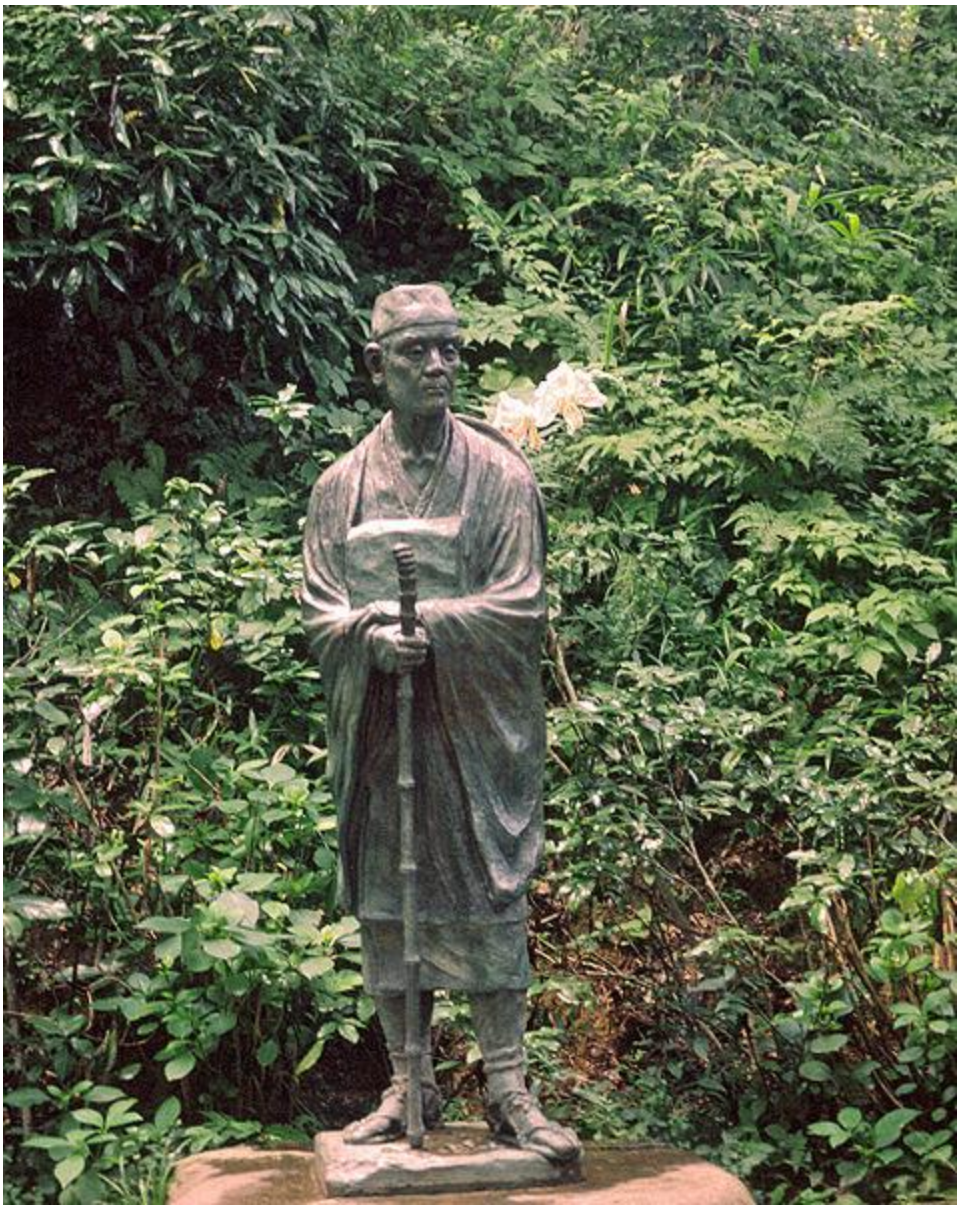
In what sense can haiku poetry be considered a 'modern' genre? A 'Japanese' genre? How would you define 'haiku' and the sort of 'vision' that it calls forth?

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 Matsuo Bashô and his famous ‘frog’ haiku, by Kinkoku (circa 1820)



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

Image of Yosa Buson by Matsumura Goshun (late 18th century)

Image of Kobayashi Issa by Muramatsu Shunpo (early 19th century)

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

DRAMA

Tokugawa Culture and the Role of Drama

Given the centrality of entertainment and spectacle in the *chônin*-centered society and culture of Tokugawa Japan, it is only natural that theater would prove attractive— and profitable. Closely associated with the pleasure quarters and its burgeoning leisure economy, Tokugawa drama centered on two related theatrical genres— puppet theater and kabuki. Nothing could rival the appeal of lavish productions featuring famous actors and dramatic scenes on the kabuki stage,and the virtuoso puppetry of *bunraku*, also known as *jôruri*. These seemingly disparate stage genres were in fact intimately interconnected. Indeed, plays initially composed for *bunraku* would be adapted for the kabuki stage, and it was standard practice for actors to emulate the style and manner of their wooden alter egos. What is more, the widespread use of woodblock prints to advertise plays and publicize the lead actors inspired the creation of one of Japan's most iconic art forms— the *ukiyo-e* 'floating world' print. Again, the contrast with the austere Confucian moralism promoted by the ruling classes could not have been more pronounced.

Bunraku:Puppet Theater and Dramas of Tragic Fate

Much like *Noh* drama, its classical predecessor, *bunraku* theater is a syncretic and collaborative performing art, merging literary composition, puppetry, oral narration, and musical accompaniment. *Bunraku* can be traced to a long history of itinerant performance that included puppets and accompanying stories and music. As it developed during the 17th century, *bunraku* became text-based, and the technical artistry involved in producing and manipulating the near life-sized puppets achieved a remarkable degree of virtuosity. On the other hand, kabuki would develop as an actor's theater, hinging upon improvisation, histrionics, and lavish stage effects.

Bunraku, which developed in the Osaka area, is typically associated with Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1725), far and away its greatest playwright. It was Chikamatsu who, at the turn of the 18th century, established a standard of literary excellence in a medium where technical virtuosity might otherwise overshadow the play's text. As with the work of *Noh* playwright Zeami, Chikamatsu's plays have been mainstays of Japanese theater as well as classics of the national literature.

Most notable are his domestic plays (*sewamono*), especially those featuring romantic encounters where the conflict between duty and passion— *giri* and *ninjô*— would have tragic consequences for the star-crossed lovers. These so-called *shinjû*—or 'double suicide'— plays, typically based on actual events, portrayed the ill-fated affairs of lowly merchants and expensive geisha whose improprieties marked them as both outcasts in the decorous Tokugawa social order and as romantic heroes. As with the fiction of Ihara Saikaku, passion figures here as an elemental force blinding its victims to social obligation and binding them together through the so-called *michiyuki*— the poignant climax in which the lovers walk to their death. Chikamatsu's genius— which has been cast as Shakespearean but shares more with the world of opera— resides not in the comic 'low' but rather in the moving coda that sought to redeem ordinary people caught in the web of utterly human passions.

Chikamatsu's best-known *shinjû* drama is *The Love Suicides at Amijima* (Shinjû tenno Amijima, 1721), which concerns the ineffectual paper merchant Jihei and his beloved geisha, Koharu. Devoted to one another, the couple must endure the taunts of Tahei, a wealthy merchant whose advances Koharu has spurned, and earnest attempts by Jihei's family to have him come to his senses and abandon the affair.

The couple pledge their love, thereby sealing their fate, and are thus obliged to enact the preordained suicidal ritual. In the climactic *michiyuki* scene, the narrative becomes an extended lyrical dialogue, dripping with pathos and bolstered by Buddhist images of rebirth and salvation. Koharu remarks to her lover:

> What have we to grieve about? Although in this world we could not stay together, in the next and through each successive world to come until the end of time we shall be husband and wife.

> Every summer for my devotions I have copied the 'All Compassionate and All Merciful' chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, in the hope that we may be reborn on one lotus.

As the drama reaches a crescendo, Jihei kills Koharu, then himself, and the chanter concludes the play as follows:

> The tale is spread from mouth to mouth. People say that they who were caught in the net of Buddha's vow immediately gained salvation and deliverance, and all who hear the tale of the Love Suicides at Amijima are moved to tears.

Chikamatsu's literary achievement is undeniable. Yet for the ordinary theatergoer, who may have had little interest in elegant tropes and classical allusions, it was the stage spectacle itself that merited the price of admission— the choreographed ballet of large puppets flawlessly manipulated by the 'invisible' black-cloaked puppeteers; the chanter's moving recitation of the text; and the musical counterpoint provided by the three-stringed *shamisen*, harmonizing with the shifting moods of the play.

Arguably *the* high point of Tokugawa drama is *Chûshingura* (Treasury of the Loyal Retainers). First produced in 1748, this monumental play recounts a famous incident in 1703: The forty-seven erstwhile retainers of the Akô *daimyô*, who had been forced to commit ritual suicide several years earlier, succeed in exacting revenge on the Shogunal official responsible for their lord's demise, whereupon they sacrifice their own lives. Intricately plotted and many hours long in its complete staging, *Chûshingura*has long been a touchstone of *bushidô* virtue— selflessness, duty, loyalty, and righteous revenge— values whose 'correctness' in the postwar period has been problematic. Yet the typical theater-goer would have been more taken by the drama unfolding on the stage.

Kabuki: Stage Spectacle and Virtuoso Acting

As with *bunraku*, kabuki theater has distinctly plebeian roots, which can be traced to outdoor performances by a troupe of women led by the dancer Okuni, in early 17th-century Kyoto. Tied to prostitution, though, these performances ran afoul of the authorities, who ended up banning women from the stage. What eventuated was all-male performance, which was itself subject to codes and regulations aimed at making the young actors inaccessible for sexual dalliance. Thus, kabuki emerged as a male performance genre that in effect leveraged the imposed restrictions so as to create an actor-centered theater that exerted a profound influence on Tokugawa popular culture and its lucrative entertainment economy. Although it originated in the Kansai area (Osaka/ Kyoto), kabuki established itself in Edo and would eventually surpass *bunraku* in popularity.

Another shared aspect of kabuki and *bunraku* is that their respective repertoires belong to two categories: those based on historical and legendary sources, and those set in the contemporary period.

One of kabuki's hallmarks, an artifact of the sumptuary restrictions meant to constrain it, is the *onnagata* role, whereby male actors 'impersonate' women. Kabuki devotees have long remarked on the capacity of the well-trained *onnagata* to capture a quality of femininity inaccessible to 'actual' women. Similar claims, incidentally, have been made with respect to *bunraku* puppets— mere wooden contraptions which, in the hands of the master puppeteer, can achieve a convincing and highly moving human quality.

Kabuki staging would adapt several features of *Noh* theater— the use of a chorus and musical accompaniment. Here, as with *bunraku*, the instrument of choice is the *shamisen*. And kabuki also features a chanter who intones a narrative that recounts the action, although much of the action on stage is improvised so as to highlight the 'celebrity' actor.

But kabuki is best known for its spectacle— the revolving stage, elaborate movable props, devices that enable actors to fly, catapult themselves, and do virtually instantaneous costume change. The actors themselves are lavishly costumed and adorned with flamboyant facial makeup (*kumadori*).

As with *Noh*, *bunraku*, and other Japanese performing arts, professional kabuki actors have historically belonged to hereditary lineages, whereby mastery of one's craft is handed down from father to son. Among the celebrated kabuki lineages are the Nakamura and Ichikawa families.

The standard kabuki repertoire features well-known plays such as *Chûshingura*, adapted from the *bunraku* stage; *Yoshitsune Senbon Zakura* (Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees), which features the heroic medieval warrior of the *Tale of the Heike*; and *Shibaraku* (Wait a Moment!), the ultimate actor vehicle, featuring over-the-top stage histrionics and flamboyance.

Bunraku and Kabuki in the Modern Day

With the early Meiji period and its denigration of 'outmoded' practices and the emulation of modern Western genres and styles, Japan's performing arts went into decline. Kabuki, though, experienced a resurgence in the late 19th century, largely thanks to the brilliant playwright Kawatake Mokuami (1816-93). It was Mokuami who succeeded in modernizing the plotline of kabuki drama while preserving its chief stage conventions. It bears noting that the Meiji period also witnessed the advent of Western-inspired 'realist' theater, which has remained on the scene since then.

The immediate postwar period in Japan also witnessed a decline in 'traditional' cultural production, in part owing to restrictions imposed by Occupation authorities concerned about vestiges of militarism in performances that might extol samurai virtues. However, in line with the nation's economic recovery in the late Fifties, kabuki and *bunraku* experienced a renaissance. Both have gone on to enjoy a sustained popularity, bolstered by tie-ins with film, television, and the burgeoning pop culture marketplace.

Osaka is home to the National *Bunraku* Theater, which offers a rich performance calendar and materially sustains the demanding apprenticeship system that the art requires. As for kabuki, its 'classical' kabuki repertoire is staged in Tokyo and Kyoto at theaters devoted to kabuki performance and to the training of actors and musicians. What is more, *bunraku* and kabuki troupes perform throughout Japan, and overseas as well. And performances are regularly broadcast on the NHK network. As with many Japanese traditional arts, local and regional groups are dedicated to the performing arts, employing a range of plays and theatrical techniques.

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Discussion Questions and Topics

How might we best appreciate the syncretic quality of kabuki and *bunraku*, which hinge upon an unusual degree of collaboration and coordination? What aspects of these arts are most appealing? Why? What may be said to account for the iconic quality of these arts?

What does one gain— or lose— by concentrating on the dramatic plotline (as exemplified in Chikamatsu's *bunraku* texts) as opposed to the stage spectacle? Consider the contrast with mimetic theater, which presents 'realistic' stories, characters, and staging?

In what ways can *bunraku* and kabuki be said to epitomize the society and culture of the Tokugawa period?

Images

Bunraku chanter (*tayu*) and *shamisen* player

The character Osono from the *bunraku* play, *Hade Sugata Onna Maiginu*

Woodblock poster for the March 1849 production of *Chûshingura*, in Edo

Woodblock print, by Sharaku, of the actor Otani Oniji (1794)

Woodblock print, by Utagawa Toyokuni III, of an 1858 production of the play *Shibaraku*, in Edo

The Kabuki-za theater in Tokyo
Note: The source for the above images is Wikimedia Commons.

FICTION

Tokugawa Culture and the Place of Fiction

Fiction writing in Japan had been in decline since the towering achievement of Heian writers, epitomized by Murasaki Shikibu's *Tale of Genji*. Poetry, in its various formal modes, ranked as the dominant genre during the medieval period. Prose narrative constituted a grab-bag of accounts, written in a popular idiom and referred to as *setsuwa*, that featured historical and legendary figures. Such narratives became popular during the early Tokugawa period, under the new heading of *kanazôshi*— printed booklets aimed at a broad readership that was increasingly centered in cities such as Edo and Osaka. These booklets were a mix of fanciful tales, parodies, and popular guides and handbooks.

It was the end of the 17th century— the so-called *Genroku* years (ca 1680-1720)— that marked the renaissance of Japanese arts and culture across a broad spectrum. A taste for fiction was re-established, and its chief exponent was a virtuoso writer named Ihara Saikaku (1642-93), whose works would set a high standard for fiction-writing. Yet it was the very popularity of the 'Saikaku style' that would contribute to its gradual decline in the 19th century. What emerged was a widespread taste for light literary entertainments— *gesaku*— fostered by publishers and booksellers that now dominated the marketplace.

Fictions of Passion and Style

Tokugawa culture has long been known for its celebration of style and fashion, a reflection of the materialist proclivities of the merchant class, the *chônin*. Being 'in the know' was essential and the new culture hero was the so-called *tsûjin*, the savvy connoisseur and arbiter of taste. The 'rule of style' is most evident in the visual and decorative arts, but its literary corollary can be found in the work of *chônin*-oriented writers. The key figure here is Saikaku, the great prose stylist of the age, whose best-known fiction focuses on the sordid affairs of those who fall prey to the weaknesses of the flesh and the allurements of money. Flouting the official codes of propriety and self-restraint, Saikaku's 'floating-world tales' of passion and desire provide a stunning parody of contemporary society through the comic pratfalls and foibles of ordinary folk.

Itself a parody of a well-known scene from *Genji*, the following passage from *Five Women Who Loved Love* (Kôshoku gonin onna, 1686) concerns several young rakes who are engaged in evaluating the female passers-by:

> Next they spied a lady who appeared to be in her mid-thirties, with a gracefully long neck and intelligent-looking eyes, above which could be seen a natural hairline of rare beauty. True, her nose stood a little high, but that could easily be tolerated. Underneath she wore white satin; over that, light blue satin; and outside, reddish-yellow satin. Each garment was luxuriously lined with the same material. On her left sleeve was a hand-painted likeness of the Yoshida monk, in a beautifully-wrought pose that conjured the famous passage, "sitting alone and reading old books under the lamp light." This was most assuredly a woman of exquisite taste! . . .
>
> "What a prize for some lucky fellow!" one of the young bucks exclaimed. But his words were hardly uttered when the lady, stopping to speak with an attendant, opened her mouth, and revealed a missing lower tooth— to the complete disillusionment of her admirers.

Saikaku's lavishly-descriptive tales, which presume familiarity with contemporary fashion and taste, all but cry out for illustration. In fact, Tokugawa literary works were routinely accompanied by pictorial depiction of important scenes, and the texts themselves were rendered in a matching calligraphic style. In other words, the artfully presented 'surface' meant as much as the 'content' of the tale. The distinction we make between 'art' and 'literature' had little validity, given that narrative and pictorial elements were virtually indistinguishable.

Saikaku's portrayals of human eccentricity and self-deception possess a distinctly comic tone. The author has us look beyond the façade of elegance to discover the inevitable wart, the telling flaw. His

parodies of parvenu *chônin* and wayward samurai constitute a typology of cads, misers, star-crossed lovers, and scoundrels that recalls the comic genius of the great French playwright Molière.

One such character is Fuji-ichi, an East-Asian forerunner of the archetypal literary miser, Dickens' Ebenezer Scrooge.

> The millionaire Fuji-ichi lived in a rented house no more than four yards wide. He was a clever man, and his fortune was amassed in his own lifetime. . . Fuji-ichi never passed up anything which might be of use. Even if he happened to stumble, he would use the opportunity to pick up stones for fire-lighters and tuck them in his sleeve. One must pay attention to a thousand such things.
>
> Yet Fuji-ichi was not a miser by nature. It was merely his ambition to serve as a model for others in the management of everyday affairs. . . Nothing delighted him more than watching over his daughter. When the young girl grew into womanhood he had a marriage screen constructed for her. . . Thinking that illustrations of *The Tale of Genji* or *Tales of Ise* might engender frivolous thoughts, he had the screen painted with busy scenes of the silver and copper mines at Tada. He composed instructional verses on the subject of economy and made his daughter recite them aloud.

As noted above, Saikaku's mastery of stylish and witty fictional narrative influenced subsequent generations of writers, who sought to emulate the 'Saikaku style.' But there were other noteworthy developments on the fictional scene. For instance, the Osaka-based writer Ueda Akinari (1734-1809) revived the old *setsuwa* genre with the publication of *Tales of Moonlight and Rain* (Ugetsu monogatari, 1776). The work comprises nine tales of the supernatural, drawn from Japanese and Chinese legends, which convey a memorably eerie, macabre quality. The work enjoyed great popularity, and its 1953 film adaptation by Mizoguchi Kenji is considered one of the masterworks of world cinema.

Late Tokugawa Fiction

The comic spirit of Saikaku marks the work of late-Tokugawa writers, for whom stylishness and a deft comic touch were literary virtues. For instance, Santô Kyôden (1761-1816) produced many works in the so-called *sharebon* genre— 'books of style.' These centered on the pleasure quarters, the lively domain of the alluring geisha and the savvy *tsûjin*. A genre of explicitly comic fiction— *kokkeibon*— is epitomized in the work of two popular writers. Shikitei Sanba (1776-1822) is best known for his *Bathhouse of the Floating World* (Ukiyoburo, 1809-13). Here, the comings and goings of those who frequent the local bathhouse (*ofuro*) represent a cross-section of society and provide a vehicle for a rousing parody of human foibles. For his part, the writer Jippensha Ikku (1765-1831) produced, over a twenty-year period, a much-admired account of two buddies who ply the great Tôkaidô road spanning Edo and Osaka. This sprawling work, entitled *Shank's Mare* (Hizakurige, 1802-22), comprises hundreds of episodes featuring the comic pair, Yaji and Kita, whose picaresque adventures amount to an encyclopedia of mischief and comic pratfalls. Again, all of these works were accompanied by copious woodblock illustrations, which enhanced the readers' enjoyment.

One final figure deserves mention— Takizawa Bakin (1767-1848). Arguably the final major fiction writer of the Tokugawa period, Bakin produced what may be the longest novel ever written. Bearing the improbable named of *Hakkenden* (The Biography of Eight Dogs, 1814-42), this 106-volume epic traces, through an intricately interwoven series of romantic intrigues and heroic exploits, the eventual restoration of a proud family's good name. A mix of dramatic narrative and samurai virtue, Bakin's ponderous masterwork has been repurposed in the form of recent manga and anime versions that have been widely admired.

Conclusion

Tokugawa fiction, as with other literary and arts genres, can be said to reflect Japan's centuries-long *sakoku* policy of isolation and insularity. The creative stasis that marks mid-19th century culture in effect

awaited the sort of catalyst that would come into play following the nation's opening up to the Western world.

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Question and issues:

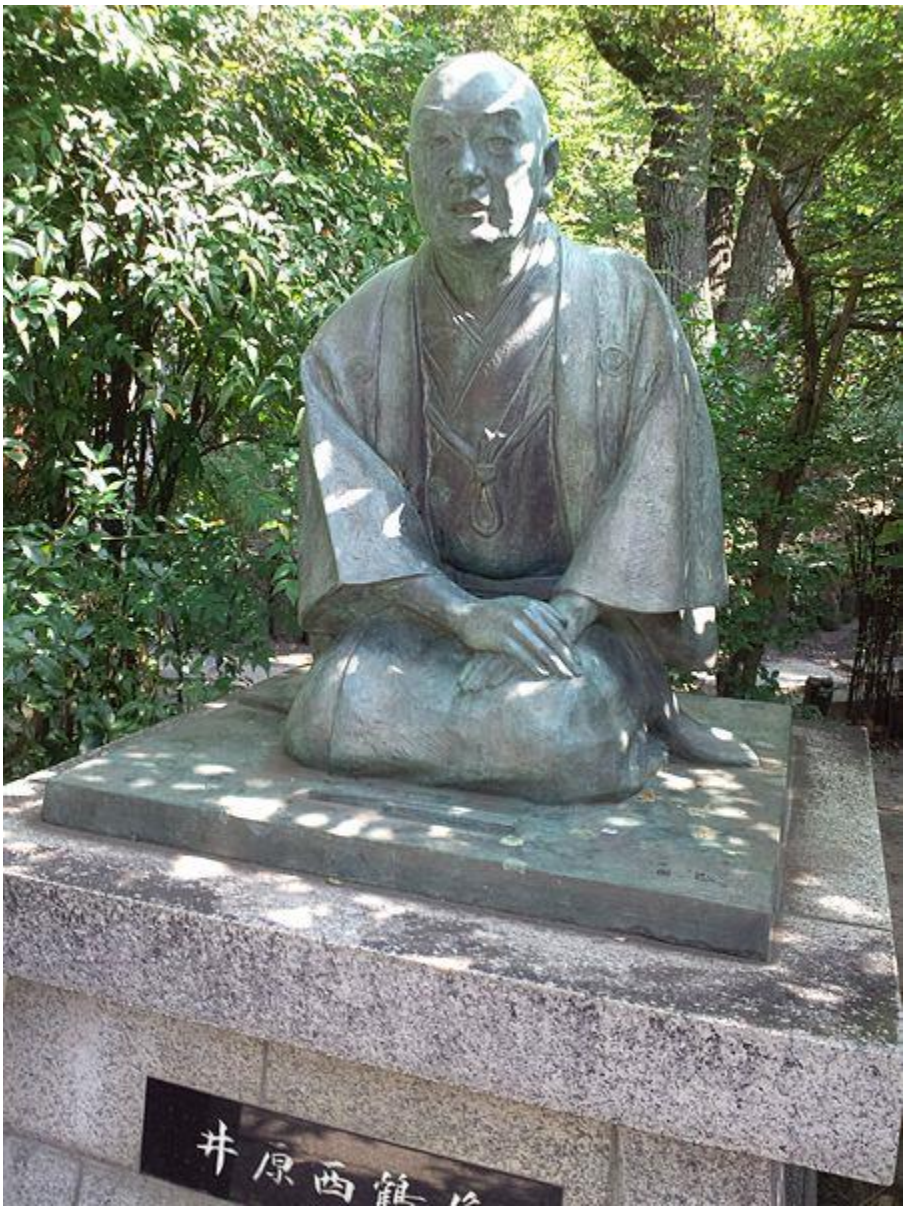
Tokugawa fiction is notably superficial, in its preference for stylish display and comic 'lightness.' What are the positive and negative aspects of such 'superficiality'? What can be said in favor of Saikaku's tales focusing on the pursuit of sexual gratification and wealth— and the inevitable pitfalls of such pursuits?

What can be learned about Tokugawa society from its fictional portrayals? Overall, what do we stand to gain from reading fiction?

Compare Ueda Akinari's *Tales of Moonlight and Rain* (available in a fine English translation) with the classic film adaptation by Mizoguchi Kenji. What conclusions can you draw from such a comparison?

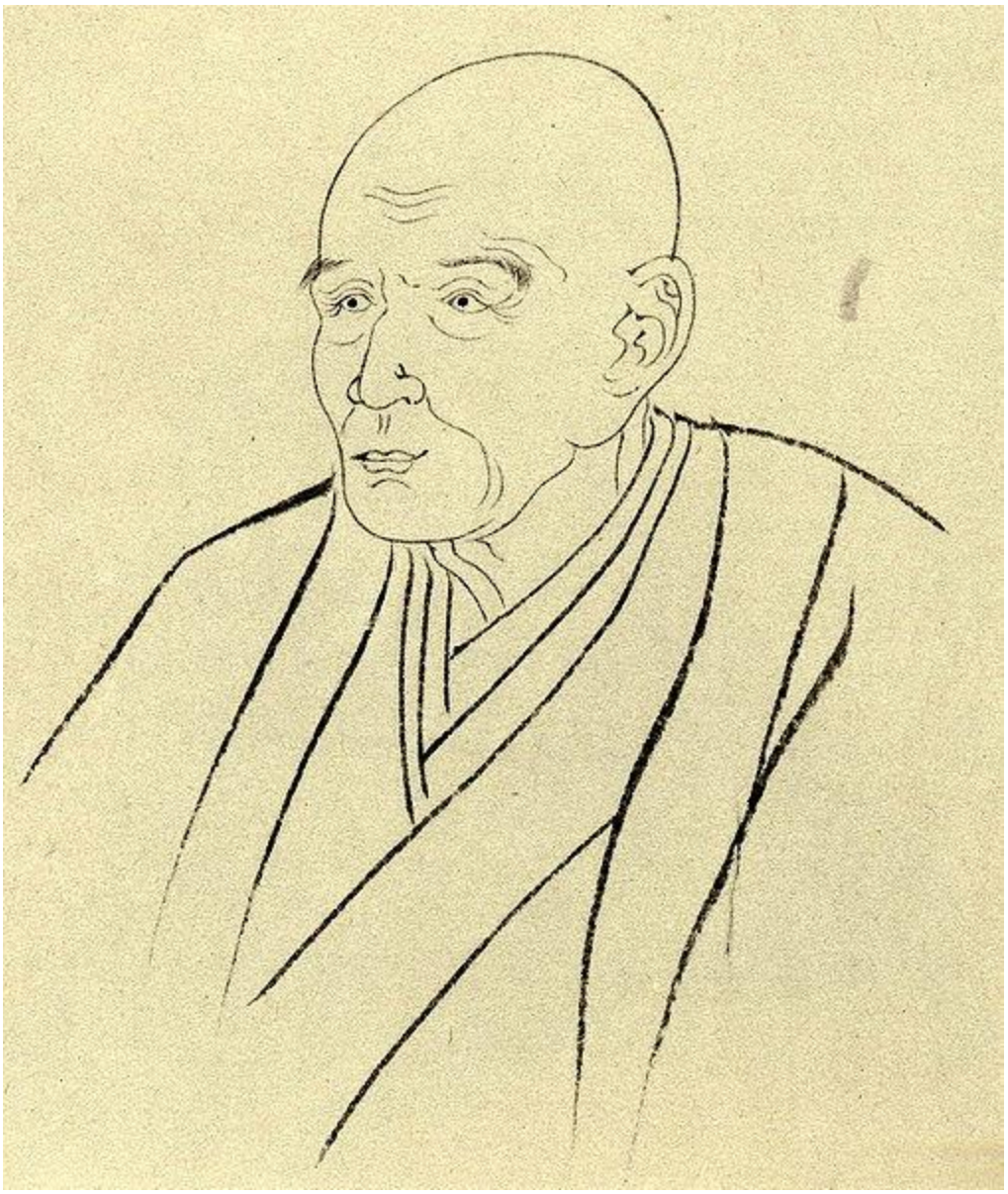
As one of the three pillars of Genroku literature, how does Saikaku compare with Bashô and Chikamatsu?

Images



Statue of Ihara Saikaku, in Osaka

Title page (right) and introduction (left) to Ueda Akinari's *Ugetsu monogatari*
Tales of Moonlight and Rain, 1776)



Portrait of Takizawa Bakin by Kunisada, ca 1840

2005 *manga* adaptation of Bakin's monumental novel, *Hakkenden*

Note: Source for above images is Wikimedia Commons

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Tokugawa Culture and the Place of Autobiography

Autobiographical writings were an important component of the Heian literary world. One thinks here of canonical works by women of the Kyoto court such as the Mother of Michitsuna, Murasaki Shikibu, and Izumi Shikibu. With the medieval period, though, prevailing Buddhistic values and tastes effectively silenced the strong, 'egocentric' personal voice. Autobiography— which is to say, the coherent, retrospective recounting of one's life in narrative form— had to await a new and more receptive social and cultural milieu.

As Japan's gateway to the modern world, the Tokugawa period was marked by a tension between authoritarian rule imposed by the samurai elite and a nascent concern for the individual and for the expression of one's selfhood— in terms of tangible achievements and contributions to literature and the arts. Put differently, the group mode that has typically been regarded as a defining quality of the 'Japanese national character' must somehow be reconciled with the voice of the individual seeking one's place in the world. In the West, this struggle is perhaps best represented by the romantic movement— Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his espousal of liberation from societal bonds and empowering individual expression— and by the political liberalism of John Stuart Mill. In Japan the picture has been rather more complex, in view of the persistence of authoritarian rule, hierarchical social order, and the ego-denial orientation of Confucianism and Buddhism.

Notwithstanding its extensive regulations and controls, the Tokugawa period witnessed an openness to the relatively unfettered literary expression of self. A number of writers— literary folk, political figures, and others— experimented with autobiography, which is to say the sustained, coherent narrative retrospection of the writer's life and circumstance. In earlier periods, personal narratives consisted chiefly of diary and essay writing; there was virtually no interest in autobiography *per se*. Tokugawa *bunjin*, too, indulged themselves in the full gamut of personal writing, not to mention poetry, and we need to recall that the various 'genres' subsumed under this broad heading are not discrete entities but rather overlap and interpenetrate. In short, the diarist, essayist, and autobiographer share a concern for plumbing one's inner self and giving it literary expression. At the same time, these texts reveal much of the authoritarian political context and the strictures imposed by formal regulations and the widely-promulgated Confucianist social order.

Our survey of Tokugawa-period autobiography will focus on two notably contrasting works that span nearly a century and a half. Their respective approaches to self-expression and to comprehending one's place in the world will reveal as much about the Tokugawa social and cultural milieu as the individuals themselves.

Arai Hakuseki, *Told Round a Brushwood Fire*

The author of this oddly-named work (in the original, *Oritaku shiba no ki*, 1717) is the noted Confucianist scholar, historian, and political reformer Arai Hakuseki (1657-1725). This work has been recognized as Japan's first 'genuine' autobiography— a coherent and comprehensive account of one's life and circumstances. The following excerpts are taken from the preface and the first of three 'books' that comprise the autobiography. In line with the author's deeply-held Confucian ethics, family figures— especially his father— figure prominently, as do details of his early schooling and devotion to study and achievement.

> Now that I have the leisure to do so, I have set down past events just as they occurred to me. . . I have not hesitated to write in an informal style, nor of delicate matters. . . Insofar as I alone know the full story of my life, it would be inexcusable if I failed to set them down.
>
> I hope that those who read this account, even unto the descendents of my sons and grandsons, will not swerve from the path of loyalty and filial piety. . . An old man of sixty, I took up my pen on the 17th day of November, 1716. (Based on pp 35-36)

Having thus established the Confucian subtext for his autobiographical project, Hakuseki goes on to provide telling details regarding his father:

> My father's routine was always the same. It never varied. He rose at four in the morning, bathed in cold water, and dressed his own hair. When the nights were cold, my mother wanted him to use warm water, but he would not countenance putting the servants to this trouble. . .
>
> Both of my parents were devout Buddhists. My father never neglected to make obeisance to Buddha each morning. On the anniversaries of his parents' death, he prepared rice and placed it on the altar, without troubling the servants. While it was still dark, he would sit up and await the dawn. As soon as it was light, he would go on duty. (Based on p 40)

Hakuseki makes a point of underscoring his father's scrupulously-observed daily routine, his unfailing sense of duty, and his abstemious, self-reliant nature. These emerge as exemplary traits of character that the son would emulate and in turn model for others. Hakuseki goes on to recount his educational background and the details of a political career that met with its fair share of reversals and disappointments. The autobiography is in a sense an apologia for the conduct of one's life. Here is how the author concludes his account of his formative years:

> If, at the age of seventeen, when I first became interested in Confucianism, I'd had someone to instruct me, I should not have been as I am now. . . I'd always been **poor** and had to borrow books from others. Anything I needed copied out, I had to do with my own hand, with the result that I read very few books. . . I have made such progress as I have because I've always forced myself to endure that which was most difficult to endure, and because what ordinary people do once, I've done ten times. And what they do ten times, I've done a hundred. (Based on p 60)

Channeling the Confucian precepts that he so cherished, the eminent author adopts a notably humble and self-deprecatory voice as he underscores the virtues of unstinting effort and perseverance.

In sum, Arai Hakuseki's autobiography eschews intimate disclosure and self-exposure. Rather, the author presents a controlled, measured, and deeply principled account of a life oriented around duty, self-restraint, and dedicated service.

***Musui's Story*: The Autobiography of Katsu Kokichi**

Seemingly at the other end of the spectrum of autobiographical accounts by Tokugawa samurai is an 1843 work entitled *Musui's Story* (Musui dokugen) autobiography. Written by a low-ranking samurai named Katsu Kokichi (1802-50), this work retells the hilarious and hair-raising exploits and misadventures of an individual who represents the very antithesis of the warrior code of honor, self-restraint, and diligence. Katsu deals unsparingly with his dissipation and vices as he regales the reader with his many escapades— brawling, thievery, and consorting with ne'er-do-wells of every stripe imaginable.

Katsu's account ends on a positive note, however, as the wayward youth eventually renounces his profligate ways and reestablishes his good name. In the epilogue to this unapologetic account of a 'failed samurai,' he holds forth on the value to be gained from the life of a moral reprobate:

> Although I indulged in every manner of folly and nonsense in my lifetime, Heaven seems not to have punished me as yet. Here I am, forty-two, sound of health and without a scratch on my body. Some of my friends were beaten to death; other vanished without a trace or suffered some ill fate or another. . . Only recently have I come to my senses and begun to act more like a human being. When I think of my past, my hair stands on end.
>
> He who would call himself a man would do well not to imitate my ways. . . In everything I was misguided, and I will never know how much anguish I caused my relatives, parents, wife, and children. . .
>
> My past conduct truly fills me with horror. Let my children, their children, and their children's children read this record carefully and savor its meaning. So be it.
>
> Written at Uguisudani, early winter, 1843. (*Musui's Story*, pp 156-57)

Strongly contrasting with the high-minded moral agenda of Hakuseki's autobiography, Katsu Kokichi's work presents the comic— and more easily relatable— persona of the picaresque anti-hero. Here one may detect a foreshadowing of the more intimate disclosure associated with modern autobiographical writing. Yet both of authors, in their distinctly different ways, seek to validate and affirm themselves via narrative self-exposure. And in so doing they bear witness to the political, social, and moral contexts in which they lived and that marked this age of samurai power and privilege.

Conclusion

As with other literary genres, Tokugawa Period autobiography can be said to mark the intersection of countervailing forces and influences— traditional and orthodox practices and precepts versus an emergent sense of self and new modes of personal expression. Writers were able to channel this personal voice through sustained narrative; shorter, more episodic accounts; and poetry. Rather than fixed, mutually-exclusive categories, these are inevitably interrelated. It is up to the reader to assess the qualities of the 'self' thus expressed and the effectiveness of the narrative vehicle for its expression.

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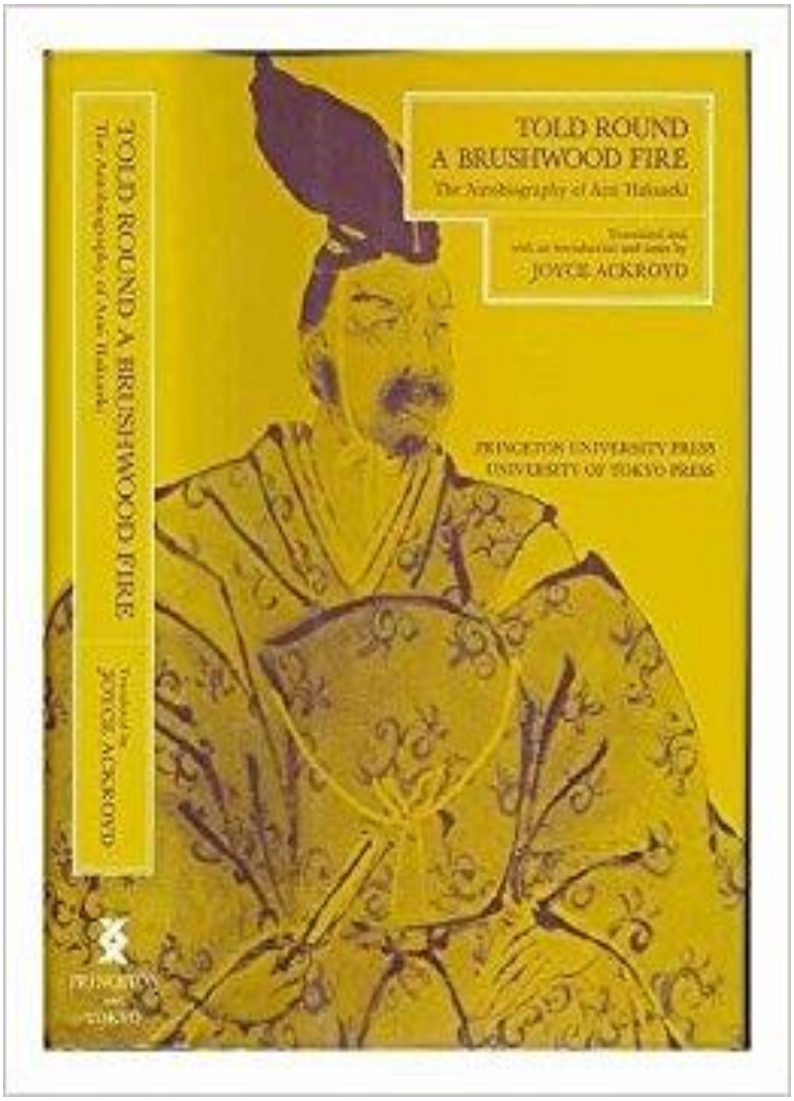
Discussion Questions and Topics

How to compare and contrast the personas that emerge in the Hakuseki and Kokichi autobiographies? What common ground can be found in these two seemingly antithetical works?

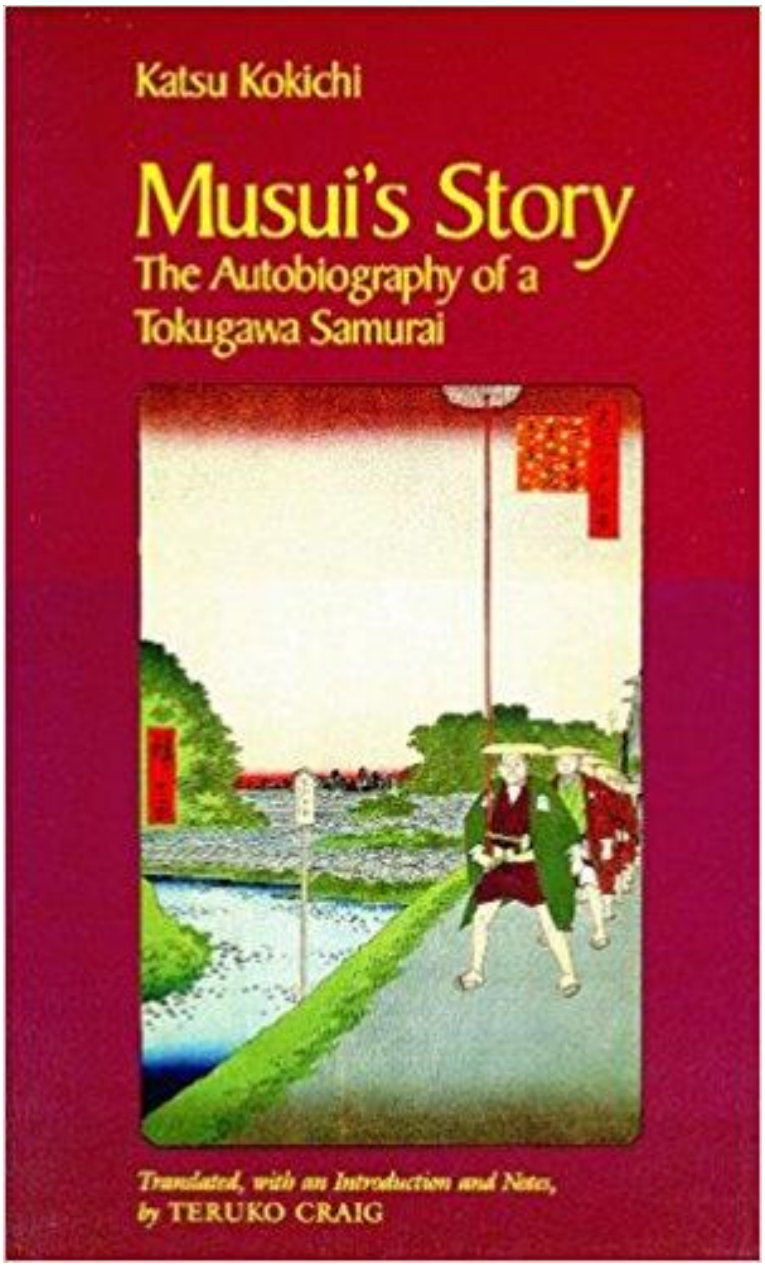
How to discern and understand the social and political contexts as presented in these two works? What aspects of Tokugawa 'life and times' are stressed here? What would you want to know more about?

Do the Hakuseki and Kokichi accounts call to mind autobiographies with which you're familiar? What connections can you make?

Images



Joyce Ackroyd translation of the Arai Hakuseki autobiography, with image of Hakuseki. (Amazon.com)



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SECTION III : 19TH CENTURY

Contents

POETRY

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 fictioninspired 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 devoteesover 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 noyonagara 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. Tôsonwould 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*, pp201-2

Echoing a mournful Wordsworthian refrain, Tôson'spoetic 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), andIshikawa Takuboku (1885-1912).

SHIKI

MasaokaShiki 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, pp309-10

AKIKO

The wife of a noteworthy Meiji poet, YosanoTekkan, YosanoAkiko emerged as an even more celebrated poet and essayist. Indeed, she ranks as perhaps thepreëminent 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 circlesand 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, thatthe 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?

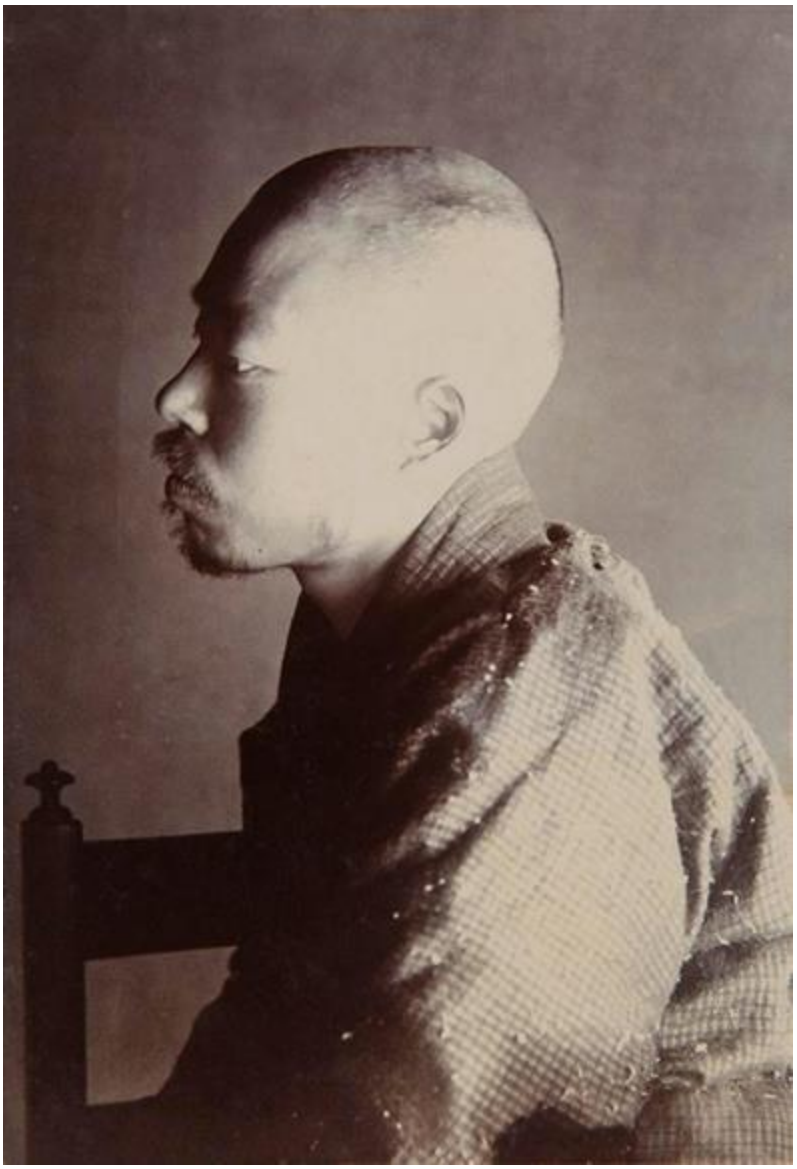
How does the quality of selfhood expressed in this poetry relate to literary selfhood in the prose writings (essay, fiction, autobiography) of nineteenth-century Japan? How does it harken back to the 'golden age' of Heian and medieval poetry?

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)

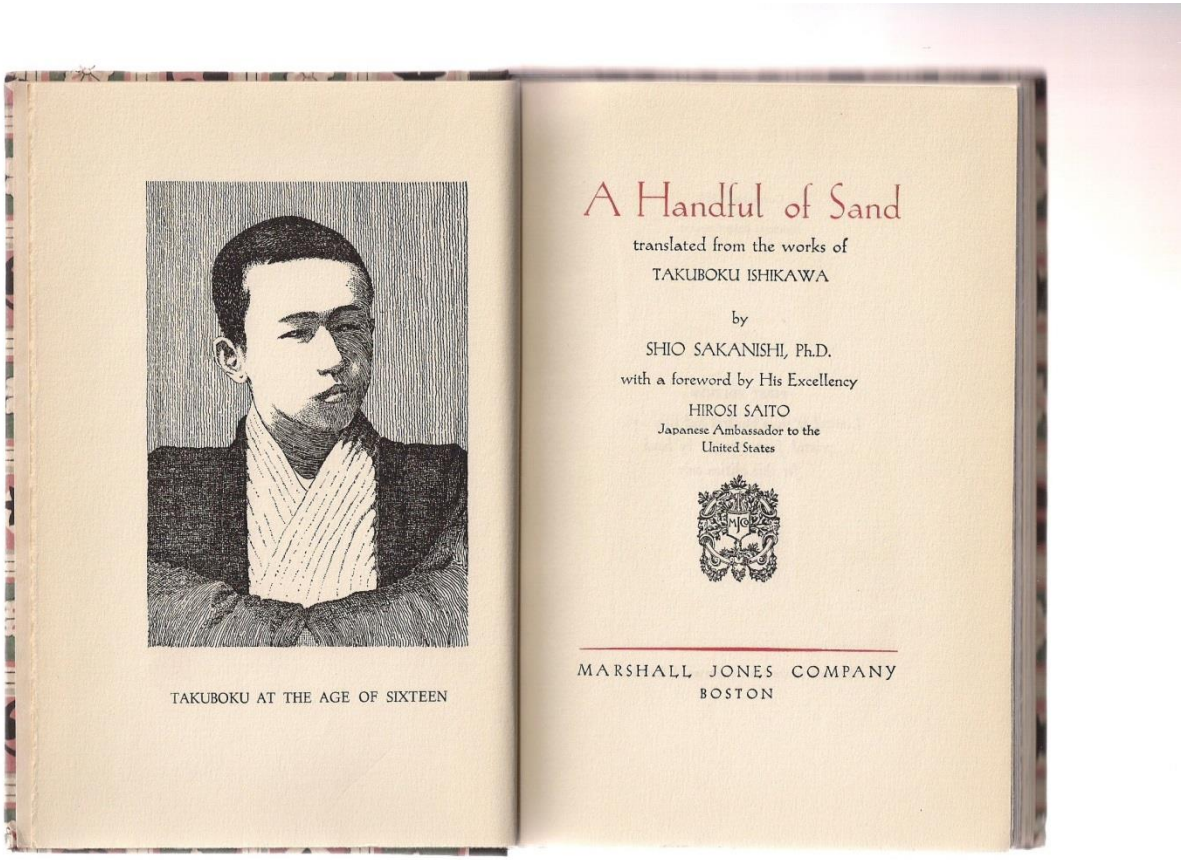


Image of Ishikawa Takuboku as frontispiece of an English translation of his 1910 *tanka*collection, *A Handful of Sand* (Ichiaku no suna)

DRAMA

The Place of Drama in Nineteenth-Century Japan

As was the case with Japanese arts and culture overall, the nineteenth century witnessed the transition from time-honored traditional drama to the introduction of modern forms and techniques that reflected the nation's radically new political and social circumstance. The austere, elegant Noh theater, with roots tracing back to the fourteenth century, thrived during the Tokugawa period, thanks to elite samurai and courtly patronage of its five performance traditions. The classical Noh repertoire— marked by unparalleled aesthetic and literary sophistication and understated, meditative performance styles— appealed almost exclusively to the elite classes.

Far more popular were kabuki and puppet theater (*bunraku, jôruri*), which featured flashy stage technique, celebrity actors and famous puppet masters, and a level of dramatic flare and flamboyance entire missing from Noh. Kabuki, in particular, became a centerpiece of Tokugawa popular culture— and a major force in the burgeoning consumer marketplace and fashion world, as well. Its dramatic actor poses and famous scenes, as depicted in countless *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints, have long been icons of the Tokugawa period— and distinctive hallmarks of 'traditional Japan' for people around the world.

Noh theater in the Meiji

The modernization agenda of the Meiji leaders would eventually extend to even the most enduring traditional entertainments, but the popular tastes and styles in the performing arts— kabuki in particular— likely slowed the introduction of Western-inspired drama in late-nineteenth century Japan. As for Noh theater— the decline of elite support during the early years of Meiji, coupled with the mass citizenry's unfamiliarity with the Noh repertoire, threatened the demise of this unique performance tradition.

One positive development took place in 1879, in the context of Ulysses Grant's visit to Japan. Invited to a performance of Noh, the ex-U.S. president remarked on his fascination with the performance and made a point of encouraging support for what he learned had become a sadly neglected performance art. Perhaps as an indication of a growing awareness and appreciation of Noh, the practice of *yôkyoku*— the oral recitation of the Noh libretto (minus the acting, dance, and musical accompaniment)— took hold among the educated public toward the end of the century.

Kabuki theater in the Meiji

In contrast with the challenges to the Noh theatrical tradition, kabuki held its own during the Meiji era. This was largely owing to the public's familiarity with, and enjoyment of, kabuki performance. Unlike Noh, which had a fixed repertoire that did not permit the introduction of new plays, kabuki was more adaptive— while maintaining a standard repertoire of 'classic' plays, it was open to new material that might appeal to a younger audience.

Most significant, though, was the survival of the kabuki 'star system' of actor lineages and celebrity figures, and the preservation of the standard theatrical styles and techniques. These factors helped sustain the popularity and economic viability of kabuki as Japan entered the modern era. Perennial favorites such as *Chûshingura*, the great 'forty-seven *rônin*' vendetta play of the mid-eighteenth century, were recast and adapted for late-Tokugawa and Meiji audiences. In fact, this play was produced in an early cinematic adaption in 1907. It was twenty years earlier, in 1887, when Emperor Meiji became the first emperor to attend a performance of kabuki. This served to enhance kabuki's stature among those who considered it to be little more than cheap entertainment for the masses.

In a sense, though, Meiji kabuki was constrained by the very need to retain its traditional theatrical styles and techniques while seeking, paradoxically perhaps, to broaden its thematic range to include current trends and issues. The key figure in this transitional moment is KawatakeMokuami (1816-93), widely regarded as the last great kabuki playwright.

Mokuami

Raised in the world of late-Tokugawa kabuki, KawatakeMokuami was a truly prolific playwright, with some 360 plays to his credit. He achieved such popularity in the early Meiji period that he was said to have single-handedly impeded the introduction of Western drama and performance. Yet Mokuami did understand the need to introduce new trends and innovations— for instance, plays that aimed at historical accurately as opposed to mere stage spectacle; and plays set in contemporary times, which would incorporate social realism and issues of the day. What is more, Mokuami was among the first to adapt Western literary works for the kabuki stage.

An important theme of Mokuami's plays, and one that the Meiji government promoted as part of its program of moral cultivation, is *kanzenchôaku*— the cardinal virtue of rewarding good and chastising evil. This theme underscores one of Mokuami's most famous plays, *The Thieves* (a loose translation of the elegant Japanese title, *ShimaChidoriTsuki no Shiranami*— Island plovers, white waves in the moonlight, 1881). The play, which hinges upon the exploits of two Tokyo thieves, culminates in the earnest entreaties of Shimazô, who has repented his evil ways, to have his partner in crime, Senta, do the same.

SHIMAZÔ: I once thought of you as my brother. If you will only realize that what you have done is wrong and give up being a thief, I'll help you all the rest of my life. . .

SENTA: (*Gradually looks up, and in an attitude of repentance lifts his head; he wipes away his tears and joins his hands in supplication*). Forgive me, brother. You have convinced me. I shall change my ways. . . I renounce robbery. And I will henceforth observe the anniversary of my poor parents' deaths— my dear parents, to whom I've brought so much suffering lo these many years!

Based on Keene, *Modern Japanese Literature*, pp 48, 49

Dripping with melodrama and sentimentalism, the play ends as the character Mochizuki, a wealthy moneylender who was to have been Shimazô's next robbery victim, overhears the man's tearful repentance and offers to make good on his burden of debts— "This is Heaven's reward for your having given up crime," Mochizuki proclaims. And so the play ends, having achieved the desired mix of entertainment and edification.

Late-Meiji innovations in drama

As noted above, kabuki was caught in a bind that required adherence to certain fixed theatrical conventions and styles, while new influences were gradually moving Japanese drama into a more modern mode. Kabuki would by no means disappear, but it would be rivaled by the modernization process, which witnessed the introduction of key Western dramatists— from Shakespeare to Ibsen, Chekhov, and Strindberg— together with a Western-inspired realist and mimetic theater.

A noteworthy figure here is TsubouchiShôyô (1859-1935). Best known for his advocating the adoption of Western approaches to literary characterization and plot, Shôyô was schooled in both traditional and Western drama. Here he advocated an amalgam of traditional performance styles and Western theatrical innovations. Shôyô himself was an author and producer of kabuki plays and a leading translator of Shakespeare's plays. In particular, his translation of *Hamlet* inspired a new conception of character, in terms of psychological depth and interiority.

*Shimpa*theater

The mid-Meiji interest in new approaches to drama crystallized around a movement known as *Shimpa*— 'new school' theater. This transitional movement, associated with the playwright Kawakami Otojirô (1864-1911), had its heyday in the 1890s and early 1900s. Unlike the male-dominant kabuki, *shimpa* playwrights were free to use female performers. Plays could be adapted from the Western dramatic

canon, and they could draw upon important events, such as the war with China. This would allow for the incorporation of appropriate patriotic sentiments, which pleased the authorities.

Shimpa attracted the work of individuals such as the above-mentioned TsubouchiShôyô and Mori Ôgai who also composed kabuki plays. It is worth noting the synergy between 'traditional' and 'modern' theatrical forms. This precisely parallels the 'binary' development of late-Meiji poetry and its traditional (*haiku-tanka*) and modern (*shintaishi*) genres, which were often composed by the same poet.

Turn of the twentieth century

In any event, the trajectory of Japanese arts and culture at the turn of the nineteenth century was distinctly modern. And here we need to appreciate the crucial significance of literary translation across the spectrum of genres. As for drama, translations of Shakespeare, Ibsen, and others helped inspire new understandings of individualism and interiority. In fact, translated drama was considered a literary genre in its own right, and plays were read and studied in the same way as novels. The works of Ibsen— most notably *A Doll's House* (1879) and *HeddaGabler* (1890)— proved so influential that an Ibsen Society was created as a venue for the *bundan* literary community to study the great Norwegian playwright.

The innovations brought about with the *shimpa* movement would only accelerate with the new century. The genre term *shingeki* ('new theater') would come to refer to the host of experiments in modern and avant-garde drama that would emerge.

Conclusion

Historically, nineteenth-century drama in Japan spans the spectrum of tradition and modernity, and it points the way to an even more aggressive program of modernization in the twentieth century. Yet the transition from Shogunal to Imperial rule, as of the Meiji Restoration, can be seen either as the gateway to a new, modern Japan or simply the recasting of the old authoritarian regime in modern dress. In fact, aspects of both were clearly in evidence.

As for the traditional performing arts— Noh gradually recovered from its moribund status during the early Meiji. And kabuki flourished, as both old and new plays were produced in abundance. At the same time, Western drama was studied, translated, and eventually staged, and the staging would early on entail a mixture of the old performance conventions and the realist techniques of modern dramaturgy.

Another turn-of-the-century Western import was cinema, which initially served a vehicle for the staging of kabuki and, eventually, modern productions of Japanese and Western drama and fiction. Dramatic production and cinema would continue to engage in a close and productive interaction over the course of the twentieth century.

The interplay of traditional and modern practices that marks the end of the nineteenth century in Japan would yield a rich and fascinating mélange of dramatic forms and style— as was the case with its poetry and fiction. But the full flowering of a modern Japanese drama would have to await the second and third decades of the new century.

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Discussion Questions and Topics

How best to understand the interface of 'tradition' and 'modernity' in the case of Japanese drama? How does this compare with the other genres? In particular, how do the key themes of individualism and interiority gain expression via dramatic performance?

How critical is it to experience the actual staging of dramatic work— be it Noh, kabuki, or a modern play? What do you feel is lost or gained insofar as we are restricted to reading dramatic works?

How did Japanese authorities exert control and supervision of stage performance? Can such constraints somehow yield creative benefits, or are they invariably negative?

What aspects of nineteenth-century Japanese drama interest you? How does this compare with the other genres during this time period?

Images

Woodblock print of a Noh performance during the Meiji period. (Source: ArtSofia)

Meiji woodblock print by Adachi Heishichi of a scene from an 1879 Western-style kabuki play by Mokuami, depicting an attack by American Indians (Source: Ukiyo-e.org)

KawatakeMokuami, as depicted in a mid-Meiji photograph (Source: kabuki21.com)

Late-Meiji postcard depiction of the Asakusa theater district in Tokyo
(Source: oldtokyo.com)

Photograph of TsubouchiShôyô, taken in 1930
(Source: oldtokyo.com)

FICTION

The Place of Fiction in Nineteenth-Century Japan

By the early nineteenth century, the brilliant fictional writings of Ihara Saikaku had given way to formulaic stories that would appeal to a readership interested in entertainment and diversion— satirical, sentimental, romantic— and often painfully didactic. Of note here is the work of writers such as JippenshaIkku, ShikiteiSanba, TamenagaShunsui, and Takizawa Bakin. (See Tokugawa Literary Genres: Fiction.) As a representative example of late-Tokugawa literary drollery, consider the following excerpt from Sanba's best-selling fictional work, *Floating-World Bathhouse* (1809):

> People do in fact possess individual minds and private feelings, but in a public bath there are no individual minds, and absolutely nothing is private. If a bather secretly farts, the water makes sounds, and a moment later bubbles rise to the surface. When we were young, we all heard about how little Yajirô farted off in the bushes and then lied about it. But a member of the public bath community who thinks about clandestine farting must consider what the impartial water is thinking, and he will feel ashamed. . . Finally, be especially vigilant about the following: Just as you place your clothes inside your rented wardrobe container and close the latch, be careful to act in ways proper to your social class, and always keep your mind safely locked and protected from others.
>
> Based on HaruoShirane (ed.), *Early Modern Japanese Literature*, pp 750, 752

Having been reduced to stale rehashings of old literary formulas and comic gambits, Japanese fiction in the latter half of the nineteenth century was in need of reinvention. It was Japan's encounter with the West, beginning in the 1850s, which eventually lead to an appreciation of Western literature and the gradual adaptation of Western literary influences and models. Needless to say, literary translation would figure as a crucial element in the modernization process. Many Japanese authors in fact began as translators and learned much in the process that they adapted to their own literary projects.

As of the second Meiji decade— the 1880s— it was understood that fiction ranked as the dominant Western literary genre, and a new generation of young Japanese writers sought to emulate this literature and to incorporate its key elements— most significantly, coherent plotting and in-depth characterization. Fictional characters would henceforth be constructed with a view to their psychological makeup and the often troubling quality of their social relationships. The typical protagonist was a young, naive man who struggled with his identity, and— in particular— with his feeble attempts to 'connect' with the opposite sex.

Yet the first generation of modern Japanese writers largely embraced the 'mission mentality' of the Meiji state, which promoted learning as the essential basis for nation-building and the molding of a strong national character. From the political perspective, literature was to embody appropriate virtues and values, and writers were expected to view literary pursuit— be it in the realm of fiction, poetry, or theater— as a higher calling. But in reality the situation was far more complex, and writers found ways to challenge the prerogatives of the nation's authoritarian leaders. Literary activity came to center upon the Tokyo-based community of writers, editors, and publishers— the so-called *bundan*. Avoiding overt political engagement, *bundan*writers focused on the troubled private lives of their characters, many of whom were autobiographical projections of the authors. Indeed, an important literary movement of the late-Meiji period— the Naturalist coterie— promoted a genre of confessional fiction meant to authentically convey the innermost qualities of the author himself. The debate concerning literary 'authenticity' has been a long-standing concern of both writers and critics.

As for the pioneers of Meiji fiction, three authors stand out: FutabateiShimei (1864-1909), Mori Ôgai (1862-1922), and NatsumeSôseki (1867-1916).

Futabatei

FutabateiShimei is something of a curiosity. A native of Edo with a penchant for foreign languages, Futabatei was among the first Japanese to master Russian, as a student at Tokyo's Foreign Language Institute in the 1880s. And he pioneered the translation of 19th-century Russian fiction from original texts. These translations were recognized as major literary achievements in their own right. Curiously ambivalent about pursuing a literary career, the young writer chose an elegant-sounding penname that is a variant of a Meiji vulgarism roughly translatable as "drop dead!"

Futabatei is best known as the author of what has long been regarded is Japan's first modern novel— *Drifting Cloud* (Ukigumo*,* 1887-89). Inspired in part by the noted literary manifesto of his mentor TsubouchiShôyô (*The Essence of the Novel*), Futabatei crafted a protagonist, UtsumiBunzô, who became the prototypical 'superfluous hero'— ambivalent, ineffectual, and chronically introverted. Largely drawn from Russian literary models, Bunzô is a decent, high-minded young man who finds himself beset by the crass materialism of the modern era and its debased values. Strongly attracted to his vivacious cousin, Osei, he is easily outsmarted by the crafty Noboru, his rival for the girl's affections.

> Bunzô was mortified. With enormous effort he held his burning fury within him until he felt his very heart would burst. How horribly he'd been insulted, and by a dog like Noboru. . . And to make matters worse, it all happened in front of Osei and her mother. . . They'd seen him made a fool of by that disgusting, vile creature. "I'll get even with you, Noboru!" he vowed to himself, gnashing his teeth, clenching his fists, and glaring wildly about.

Much of *Drifting Cloud* centers on Bunzô's pained interiority— an often seething emotional drama at odds with the passive, stoic persona that he presents to those around him. The novel concludes with the protagonist still irresolute, still a prisoner of his roiling emotions and unrelenting ineffectuality:

> In the end, Bunzô was forced to admit that he lacked to strength to carry out his resolutions. Weeks of worry had left him nearly mad, but he had done nothing to help the situation. . . Restlessly he wandered about the house. Eventually he reached a decision. He would talk to Osei when she returned home. He would gamble everything on her response. If she would not listen, he would leave once and for all. And so he went back upstairs to wait.
>
> Based on Marleigh Ryan (transl.), *Japan's First Modern Novel*, pp 286-88, 354, 356

In crafting a novel centering on the private emotional world of its very ordinary protagonist, Futabatei had set the compass for a mainstream of modern Japanese fiction that would explore the labyrinth of human subjectivity and self-absorption, and our failed negotiations with a confusing and alienating world.

Ôgai

Mori Ôgai ranks as one of the towering intellectual and literary figures of modern Japan. His accomplishments as writer, intellectual, critic— and, simultaneously, Japan's leading medical officer— are all but unparalleled. Ôgai's pioneering contribution to modern fiction is a trilogy of stories set in Germany, where he had spent four years (1884-88) as a medical officer. The first of these stories, *The Dancing Girl* (1890), draws upon his personal experiences. It begins as follows:

> It is customary to while away one's time at sea in the company of others, but I've chosen to shut myself up in my cabin, tormented as I am by a hidden remorse. . . How can I ever rid myself of such a torment? . . . Well then, since it will be some time before the cabin boy comes to turn off the light, I will attempt to record my story here.
>
> Based on Richard Bowring (transl.), in J. Thomas Rimer (ed.), *Mori Ôgai*: Youth *and Other Stories*, pp 8-9

Ôgai proceeds to tell the tale of a young Japanese— ÔtaToyotarô— who had lived in Berlin and won over a beautiful but impoverished German dancing girl. For a while living out this improbable romantic fantasy, Ôta eventually gives in to the call of duty and abandons his lover— pregnant, and on the verge of a mental breakdown— in order to return to Japan. Ôgai's moving confessional tale, which recounts the

protagonist's searing sense of guilt as he reflects upon his romantic misadventure on board the Japan-bound ship, helped established the short story as a privileged format for modern Japanese fiction, and personal confession as a powerful medium of self-expression.

Sôseki

More so than any other writer, it was NatsumeSôseki who can be credited with having brought modern Japanese fiction to its highest level. An erstwhile professor of English literature who turned to creative writing as a professional career, Sôseki is generally regarded as Japan's 'novelist laureate.'

Sôseki's abiding concern for the corrosive effects of the modern age is best expressed in a work regarded by many as the great Japanese novel— *Kokoro* (1914). This deeply moving work, seen as capturing the essential spirit of the Meiji era, centers on the relationship between a young man and an older acquaintance, *Sensei*, to whom he is strongly— and strangely— attracted. The novel begins as follows:

> I always called him 'Sensei.' I shall therefore refer to him simply as 'Sensei,' and not by his real name. . . Whenever the memory of him comes back to me now, I find that I think of him as 'Sensei' still. I simply cannot bring myself to write of him in any other way.

Kokoro goes on to tell of the young narrator's attempts to fathom what lies behind Sensei's reticence and melancholy fatalism.

> "Don't put too much trust in me. You will learn to regret it if you do," Sensei said. "The memory that you once sat at my feel will begin to haunt you. . . I bear with my loneliness now, in order to avoid greater loneliness in the years ahead. You see, loneliness is the price we pay for being born in this modern age, so full of freedom, independence, and our own egotistical selves."

Notwithstanding this ominous pronouncement, Sensei becomes something of an obsession for the narrator, even displacing his own father. He will end up abandoning the father, on his deathbed in the family home in the provinces, in order to return to Tokyo to be with Sensei, who has evidently taken his own life. Sensei finally reveals himself to the narrator in the form of a long letter, comprising the second half of the novel, which tells of his sorry past and the tragic circumstances that led to his suicide.

> Now, as I am about to cut open my own heart and drench your face with my blood, I shall be satisfied if, when my heart stops beating, a new life lodges itself in your breast.

Above excerpts based on Edwin McClellan, transl., *Kokoro*, pp 1, 30, 129

Sensei's confession— a fully-fashioned autobiography in its own right— recounts how he had betrayed his best friend over their rivalry for the same young woman, resulting in the friend's suicide. Sensei eventually marries the young woman but is consumed by remorse and an all-consuming and desperate loneliness. The fate of the young narrator, who has himself betrayed his dying father for the sake of the suicidal Sensei, remains unknown. These deaths are in turn related to the demise of the Meiji Emperor (1912) and the end of an epochal era in Japan's history.

Conclusion

In addition to these pioneering fiction writers, three others deserve mention. ShimazakiTôson (1872-1943) was a leading romantic poet in the 1890s who turned to fiction. His 1906 novel, *Broken Commandment*, tells of the 'coming out' of Ushimatsu, a member of the outcaste *burakumin* minority, who defies his father's dying wish that he conceal his true identity and gains a new lease on life through his confessional unburdening at the novel's climax.

Higuchi Ichiyô (1872-96) was a brilliant woman writer who succeeded against all odds in establishing herself in the male-dominant literary establishment. Notwithstanding her death at a very early age, Ichiyô's stories— most notably, *Growing Up* (1896)— movingly evoke the world of women and young people living in the vicinity of Tokyo's entertainment district. And Nagai Kafû (1879-1959) was a Tokyo

writer who, like Tôson, was trained as a poet but turned to fiction. Drawn to the working-class *shitamachi* working-class district and its back streets and common folk, Kafû is known for stories such as *The River Sumida* (1909)— a nostalgic portrayal of Tokyo and its tapestry of locale neighborhoods before its transformation into a Western-style metropolis.

In sum, the transition from the fiction of the late Tokugawa to a fully-fledged modern fiction in the late-Meiji reflects the interplay of traditional themes and tastes and a host of adaptations and assimilations of Western literature and culture. Three elements stand out here: the privileging of psychological interiority and personal isolation; the complex engagement of individuals with family and social relationships— especially regarding gender issues ; and the centrality of Tokyo itself— its neighborhoods, streets, and byways, together with the river that runs through it. Indeed, much Meiji fiction treats the Tokyo city-scape as a character in its own right.

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Discussion Questions and Topics

Give thought to the curious fact of a male centered literary establishment, which appeared to favor a literature of male ineffectuality and anxiety— and women as self-possessed and capable. In other words, how are we to 'read' the accounts of male angst and emotional instability?

The apolitical status of most nineteenth-century Japanese fiction reflects the marginal circumstance of writers, vis a vis the authoritarian regime— be it shogunal or imperial. How are we to assess the socio-political milieu within which writers functioned?

Meiji fiction presents an interesting juxtaposition of externality— the spaces and locales that characters inhabit and move through— and the interiority and self-absorption of these same characters. Consider the interplay of these seemingly antithetical elements.

Images

ShikiteiSanba (1776-1822) (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

FutabateiShimei (1864-1909) (Source: *Yomiuri Shinbun*)

Mori Ôgai (1862-1922) (Source: *Japan Times*)

NatsumeSôseki (1867-1916) (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The Place of Autobiography in Nineteenth-Century Japan

Overall, Japanese literature in the late-Tokugawa period was marked by the intersection of stultifying traditionalism and formalism and the gradual assimilation of new forces and influences— most significantly, a concern for the individual and an interest in new modes of self-expression. The shogunal regime remained unchallenged, as did its official embrace of samurai virtue and privilege. But the urban merchant class, the so-called *chônin*, favored a more progressive and secular orientation. With the advent of the Meiji era, these forerunners of modern urban society assumed a dominant role.

Meiji literary activity quickly came to center on Tokyo and its literary community, the so-called *bundan*. Although writers were politically marginal and avoided direct critique of the imperial regime, they explore a tacit resistance through their abiding concern for individualism and freedom of expression. Yet the *bundan* was a largely male bastion, and literary women were in the minority.

The literary journalism that served to mediate between writers and the print media— be it the periodical press or book publishers— was marked by a rising demand for personal narratives by noteworthy writers and public figures. These were identified by a confusing array of genre terms, but they were united insofar as writers were expected to hold forth on their upbringing, their literary background, and their thoughts regarding current issues and the world at large. A crucial criterion was the crafting of a convincingly genuine personal voice.

Modern autobiography— the comprehensive, extensive narrative overview of one's life and times— was introduced into Japan as part of the wide-ranging translation project of key Western works. Foremost here, in terms of their impact on young Meiji writers and intellectuals, were Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782)and the *Autobiography* of Benjamin Franklin (1793). These were widely read and admired, and often cited as inspiration for writers grappling with the challenge of crafting personal narrative. The pioneering autobiography of the great Meiji educator and ideologue FukuzawaYukichi was liberally adapted from the Franklin work.

Nonetheless, the Western model of comprehensive, coherently-plotted autobiography did not take hold during the Meiji period. Instead, writers generally opted for shorter, more episodic narratives. Of note in this regard is the key role of the print media and their broad solicitation of personal narratives regarding the lives of noteworthy individuals— literary and otherwise. (See: Essays)

Of note, too, is the significance of autobiographical fiction. Here, the role of the late-Meiji Naturalist (*shizenshugi-ha*) coterie was crucial. Its writers were committed to crafting fictional protagonists whose accounts would be 'read' as faithful projections of the author himself. In short, the autobiographical burden of Japanese fiction was well established by the end of the Meiji period.

Late-Tokugawa autobiography: The escapades of KatsuKokichi

The increasingly secular orientation of late-Tokugawa Japan witnessed a break from the strongly Confucianist cast of earlier autobiography, as epitomized by Arai Hakuseki's*Told Round a Brushwood Fire*. A prime example is a work entitled *Musui's Story* (Musuidokugen, 1843), the personal account of a low-ranking samurai named KatsuKokichi (1802-50). (See Tokugawa genres: Autobiography). Katsu's account seems to have more in common with Jippenshalkku's picaresque novel, *Shank's Mare* (Hizakurige), serialized between 1802-22. Katsu casts himself as the proverbial 'bad boy'— the very antithesis of the samurai ideal of self-restraint and steadfastness. He appears to revel in accounts of his youthful dissipation and debauchery. Yet his autobiographical escapades are recounted from the retrospective position of one who has dutifully reformed himself and renounced his profligate ways. Katsu has learned his lesson, so to speak, and managed to reestablish his good name. But what makes *Musui's Story* so compelling— and entertaining— is the vivid and unabashed exposé of one's youthful transgressions. And so one is inclined to question the seriousness of his moral exhortations and

admonitions. Is Katsu's narrator serious about his role as a penitent soul, or is there an ironic 'dig' at the pomposity and pretense of it all?

Meiji Autobiography

Given the aims of Meiji modernization, one might think that writers would happily eschew didacticism and instead favor the voice of individualism and unencumbered self-expression. But the Meiji regime essentially repurposed the Tokugawa moral code and promoted it as part of a state-sponsored national identity. This 'neo-*bushido*' ethos, famously expounded by NitobeInazô in his widely-read *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* (1899; written in English), would intersect with a Western-inspired embrace of individualism and social progressivism. The pioneering work of Meiji autobiography, written at the turn of the twentieth century, would position Japan's traditional— and emperor-centered— moral code against this new spirit of independence and rational inquiry.

The Autobiography of FukuzawaYukichi

FukuzawaYukichi (1835-1901), whose image graces Japan's 10,000 yen banknote, was a towering figure of the so-called 'Meiji enlightment' (*bunmeikaika*). His role was akin to that of Franklin vis a vis the birth of our own nation, and it was Franklin's autobiography that helped mold Fukuzawa's autobiographical persona in *Fukuôjiden* (1899). Like Mori Ôgai, Fukuzawa was raised in a traditional samurai household. Both were challenged to reinvent themselves in accordance with the Meiji agenda of modernization, and both went on to make outstanding contributions to the nation's development, in their respective ways. Unlike Ôgai, however, Fukuzawa left a compelling autobiographical record of his rise in the world.

Focusing on his youthful rebelliousness, Fukuzawa's narrator relates key incidents in the emergence of his spirit of independence, social justice, and rational inquiry. One such incident centers on his older brother, a stern, self-righteous lad who would regularly admonish him for any infractions of propriety— for instance, defiling the image of a samurai leader or, worse yet, a Shinto deity (*kami*). Skeptical about such seemingly mindless superstition, the young Yukichi decided to put it to the test:

> I stole one of the sacred Shinto charms— a piece of paper bearing the names of the *kami*— and I deliberately trampled on it when nobody was looking. Lo and behold— nothing happened! No divine punishment was visited upon me. And so I decided to go one step further. I took another sacred charm to the privy and tossed it in the filth. It did cross my mind that I might have gone too far with such a brazen deed. But again, nothing whatsoever happened! Aha, I though. I'd indeed made a great discovery. But I had to keep it to myself.
>
> Based on *The Autobiography of YukichiFukuzawa*, pp 16-17

The young man went on to devise ever more sophisticated challenges to the status quo, and in so doing he refined his intellectual acuity and independent, rational temper. By and by he turned his critical eye to the egregious inequalities of the feudal system itself, and the hegemony of samurai power and privilege. Indeed, Fukuzawa would famously emerge as an ardent exponent of egalitarianism in the early years of the Meiji.

Like other erstwhile samurai, though, FukuzawaYukichi did not entire abandon the elitist qualities he had acquired through his samurai upbringing. One notes a *noblesse oblige* quality to his public career, despite (or perhaps in tandem with) his Meiji-era reinvention as a modern intellectual and a culture critic.

UchimuraKanzô, *How I Became a Christian*

In much the same vein as Fukuzawa, but fully a generation younger, UchimuraKanzô ranks as a leading Meiji intellectual and social activist who harbored a distrust of authoritarian institutions and advocated a an independent and questioning spirit— and spiritual life. Like Fukuzawa, he too wrote an autobiography detailing the process of his intellectual and spiritual coming of age— as a Christian. Uchimura's career as a Japanese Christian burdened with making sense of this 'foreign faith' and promoting it among his

countrymen is indeed unique, and it inspired a number of autobiographical works that trace the course of his spiritual journey. The best known of these works— *How I Became a Christian* (1895)— was written in English, and it presents a strikingly new autobiographical persona— at once recognizably 'Japanese,' yet untethered from the expected traits of character.

A native of Edo, Uchimura was educated in a mission school in Hokkaido, in the far north, where he was baptized in 1877. He tried his hand at various ventures before deciding to continue his education in the U.S., where he spent four years (1884-88). Uchimura's autobiography focuses on these years, and the disillusionment he felt as he confronted an American Christendom that fell far short of his expectations. Inspired in part by the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine (ca 400), arguably the first work of Western autobiography, Uchimura's account explores the challenges of acquiring faith and maintaining it in the face of temptation, societal opposition, and self-doubt. Its having been written in English can be said to have opened up avenues of narrative soul-searching not easily accessible in his native language.

Together with his other autobiographical writings of the 1890s, Uchimura succeeded in crafting a comprehensive and deeply moving spiritual autobiography. He would go on to become an ardent proponent of pacifism, in the face of Japan's impending war with Russia, and the founder of *Mukyôkai*— a 'non-church' Christian movement that sought to minimize the excessively regimented quality of the established churches and to underscore the individual's responsibility to construct and maintain a faith-based life.

What follows is a late-Meiji autobiographical subject who was cut from a very different cloth.

Ishikawa Takuboku, *Romaji Diary*

Primarily known as a pioneering Meiji poet, Ishikawa Takuboku kept a sporadic record of his thoughts and moods over a three-month period (April to June) in 1909, from his Tokyo apartment. He employed a Roman alphabet transcription of his remarks, for reasons not entirely clear, and proceeded to hide the manuscript away. It was discussed in the 1950s, entirely by accident, and published posthumously, under the title *Rômajinikki* (A Diary written in the Roman alphabet).

Takuboku's work is neither diary nor autobiography, strictly speaking. Rather, it is a disjointed series of tormented and twisted observations, thoughts, and fantasies, which points to the influence of the then-dominant Naturalist movement, which espoused an unvarnished, unfiltered self-exposure, which would maximally reveal one's quirks, anxieties, and obsessions. And it also is consistent with the *bundan* preference for episodic, fragmentary glimpses of character— in this case, a character straddling the border of sanity and madness.

> I am unhappy. I am a weakling, a weakling with a marvelous sword inferior to none. . . I want to live like a farmer, ignorant of everything. I envy people who go crazy. I'm too healthy in body and mind. . . I can't obtain any satisfaction from people, and yet it's impossible for me to go off by myself. . .
>
> I am worn out. I am seeking peace of mind. Where can anyone find this thing called peace of mind? I want to be sick. . . Sickness is the only way we have to obtain peace of mind. . .
>
> Why am I loved? Why can't I hate anyone? To be loved is an insufferable insult. I am tired. I am a weakling. God, do me a favor and damage my body. I won't mind the pain. Or make me sick. Just make me sick.
>
> Based on Keene, *Modern Japanese Literature*, pp 218, 220-21

NatsumeSôseki and *shôhin* reminiscence

Sickness— physical, for the most part, but psychological as well— would figure prominently in the life and personal writings of Japan's most esteemed novelist, NatsumeSôseki. Sôseki turned to autobiographical

sketches and reflections in between the serial publication of his widely-read novels in the *Asahi* newspaper, from 1907 until his death in 1916. Referred to as *shôhin*— literary miniatures— these hundreds of personal narratives can collectively be regarded as Sôseki's autobiography.

The author, writing from the solitary confines of his study, touches on a range of themes and concerns— his upbringing in early-Meiji Tokyo, and how the city had changed virtually beyond recognition; his childhood friends and schoolmates; his parents— a mother recalled fondly but only imperfectly, and a rather indifferent and remote father. Sôseki remarks at length about his ill health— a chronic stomach disorder would prove fatal at age forty-none. Often hospitalized, he was prone to reflect upon his own mortality and to lament his inability to comprehend the world in which he lives.

NatsumeSôseki candidly remarks upon himself as an imperfect family man. There is the fraught relationship with his wife Kyôko, and his ambivalence as a father to a large brood of children. He expresses his strong distaste for being hounded by journalists and others seeking some favor. He writes of the family pets and his sorry neglect of their needs.

A curmudgeon by nature, Sôseki fully acknowledges his shortcomings— and his occasional moments of tranquility and repose. One such moment comes at the conclusion of his final *shôhin* collection, *Inside My Glass Doors* (Garasudo no uchi, 1915):

> I'd brought my desk out onto the veranda on this Sunday afternoon in spring, and leaned up against the railing. I just sat there, lost in thought. . . I reflected upon these little episodes I'd written and how pointless they seemed. . . But I managed to look down upon myself and enjoy laughing at my own folly. Cosseted by my self-mockery, all the while I am little more than a child asleep in his cradle. . .
>
> Looking out upon the great expanse of humanity, I can only smile. And as I cast the same gaze upon myself, the author of these trifling accounts, it's a thought someone else had written them all. And I can only smile. . .
>
> The house is still and hushed, as is my spirit. And so I open wide the glass doors, and bathed in the quiet light of spring, I bring this work to a close. And when it's done, I will lie down here on the veranda.
>
> Based on Marcus, *Reflections*, pp 153-54

Conclusion

The nineteenth century witnessed a dramatic shift in the way that writers conceived of themselves as individuals and members of society. Late-Tokugawa writers generally steered away from a focus on self and self-exposure, instead conforming to established codes and practices. Poetry remained the dominant genre, and prose writing tended toward droll tales, romances, and popular fare.

The interest in *jiga*— modern selfhood— and its narrative representation became a concern of Meiji writers drawn to Western models of individualism and literary subjectivity. Romanticism proved influential, as did political liberalism and the Christian concern for confession and soul searching.

As noted above, the classics of Western autobiography were read and appreciated, but there was a preference for personal narratives that were episodic and fragmentary. Also, autobiographical fiction emerged as a prominent vehicle of self-expression, especially of the confessional variety. It is perhaps ironic that the fictional works of the Naturalist coterie came to be regarded as authentically autobiographical.

Finally, one notes that the backdrop for this literary quest for individuality and self-expression is the Japanese imperial state, whose authoritarian agenda was entirely at odds with that of the *bundan* community.

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Discussion Questions and Topics

What do you regard as the proper criteria of 'autobiographical writing'? How to determine the border of 'essay' and 'autobiography'? Of the various genres noted above, which are easiest for you to relate to and appreciate?

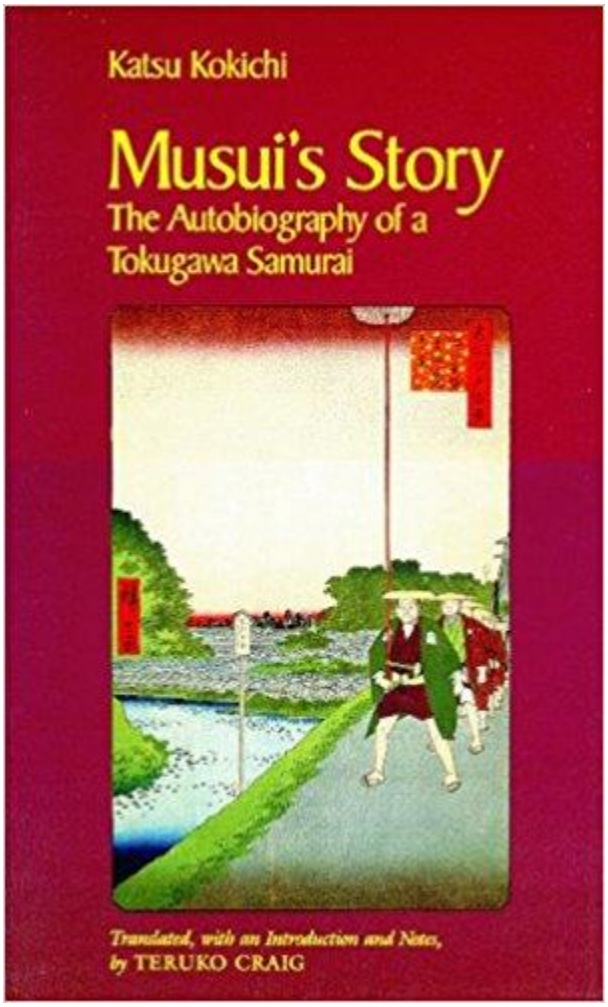
Ultimately, is it possible to judge the 'authenticity' of any form of personal narrative?

Compare Fukuzawa's autobiography with its 'source work,' the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin. How does Fukuzawa 'Japanify' the Franklin persona?

Compare Fukuzawa's work to Nitobe's*Bushido: The Soul of Japan* and Uchimura's*How I Became a Christian*. How might the fact of these latter two works having been written in English affect the 'self' being constructed?

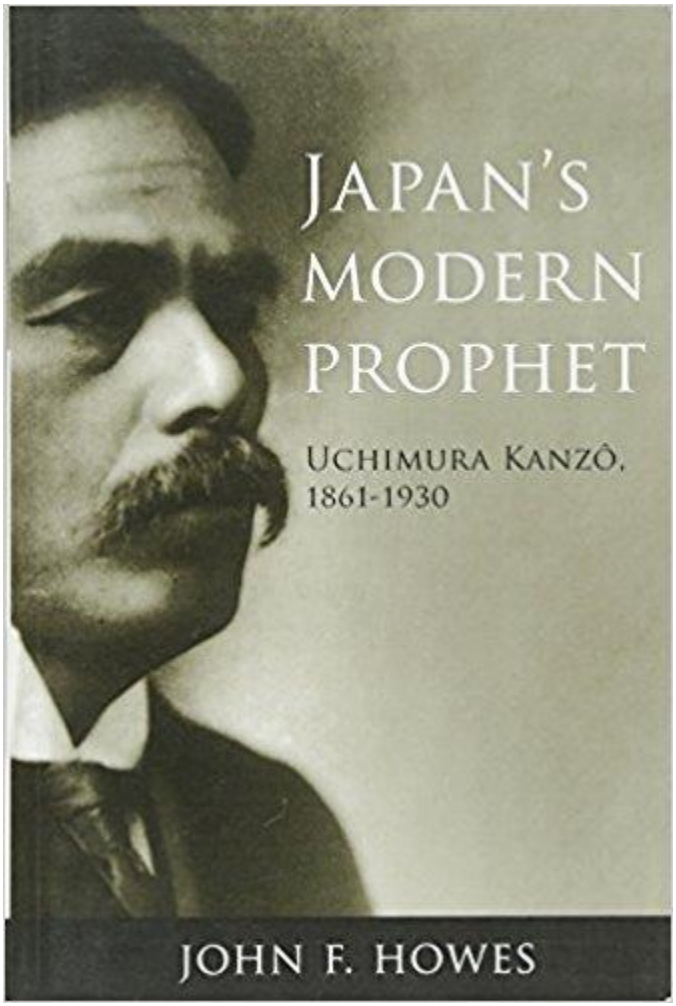
How can fiction serve as an effective vehicle for autobiography? What examples come to mind?

Images

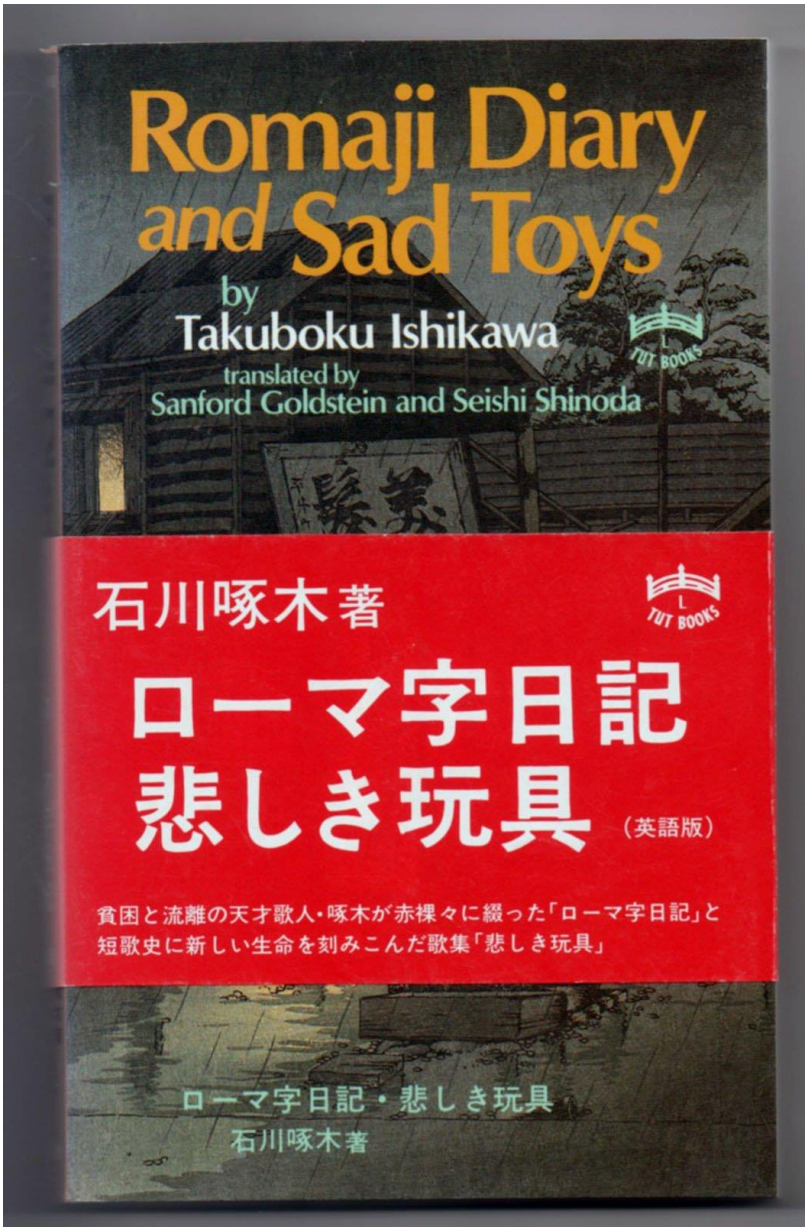


English translation of KatsuKokichi's autobiography
(Source: Amazon.com)

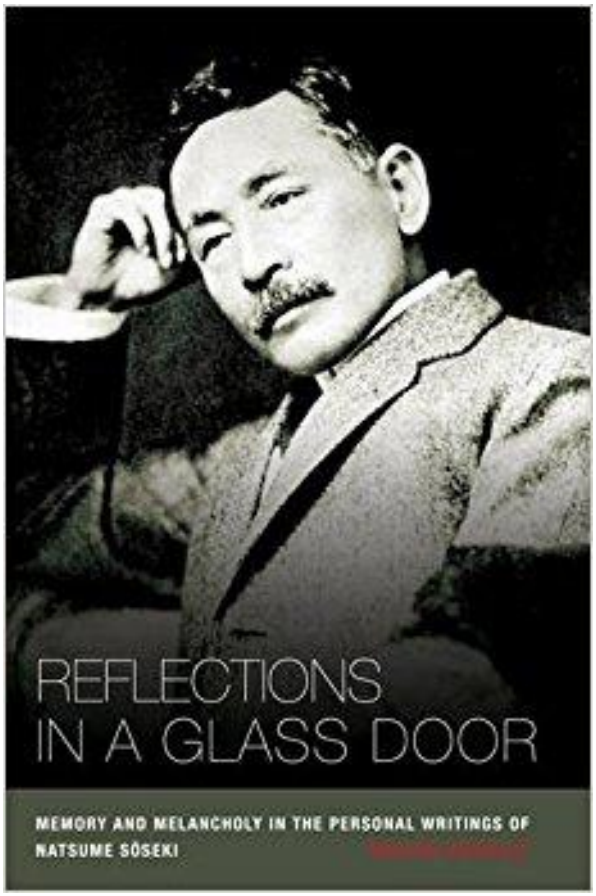
FukuzawaYukichi, as pictured on the Japanese 10,000 yen banknote
(Source: Wikimedia commons)



UchimuraKanzô, as pictured on the cover of John Howes' biography. (Source: Amazon.com)



Ishikawa Takuboku's*Romaji Diary* and his 1912 *tanka* collection, In English translation (Source: Amazon.com)



NatsumeSôseki, as pictured on the cover of Marcus's study of the *shôhin* writings (Source: Amazon.com)

ESSAY

The Place of Essay Writing in Nineteenth-Century Japan

As in other literary and cultural areas, essay writing in nineteenth-century Japan reflected the intersection of old, established traditions of personal narrative (the *zuihitsu* genre, in particular) and a new, Western-oriented concern for individuality and authenticity of expression. Still under the sway of traditional styles and conventions, late- Tokugawa writers retained their interest in rhetorical polish, virtuosity, and flair. And notwithstanding the gradual transition to a more secular, materialist society, a Confucian-centered elevation of literary pursuit and the privileging of a distinctly literary language still held sway. This was certainly the case in the great urban centers of Edo, Osaka, and Kyoto. (See Tokugawa Literary Genres: Essay)

With the Meiji period, Japan's transition to Western-inspired modernization led to fundamentally new conceptions of the individual and one's expressive capacities. Despite the persistence of older genres, the emergence of new genres of personal essay was in part the product of the rise of modern print media— mass-circulation periodicals, in particular— and a literary journalism that met a demand for personal essays by writers and other notable figures. The key criterion here was the fashioning of an authentic personal voice, expressed in a standardized literary language accessible to a broad national readership. Such writing was widely embraced by the emerging Tokyo-based literary community, the so-called *bundan*.

There appeared a number of essay-style sub-genres on the periodical market, but the broad personal essay genre favored short, episodic observations and reflections. These included diary writing (*nikki*, a perennial preoccupation of Japanese writers); and sensitive, lyrical prose that featured natural imagery and poetic musings.

Japanese writers were not unfamiliar with autobiography as a genre of literary self-expression, and a number of Tokugawa and Meiji figures experimented with the genre (See the relevant article on autobiography). Yet there was a curious resistance to consigning oneself to a single, comprehensive literary package. Rather, it was the brief personal essay form that most appealed to Japanese writers in the nineteenth century.

A Sampler of Essay Writing

What follows is a roughly chronological selection of excerpts from noteworthy late-Tokugawa and Meiji essays, with brief comments on each.

1) Anonymous essay collection, *Clouds of Floating Grasses* (1843)

> People who keep cats don't always know how to care for them. They put dried tuna in with their food, which adds fat, not knowing that if you give cats too much fat, they won't be able to catch mice. Rather, the thing to give cats is fried barley with miso on it. You shouldn't give them anything else. If they get used to eating meat, when you don't have any to give them, they are sure to steal from the neighbors. It's the same with raising our young people. . .
>
> Having few things is the basis of true abundance. Storing up lots of things simply invites trouble and taxes the body. Rich people who live frugally can enjoy accumulating more things. But wearing thin robes when you are wealthy is to make sheer accumulation one's only pleasure. From the vantage point of those without many worldly desires, such people look like nothing so much as summer insects drawn to the flames.
>
> Based on Carter, *The Columbia Anthology of Japanese Essays*, pp 355, 359

The anonymous author of the above excerpts is employing a standard late-Tokugawa essay style, which channels the orthodox Confucian moral code as he presents both practical and moral advice to the reader. Overall, the *Floating Grasses* collection is a miscellany of such observations and reflections.

Meiji Essays

The grounds for essay writing in the Meiji period would undergo a dramatic shift. What follows is a sampling of noteworthy essays spanning nearly half a century:

2) KanagakiRobun, *The Beefeater* (1871)

> We really should be grateful that even people like ourselves can now eat beef, thanks to the fact that Japan is steadily becoming a civilized country. Of course there are those unenlightened boors who cling to their barbaric superstitions and claim that eating meat defiles you so much that you can no longer pray before Buddha and the gods. Such nonsense shows that they simply cannot understand natural philosophy. Such savages should be made to read Fukuzawa's enlightened article on eating beef. In the West, they're free of superstition and do everything scientifically— that's why they've come up with such glorious inventions as the steamship and steam engine.
>
> Based on Keene, *Modern Japanese Literature*, p 32

Robun's is a transitional work of the early Meiji, reflecting the late-Tokugawa *gesaku* comic and ironic mode as it lampoons the fetish for Western goods and styles that had taken hold in Tokyo and elsewhere. This send-up of Japan's slavish imitation of the West would be revisited in early twentieth-century writing as well.

3) TsubouchiShôyô, *The Essence of the Novel* (1885)

> It would seem that the time is propitious for the production of new, modern novels. But it has reached the point that our newspapers and magazines are printing rehashes of the hackneyed old novels. . . There is a staggering production of books— all of them bad. . . It has long been our practice to treat the novel as an instrument of moral education, whose chief function is the encouragement of virtue and the castigation of vice. In actual practice, though, readers have been drawn only to scenes of violence and pornography. Alas, our popular writers have become slaves to public fancy and have freely pandered to the lowest common denominator of taste. What could be more lamentable! . . . And so it is my hope that this work will be of service to authors seeking to improve our novels, with the hope that we may surpass in quality the novels of Europe, thus enabling the Japanese novel to assume a glorious place on the altar of the arts.
>
> Based on Keene, pp 55, 57-58

Shôyô was an important literary editor and culture critic who sought to galvanize young Japanese writers by steering them away from outmoded Tokugawa practices and having them turn to fiction writing inspired by Western models. His essay on how to craft the modern novel was a watershed in the emergence of a modern Japanese literary voice.

4) NatsumeSôseki, *The Civilization of Modern-Day Japan* (1911)

> As a result of our modern contrivances, life should be easier for us than it was for our ancestors. But this is not the case. We live with pain no less extreme than that experienced by the men of old. Our standard of living may have risen, but the pain of existence has not at all abated. . . This is the great paradox to which modern civilization has given birth. As for Japan— having been snatched up by the flying monster of Western civilization, our nation clings desperately to the monster, afraid of being dropped into oblivion. . . We can only view Japan's future with pessimism.

Based on Rimer and Gessel, *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Japanese Literature* (Vol 1), pp 315-22

5) NatsumeSôseki, *My Individualism* (1914)

There has been much talk of late concerning 'the ego' and 'self-awareness' as a justification for unrestrained self-assertion. Be on your guard against those who spout such nonsense, for while they hold their own egos in high esteem, they are indifferent to others' egos. . . There should be no such thing as power unaccompanied by obligation. In other words, unless one has attained a degree of moral integrity, there is no value in developing one's individuality. One who lacks character will inevitably present a threat to others. Individualism, in short, must be rooted in ethical conduct and conscience. Otherwise, it can only yield to a profound condition of loneliness.

Based on Rimer and Gessel, pp 327-31

The above essays by the eminent author NatsumeSôseki reflect, first, his pessimism regarding the position of Japan vis a vis a dominant— and domineering— Western civilization; and, second, the fraught quality of modern, urban existence and the lamentable rise of egocentrism, self-absorption, and a virtually debilitating sense of loneliness. This latter theme is brilliantly evoked in his best-known novel, *Kokoro*. (See: Fiction) For a selection of Sôseki's personal narratives, see: Autobiography.

6) Mori Ôgai, *Daydreams* (1911)

What had I been doing all my life? I'd been toiling away at my studies as if constantly driven on by something. . . But I felt that all I was really doing was appearing onstage and acting out an assigned role. . . However much I longed to take off the mask, to catch a glimpse of my true self, I kept up my performance, the director's whip at my back. . .

"How can a man come to know himself?" Goethe once wrote. "Not through reflection, but perhaps through action. Do your duty and in the end you will know your true worth. What, then, is your duty? The demands of each day." . . .

The old man in his small hut thus spends his days, neither fearing death nor awaiting it, but with the sense of a dream unfulfilled. His reminiscences occasionally reveal the traces of many years in a single moment. And at such times his eyes stare out over the distant sea and sky. This is merely an odd scrap jotted down at just such a moment.

Based on Richard Bowring, transl., in J. Thomas Rimer (ed.), *Mori Ôgai*: Youth *and Other Stories*, pp 170, 176, 181

One of Meiji Japan's preëminent literary and intellectual figures, Ôgai reflects here upon an upbringing dominated by others' expectations and the chronic— and irreducibly modern— anxiety regarding one's identity, one's proper role in society, and the meaning of one's life. This theme is central to Ôgai's celebrated short story, *The Dancing Girl* (See: Fiction)

Conclusion

Not surprisingly, essay writing in nineteenth-century Japan reflects prevailing literary and cultural styles, together with the nation's dramatically shifting socio-political milieu. While authors tended to focus on other literary pursuits, they would turn to the essay both as a vehicle for culture criticism and as an outlet for one's personal point of view. Ultimately, the themes that emerge in essay form would be evident as well in the fiction, poetry, and drama of late-Tokugawa and Meiji Japan. Overall, though, a concern for individual expression and for sobering reflections on the modern age and its challenges and frustrations would come to predominate.

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Discussion Questions and Topics

How do the above essays reflect the transformation from the insular world of Tokugawa Japan to the more open, cosmopolitan world of the Meiji era? How do they relate to, and differ from, essay writing in earlier periods?

'Individual expression' is a highly subjective matter. How do essays serve as convincing and compelling vehicles for such expression? How do we respond to didactic essays, which counsel virtue and admonish vice? Have we grown impervious to moralizing and 'preaching' in the present day?

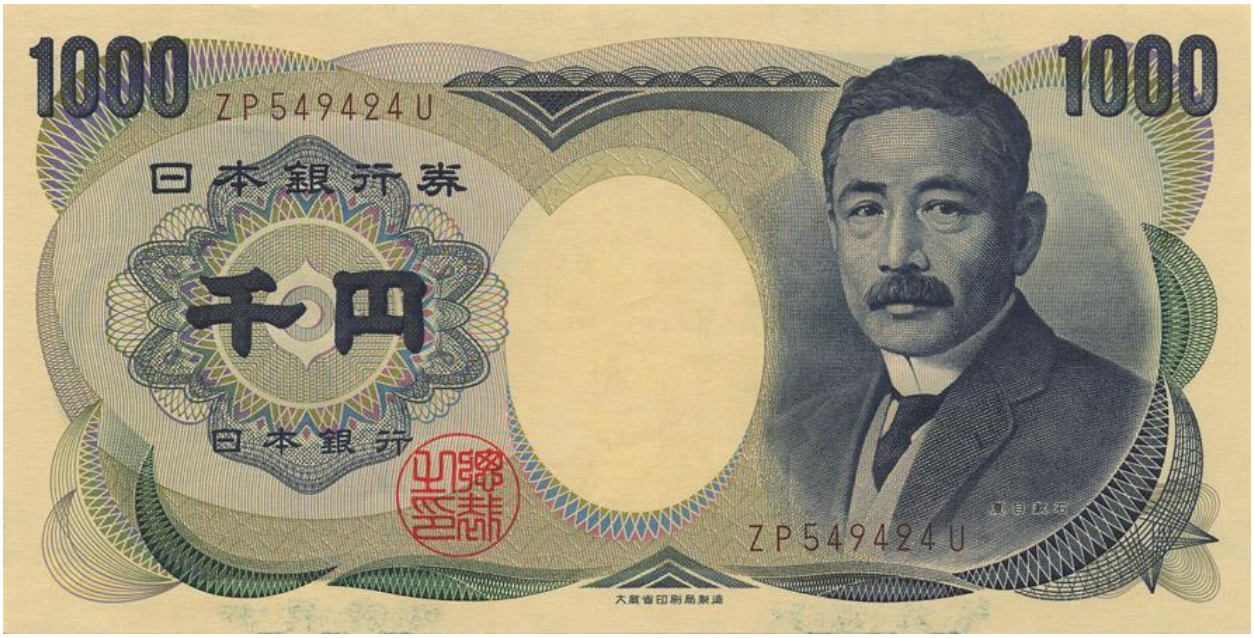
What would you suggest as the proper criteria for an effective essay? How do we regard essay writing in comparison with diary writing, poetry, or fiction?

Images

KanagakiRobun (1829-94) (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Image from *The Beefeater* (Aguranabe, 1871) (Source: manabean.wixsite.com)

TsubouchiShôyô (1859-1935) (Source: Wikimedia Commons)



NatsumeSôseki (1867-1916), as depicted on 1000-yen Japanese banknote (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Mori Ôgai (1862-1922) (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

SECTION : IV : 20TH CENTURY

Content

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.

Part I : POETRY

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’?

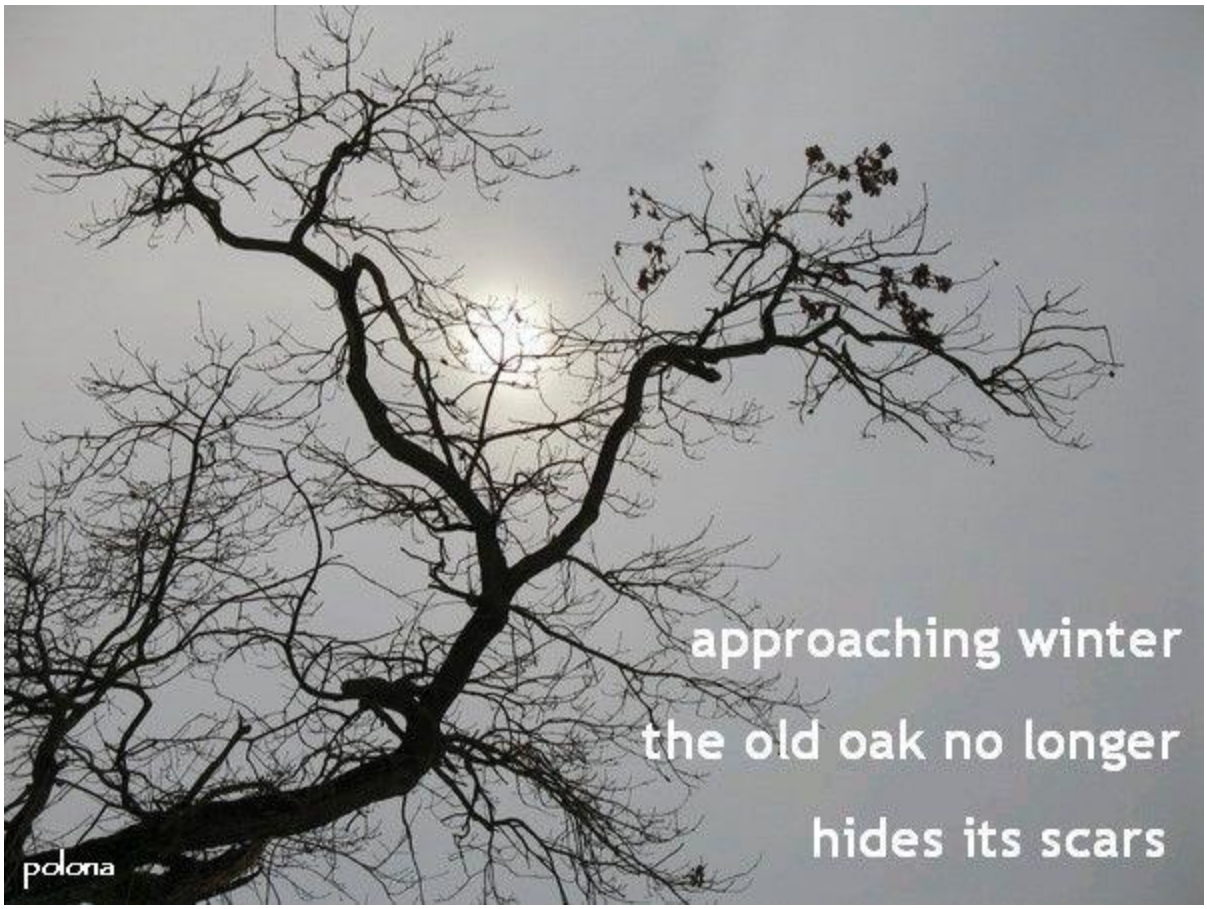
Images *


Hagiwara Sakutarô

Miyazawa Kenji

Tamura Ryûichi

TawaraMachi(Source: Japan Times, Inc.)



No caption needed(Source: Pinterest)

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Part II : DRAMA

The Place of Drama in Twentieth-Century Japan

The late-Meiji scene

The Meiji period witnessed the transition from long-established theatrical practices and repertoires to a modern, Western-inspired drama. (See article on nineteenth-century drama.) In particular, the widespread popularity of kabuki drama and puppet theater (*bunraku*) during the Tokugawa period continued to exert its influence well into the modern era. Indeed, the iconic status of kabuki endures in the twenty-first century.

The late-Meiji period witnessed the rise of two important transitional genres of theatrical performance— *shimpa* and *shingeki* ('new style;' 'new theater'). These hybrid genres incorporated aspects of kabuki performance and recently-imported Western modes of acting and playwriting. What emerged was an array of competing troupes that gradually led to an increasingly sophisticated modern drama. One important development, which originated with writers seeking a broader readership, was the advent of a standardized vernacular form of Japanese. Achieving currency by the late-Meiji period, this linguistic breakthrough allowed for a more compelling and realistic mode of performance that employed colloquial speech and centered on contemporary settings and situations.

The Taishô scene and Osanai Kaoru

As with other domains of Japanese arts and culture, however, the emergence of distinctively Japanese modern drama that was freed from traditional performance modes and no longer merely imitative of Western theatrical models had to await the Taishô period (1912-26). A key figure here is Osanai Kaoru (1881-1928), founder in 1909 of an important *shingeki* troupe, the Free Theater group. Having come under the influence of Western drama during an extended stay in Europe (1912-13), Osanai set about staging translated versions of modern Western plays by Ibsen, Chekhov, and Hauptmann, among others. One drawback, though, was that Osanai's troupe of actors had been trained in kabuki performance and found it difficult to adopt Western acting techniques.

Osanai achieved greater success with his next theatrical company— the Tsukiji Little Theater (*Tsukiji shôgekijô*), founded in 1924. By this time, translated Western plays had achieved widespread currency, and audiences were more receptive to 'Western style' performance.

The privileging of translated Western drama, however, inevitably stifled the emergence of modern plays by Japanese playwrights. Following Osanai's untimely death in 1928, the burden of establishing a viable Japanese modern drama fell to individuals such as Hijikata Yoshi (1898-1959) and Kishida Kunio (1890-1954). It was Kishida who can be said to have established the aesthetic and performative standards for a modern Japanese theater that could stand on its own.

Taishô popular culture and political activism

A key context for the emergence of pre-war Japanese theater was the burgeoning popular culture of the Taishô-era, with its new performance media and thriving market for consumer goods and leisure activities. Moving pictures developed in tandem with modern theater, and their synergy of acting styles and stage sets recalls the mutual reinforcement of kabuki and *bunraku* during the Tokugawa period.

What is more, the free-wheeling, hedonistic subculture of Taishô 'modern boys' and 'modern girls' (*mobo, moga*), who were powerfully drawn to chic style, fashion, and spectacle, gave rise to new 'performance spaces'— bars, coffee houses, dance halls, and jazz clubs. In other words, modern theater had a vibrant counterpart in the performative world of pre-war Japanese popular culture, where histrionics, sensuality, and display were all the rage.

Furthermore, the burgeoning political activism of the Taishô and early Shôwa (1915-35) fostered a wide range of literary and dramatic production that promoted the left-wing agenda that appealed to young writers and intellectuals. A key figure is Kubo Sakae (1901-57), whose plays openly proclaimed their Marxist credo.

Pre-war 'new kabuki'

Notwithstanding these new, often radical theatrical experiments, the fact remains that kabuki, which was for a time eclipsed by the juggernaut of Meiji Westernization, proved remarkably resilient. As with other traditional genres (poetic, musical, artistic) that succeeded in adapting modern elements, the so-called 'new kabuki' (*shin kabuki*) thrived in the prewar years. For instance, the playwright Okamoto Kidô (1872-1932) composed nearly two hundred kabuki plays, which managed to incorporate contemporary themes and staging.

Another noteworthy 'traditionalist' figure is the *shimpa* playwright Mayama Seika (1878-1948). His best known play, *Genroku Chûshingura* (1935), is a modern kabuki version of the great Tokugawa-period vendetta tale of the *Forty-Seven Loyal Retainers*. Mayama's play inspired the celebrated film adaptation (1941-42) by the great director Mizoguchi Kenji. Aside from its artistic merit, Mizoguchi's film, playing upon themes of nationalism, martial honor, and self-sacrifice, served to propagandize Japan's wartime efforts.

As the tide of war turned and the 'dark valley' of austerity and draconian militarism took hold, popular entertainments and self-indulgence went into steep decline— as did the Japanese empire and its earnest performance of invincibility and spiritual purity.

Postwar Drama

The incalculable material and intangible costs of Japan's defeat were in effect mitigated by the newfound freedom and individualism fostered by the American Occupation and the egalitarian postwar Constitution of 1947. Liberated from the stranglehold of the military and its oppressive dogma, writers, artists, and playwrights set about forging new, unprecedented outlets for their creative energies in a collective quest for a new identity.

Postwar Japanese drama reflects the nation's full integration into the global theatrical scene and the emergence of diverse audiences whose tastes range across the spectrum. At one end of this spectrum is avant-garde theater, which established itself in Japan in the 1960s and 70s.

Avant-garde theater

Reflecting the influence of Western trends, yet distinctively Japanese in its performance style, Japanese avant-garde theater took hold in the 1960s. Known by the name '*angura*,' a derivative of the English 'underground,' this movement generated an eclectic theatrical repertoire that mixed traditional elements (for instance, Greek drama and Noh theater), the work of Samuel Beckett, wartime references, and the fractured identities of modern life. The key figures here are Betsuyaku Minoru (1937-) and Terayama Shûji (1935-83). Betsuyaku, a prolific and award-winning playwright, is credited with having produced the first *angura* play, 'The Elephant' (1962). Terayama is known for having favored a revolutionary theater that would challenge the received notion of 'drama' and, by extension, our very perception of self and society. Terayama experimented with plays conducted in total darkness, plays using nude actors, and an overall propensity for outrageous histrionics. What is more, he fostered impromptu, 'pop-up' productions in local neighborhoods, in an attempt to break out of the conventional notion of theatrical space and staging.

A related development is the wild, primordial dance form called *butô*, founded in the late 1950s by Hijikata Tatsumi (1928-86). A hybrid performance art, *butô* is known for the iconic look of its performers— shaven heads, bodies painted white— and for its unique choreography of body contortion and intertwining. Having gained a world-wide fan base, *butô* ranks as a legitimate Japanese cultural export.

Traditional theater

At the other end of the theatrical spectrum, traditional performance has retained its privileged placed in modern and contemporary Japan. Thanks to generous government support, there is a tripartite National Theater (*Kokuritsu gekijô*), based in Tokyo, that stages performances of Japan's three 'classical' dramas— Noh, kabuki, and pupper theater (*bunraku*). Live performances are augmented by regular broadcasts of these plays on NHK, the national television network. Appealing to younger audiences is a challenge, though, which has inspired many *anime* and other pop-cultural variants of the traditional genres.

Understandably, opinion is divided as to the sustainability of 'pure' traditional performance in the face of the onslaught of new media and the increasingly competitive entertainment market. One sign of the endurance of tradition concerns the centuries-old schools of Noh theater, which can be traced to the fourteenth century. Several of the major schools— Kanze, Hôshô, and Kita— maintain theaters in both Tokyo and Kyoto and continue to stage performances, essentially unchanged since the early Tokugawa period, on a regular basis.

Authors as playwrights

Harkening back to Meiji authors who established themselves as leading playwrights— most notably, Tsubouchi Shôyô and Mori Ôgai— several post-war authors achieved considerable renown for their dramatic productions. Yukio Mishima (1925-70), among modern Japan's most celebrated novelists, produced a number of 'neo-traditional' plays in the 1950s. In addition to modern plays in the kabuki style, Mishima composed plays based on Noh drama, which incorporate classical themes and narrative with modern staging and dialogue. One such play, 'Lady Aoi,' is a contemporary re-enactment of a famous chapter from the classic *Tale of Genji*.

It bears noting that Mishima had a famously histrionic persona, and he featured himself in several dramatic roles— for instance, the 1966 film version of his short story, 'Patriotism' (1961), which concludes with the protagonist's agonizing ritual disembowelment (*seppuku*). This was in effect a rehearsal for the author's real-life *seppuku*, 'performed' in November, 1970 for a private audience of devoted followers— and a stunned nation.

The author Abe Kôbô (1924-93), known for existential novels such as *Woman in the Dunes*, enjoyed a long and distinguished career as playwright (1954-79) and head of his own theater company— the Abe Studio, which he founded in 1971. Abe adapted several of his own fictional works into plays— for instance, 'The Man Who Turned Into a Stick' (1957). Other plays— such as 'Friends' (1967)— deal with the question of 'home' and our debatable claim to a fixed abode and a secure identity given the deracinated, alienating quality of the modern condition.

Takarazuka

Among the most distinctive and recognizable forms of twentieth-century Japanese drama is the Takarazuka theater. Founded in 1913, and named for the town— near Osaka— where it originated, Takarazuka has, since its inception, been an all-female theater. As such, it can be regarded as a 'reverse-gendered' variant of kabuki. And its popularity has extended well beyond Japan.

Takarazuka productions are known for their lavish staging and distinctive acting styles and roles— again, echoing the kabuki model. The repertoire is impressively varied— musical reviews, adaptations of Western drama, Japanese classics (*Tale of Genji*, *Tales of Heike*), and folk tales, in addition to original drama and stage spectacles.

Entry into the Takarazuka troupe is highly competitive and involves a long and disciplined training regimen. Gender questions and concerns invariably arise with respect to Takarazuka— in particular, regarding the lesbian appeal of the all-female troupe. There is no question, though, as to the profound influence of Takarazuka on Japanese popular culture— *anime* and *manga*, in particular.

Conclusion

The diversity of Japanese drama in the twentieth century— and well into the twenty-first— is remarkable, ranging from the classical and traditional to the innovative and experimental, and its place in the larger constellation of world drama is secure. Moreover, Japanese performing arts have increasingly intersected and interacted with those of China, Korea, and Taiwan. One could easily make a case for an integrated East-Asian performative community.

Yet there are troubling signs. An aging— and increasingly isolated— population faces problems with access to live performance. A marginalized rural population is not well served, although efforts have been made to establish local acting troupes and amateur theatricals that take advantage of community centers, school auditoriums, and other facilities. Younger people may prefer social networking and gaming to more conventional performance venues. Indeed, the very notion of 'drama' and 'performance' has undergone profound shifts in recent years.

As noted above, the government has invested in performing arts at the national level, and the public media and major funding organizations— notably, NHK and the Japan Foundation— continue to broadcast dramatic productions, both traditional and contemporary, and to sponsor performances both in Japan and abroad.

One can only hope that the arts in Japan— performative and otherwise— which have played such a key role in the nation's cultural history, will continue to thrive and to delight audiences world-wide.

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Discussion Questions and Topics

How best to compare pre-war and post-war drama in Japan? What themes and issues are shared? How to gauge the differences?

Considering the traditional/ avant-garde spectrum, what most appeals to you? How would you express your preferences vis a vis performing arts— Japanese or otherwise?

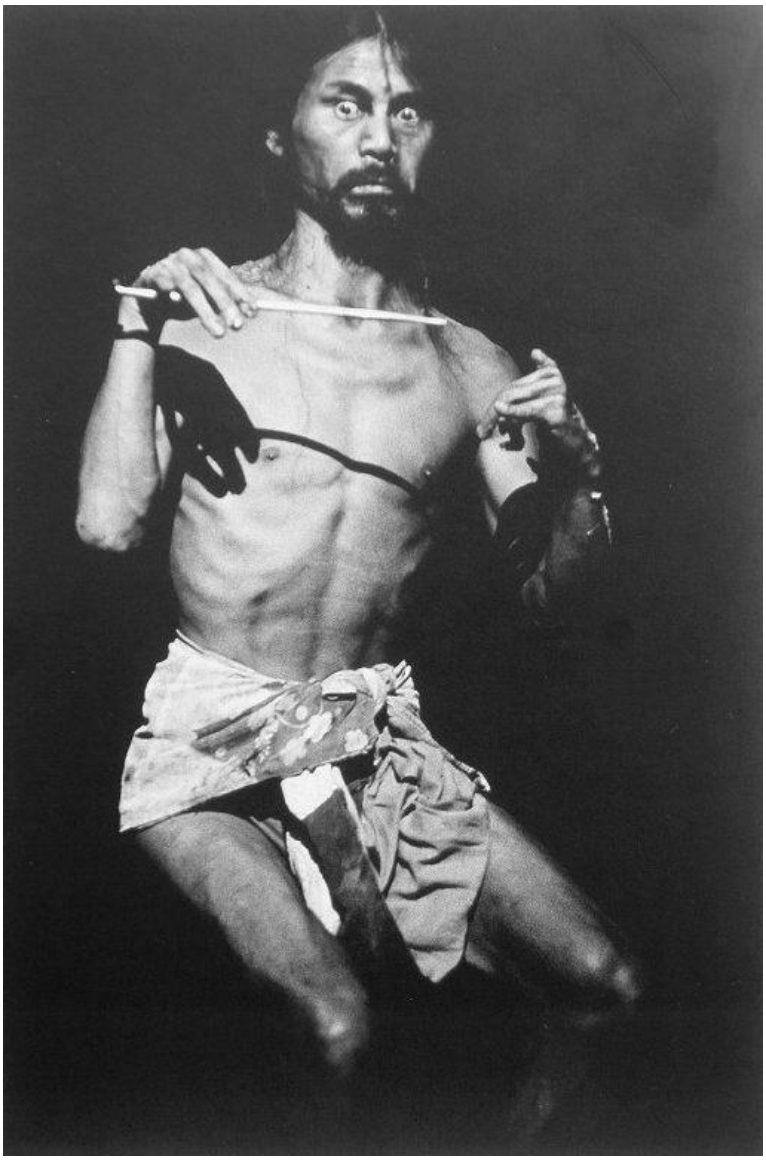
What significance do you attribute to the resilience of traditional Japanese drama— nô, kabuki, bunraku— in the modern day? Do you feel that without the 'artificial life support' of governmental and foundation funding, these 'outmoded' genres would disappear? Would that trouble you?

What is your attitude toward live performance? Are you a theater-goer yourself? Must we experience live performance in order to truly appreciate it?

Images

Osanai Kaoru at the Tsukiji Little Theater

(Source: Wikimedia Commons)

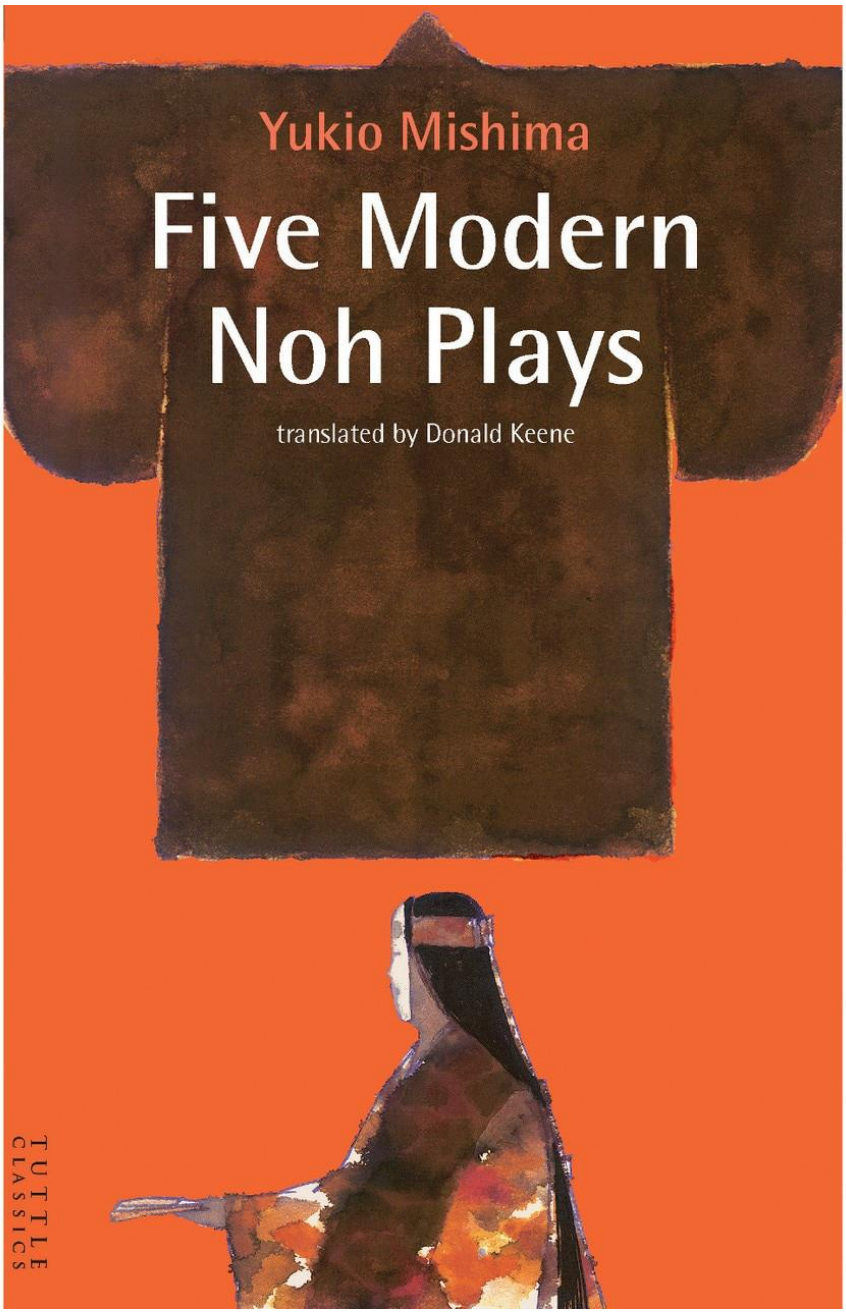


Hijikata Tatsumi, in Butoh performance

(Source: Pinterest)

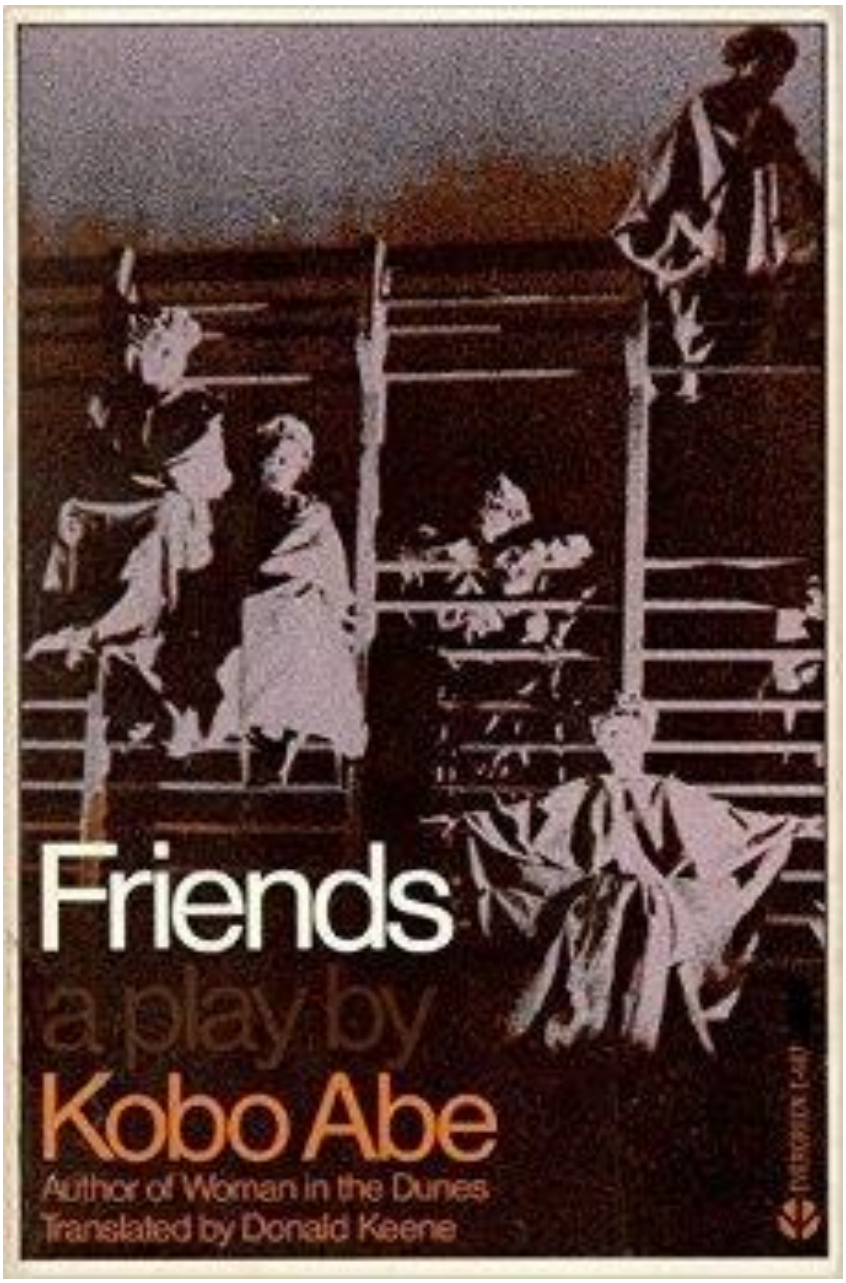
Outdoor performance of Butoh

(Source: Pinterest)



Translation of Mishima Yukio's modern Noh plays

(Source: Tuttle Publishing)



Abe Kôbô's 1967 play, *Friends* (Source: Goodreads)

Takarazuka ‘traditional’ performance (Source: Japan Times)

Takarazuka ‘Western-style’ extravaganza (Source: Japan Times)

Part III : FICTION

The Rise of Fiction in Late-Meiji Japan

A key literary development of the late Meiji period was the emergence of prose fiction (*shôsetsu*) as the preëminent literary genre, essentially displacing poetry. Initially emulating exemplary Western models— notably the fiction of Britain, France, Germany, and Russia— writers developed a new, standardized literary language that enabled their work to reach a broad audience. A first generation of modern Japanese fiction writers— spearheaded by pioneering figures such as Mori Ôgai, Natsume Sôseki, and Shimazaki Tôson— produced works that centered on plot, character development, and the challenges of modern urban life and social interaction.The protagonists were typically ineffectual men whose pained interiority and confusion came to dominate the narrative. Other more popular genres of fiction emerged as well— romances, mysteries, even science fiction— and in the process a number of distinct readerships developed. Overall, writers published initially in serialized periodical form, which meant that the rapidly-expanding print media made it possible for their work to gain a broad national readership.

The Taishô Era and Pre-war Fiction

Taishô(1912-26) fiction would be built upon the accomplishments of Meiji authors. A so-called 'pure literature' centering on fiction with clear autobiographical elements and a strong confessional voice appealed to some readers, but an expanding array of literary options would be available as well. A younger generation of fiction writers would give voice to Japan's increasingly urban society— with Tokyo as its virtually obligatory site— and to the burgeoning consumer economy and a new spirit of freedom and self-indulgence that marked the Taishô social scene. A Hollywood-inspired youth culture, symbolized by fashionable *moga* and *mobo*— stylish 'modern girls' and 'modern boys.'— provided a strong contrast to the draconian state-sponsored moralism and political correctness.Leisure pursuits, hedonism, and erotic display figured prominently in the fiction of the day. Themes such as desire, madness, and the irreducible subjectivity of human experience loomed large in the work of writers such as Tanizaki Jun'ichirô (1886-1965) and Akutagawa Ryûnosuke (1892-1927). The latter is known as author of *Rashômon*, the story that inspired the award-winning film by Kurosawa. Overall, Taishô readers were challenged with having to figure out the credibility of unreliable narrators, competing claims to truth, and nettling questions about our capacity to comprehend the world, those around us, and— most pointedly— our own selves.

For his part, the writer Nagai Kafû (1879-1959), a native of Tokyo who lamented the city's transformation into an ersatz Western-style capital, sought to counter the dystopian fiction that told of urban alienation and melancholy. Kafû produced a fictional world that nostalgically evoked early-Meiji Tokyo— its geisha, artisans, and ordinary folk, together with the city's labyrinth of quaint side streets and byways. A noteworthy example is *The River Sumida* (1909), a bittersweet tale of personal longing and familial responsibility set in the neighborhoods of 'old Tokyo,' adjacent to the river that runs through it.

An elite literary group, the White Birch Society (*Shirakaba-ha*), fostered fiction that promoted a socially-progressive humanist agenda. Its leading figure, Shiga Naoya (1883-1971), is known for fiction— short stories, chiefly— seen as expressing the author's deepest interiority, with a minimum of artifice. Stories such as 'At Kinosaki' (*Kinosaki nite*, 1917) have been praised for their lyrical and spiritual depth— prose haiku, in effect. This distinctive category of personal fiction became known as 'I-novel' (*shishôsetsu*). It has remained a prominent— if somewhat nebulous— Japanese literary genre.

Japan's liberal political climate of the Twenties gave rise to a so-called proletarian literary movement, which espoused a range of Marxist and socialist fiction that reflected the Russian and Soviet political scene. With the 1930s, though, a new militarist regime would curtail leftist expression and impose strict censorship in the lead-up to hostilities on the Asian mainland. Japan's leaders resurrected the nationalist discourse of uniqueness and cultural superiority, known as *kokutai*, and silenced the more 'individualist' and politically-subversive writers and intellectuals. This would be the finale of Japan's imperialist venture.

Postwar Fiction and Japan's Literary Renaissance

The Pacific War and the cataclysmic end to Japan's imperial adventure yielded a rich literary harvest in the postwar period, notwithstanding the vast destruction and dislocation that marked the outset of the American Occupation (1945-52). A genre of war literature (*sensô bungaku*) centering on fiction that reflected upon the horrors of war and the burden of defeat and survival. The work of Ôoka Shôhei (1909-88) is especially noteworthy— in particular, his moving novel, *Fires on the Plain* (1951).A subgenre of 'atomic literature' (*genbaku bungaku*) would seek to make sense of the unimaginable. Here, the novel *Black Rain*(1966) by Ibuse Masuji (1898-1984) deserves mention.The film adaptations of these two works are widely admired.

Postwar writers, with their newfound freedom of expression facilitated by the Occupation authorities, produced a broad range of fiction set in the late Forties and early Fifties. Reflecting the dislocation and privation of the postwar years, this work evokes both the desperate circumstances of ordinary people and the renewed hope of a better life that was enshrined in the nation's new constitution, promulgated in 1947.In particular, the novels and stories of Dazai Osamu (1909-48), Yasuoka Shôtarô (1920-2013), and Kojima Nobuo (1915-2006)are representative of this transitional period.Their work is marked by the distinctive personal signature associated with the 'I-novel' (*shishôsetsu*) genre. Representative of the darkly comic treatment of postwar privation and the struggle to survive is Yasuoka's *Prized Possessions* (1952). The story tells of a father's obsession to raise rabbits for the fur market, and his gradual transformation into a pathetic human rabbit.

Postwar Literary Landmarks

Following the Occupation, Japan went on to achieve a stable political and economic footing. With the Fifties and Sixties, the postwar climate of freedom and individualism helped inspire a renaissance of the arts, visual media, and culture. In the realm of fiction, Abe Kôbô (1924-93) wrote brilliantly of Japan's rootless, alienating urban jungle in a number of novels, the best-known being *Woman in the Dunes* (1962). The 1964 film adaptation by Teshigahara is a classic of Japanese cinema. Shôno Junzô(1921-2009) wrote of the troubling undercurrents of postwar domesticity that marked the urban middle-class nuclear family. Tanizaki, among modern Japan's greatest fiction writers, re-emerged on the postwar scene and produced some of his most memorable work— *The Makioka Sisters* (1948),*The Bridge of Dreams* (1959), and *The Diary of a Mad Old Man* (1961), among others.

Kawabata and Mishima

Arguably the two most prominent postwar novelists are Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972) and Mishima Yukio (1925-70). Kawabata's 'traditionalist' novels— *Snow Country* (1947) and *Sound of the Mountain* (1954), among others— constitute a lyrical elegy for a lost Japan. His brilliant evocation of Japan's 'beauty and sadness' earned him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1968— the first for a Japanese author.For his part, Mishima earned a reputation for striking works of fiction that mixed nihilism, Buddhism, and a critique of the vacuity of postwar Japan. Novels such as *Confessions of a Mask* and *Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, which achieved an international readership, established Mishima as Japan's best-known writer. Yet he would become better knownas a political reactionary and leader of a cultish paramilitary organization. Decrying the emptiness of 'post-imperial' Japan, and positioning himself as a latter-day samurai savior of a troubled nation, Mishima ended his life in an astonishing ritual suicide in November, 1970.

Historical Fiction

Historical fiction (*rekishi shôsetsu*) looms large as a genre that explores Japan's modern circumstance from the perspective of its legendary and historical past. Here the fiction of Inoue Yasushi (1907-91), Endô Shûsaku (1923-96), and Shiba Ryôtarô (1923-96)— inspired by the pioneering work of Ôgai, Akutagawa, and Tanizaki— stands out.Inoue's work is noteworthy for its focus on the broad sweep of Asian history— the Silk Road, in particular, and Japan's embrace of Buddhism, which was painstakingly introduced from China and Korea. His acclaimed novel *The Roof Tile of Tempyô*(1975) brilliantly captures this key development in Japan's early history. Endô is best known for his fictional exploration of Japan's century-long encounter with Christianity in the 16th and 17th century. Himself a Christian, Endô

questioned— through masterful novels such as *Silence* (1966)— the quality of faith of Japan's Christian converts and the horrendous martyrdom that many experienced at the hands of samurai overlords. Shiba, among modern Japan's most prolific— and enduringly popular— authors, was especially fascinated with the transition from Tokugawa feudalism to the Meiji era and Japan's emergence as a modern nation. His monumental, multi-volume *Clouds Above the Hill* (1972) is the finest literary depiction of Japan's war with Russia (1904-05).

In contrast with these more 'serious' writers, thereemerged in the prewar period a popular genre of period fiction (*jidai shôsetsu*)that featured, among others, the exploits of legendary samurai warriors. Here the best-selling novels of Yoshikawa Eiji (1892-1962)— for instance, *Miyamoto Musashi* (1935), based on the legendary accounts of Japan's iconic swordsman— deserve mention. The market for such accounts of legendary figures has expanded dramatically, owing to adaptations for *manga*, *anime*, and other popular media.

The Sixties and Beyond

With the Sixties, which witnessed the dawn of Japan's social and economic renaissance, a group of women writers emerged on the literary stage. This in part reflected— and in turn reinforced— a new discourse of women's rights and the advent of women's participation on the political and cultural scene. Of particular note are ground-breaking authors such as Enchi Fumiko (1905-86) and Kôno Taeko. Through moving novels such as *The Waiting Years* (1957) and *Masks* (1958), Enchi probed the circumstance of women subjected to male power and privilege. Kôno is known for her unsettling depiction of female sexuality and psychological complexity in stories such as *Toddler Hunting*(1961). Overall, the challenge posed by the growing cohort of *joryû sakka*— women authors— to traditional gender roles and norms did much to transform the long-accepted male dominance in the literary realm. Henceforth women would assume a prominent place in Japanese literature and the arts.

Japanese Literature in the Late 20th Century

Japan's 'miraculous' economic expansionism of the 1970s coincided with the emergence of fictional and other writing that had arguably lost its distinctive 'Japanese' qualities of subtlety, sensitivity, and lyrical depth. Indeed, the language itself and the themes that inspired writers had undergone changes that brought writersin line with their counterparts in the developed world. In short, a globalization trend— more obvious in the domain of popular culture and mass media— was set in motion, and it has dramatically accelerated in recent years.

One author concerned about Japan's insular identity in the late 20th century is Ôe Kenzaburô (1935-).Ôe emerged on the literary scene in the Sixties as spokesperson for a new generation of postwar Japanese youth, through his groundbreaking novel,*A Personal Matter*(1964). He would go on to explore the qualities of Japanese national character and its mythic roots while spearheading Japan's anti-nuclear movement. Ôe's deeply principled and morally-centered fictionearned for him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1994— Japan's second awardee.

The late-20th century literary scene was notably diverse. Women writers such as Tsushima Yûko (1947-2016) and Yoshimoto Banana (1964-) have been at the vanguard of Japanese fiction, and they were no longer demeaningly categorized as 'woman writers.' Yoshimoto's best-selling novel, *Kitchen* (1988), explores the complexity of 'non-traditional' families and the journey of self-discovery. Younger writers such as Kanehara Hitomi (1983-) have ventured into the once-taboo zone of drug use, body modification, and deviant youth subculture; her 2003 novel *Snakes and Earrings* is representative of this new wave.

The Murakami Phenomenon

Arguably the best-known and most widely-admired Japanese writer is Murakami Haruki (1949-), whose work hasbeen translated into some fifty languages. Murakami's novels— most notably, *A Wild Sheep Chase* (1989), *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (1997), and *Kafka on the Shore* (2005)— have become part

and parcel of ‘world literature,’ and the author’s extraordinary capacity to merge reality and fantasy, dream and drudgery, past and present has been widely discussed and studied.

Murakami’s work is typically branded as ‘postmodern’— a curiously elusive term that conjures up the ‘whatever-ness’ of lifeand the fluid, happenstance quality of our existence. But the fact remains that the man is a brilliant storyteller, and the casual and candid voice of his first-person *boku* protagonist resonates powerfully with his readers. Murakami is all but guaranteed to be awarded a Nobel Prize, and many of his fans are indignant about the delay. His day shall come.

Conclusion

Given Japan’s modern history, its literature— fiction and otherwise— understandably reduces to a pre-war versus post-war binary divide. This of course belies the complex trajectory of the nation’s 20th-century history, which began with vestiges of the Tokugawa past and ended with the pervasive and globalized media-scape with which we are all familiar.

The concerns of writers, the themes that inspired them, the very language at their disposal— these have shifted dramatically. One index of this change is the steadily increasing prominence of Japan’s women writers, who are now at the very pinnacle of the nation’s literary edifice.

One cannot overstate the influence of the visual and graphic media— television, film, the internet, and the image- and consumer-centered popular culture. Japanese literature in the 21st century has a ‘local’ audience, to be sure, but its ties to global entertainment and marketing are most evident.

What is more, social networking, blogging, texting, and tweeting have opened up literary expression to new avenues, centering on a powerful graphic element. How, then, to conceive of ‘fiction’ in such a context? The demise of the ‘literary novel’ has been widely noted by critics and pundits in the West. How Japanese writers choose to express themselves through fictional narrative is an open question, subject to diverse points of view. One can hardly imagine what the shape of this literature will be when the 21st century draws to a close.

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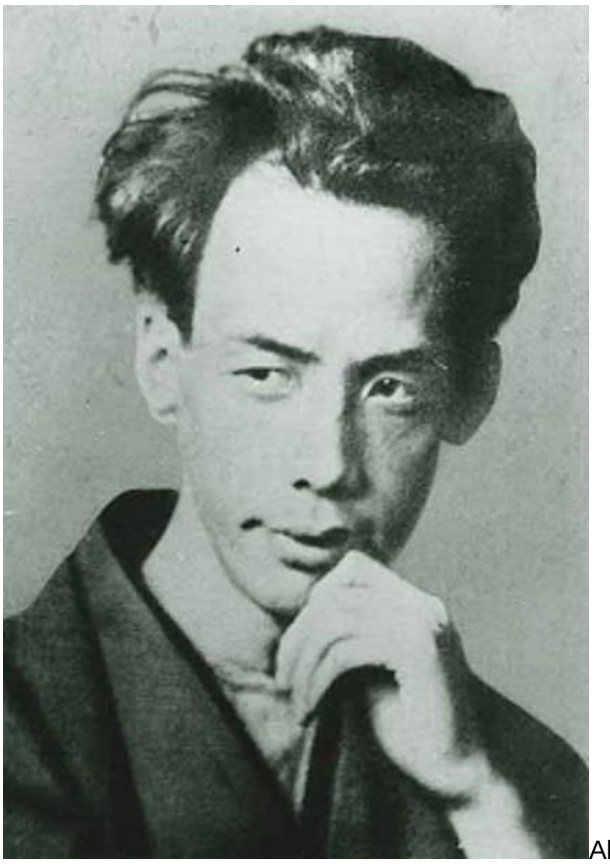
Discussion Questions and Topics

What is ‘traditional’ about 20th-century Japanese fiction? How to distinguish this from the modernization that has presumably encroached upon the ‘bastion’ of traditionalism? In what sense can ‘traditionalism’ be seen as a strategy of combatting the forces of modernity— isolation, insulation, and anxiety?

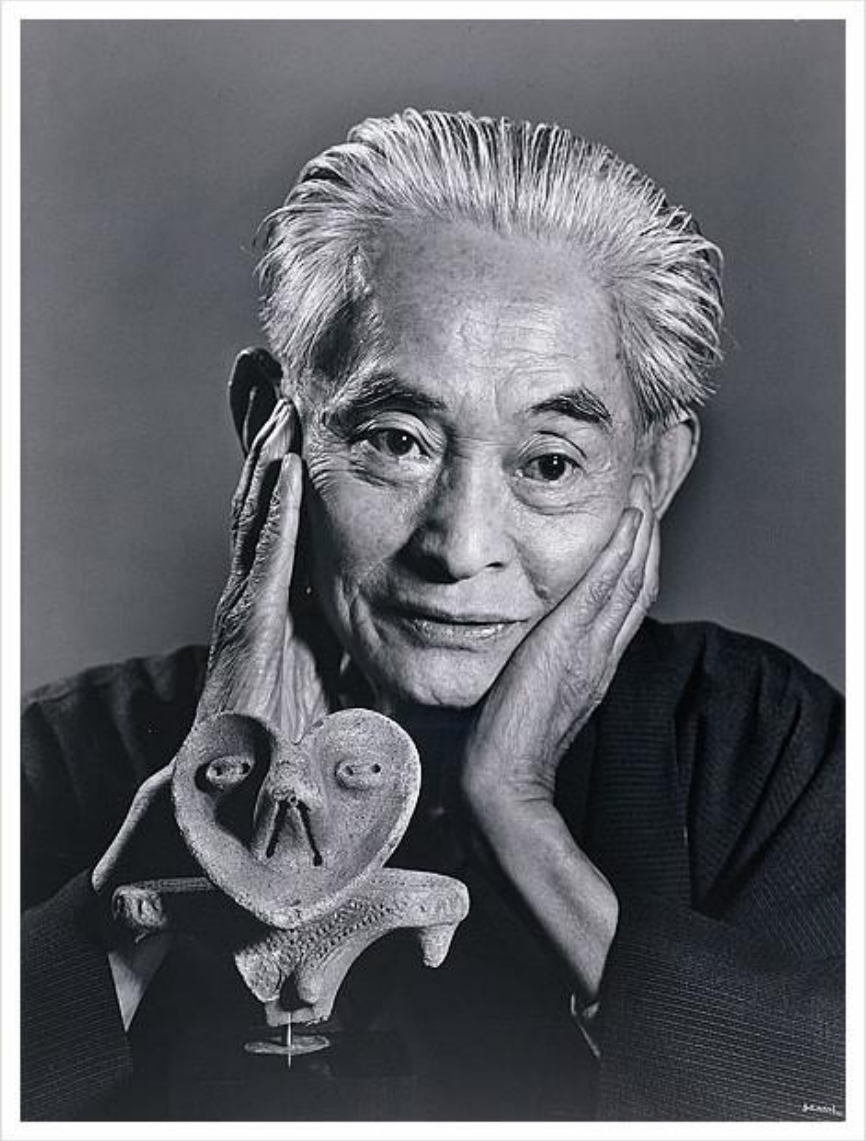
What can be said in favor of— and against— the pre-war (imperial) and post-war binary of 20th-century Japanese fiction? Can Japan's modern fiction be read without regard to its contexts and instead be appreciated entirely on its own?

How are we to assess the impact of new media and social networking on fiction writing— in Japan and elsewhere? Would you favor the work of 'serious' writers as a bulwark against what can be seen as the adulterating impact of the new media?

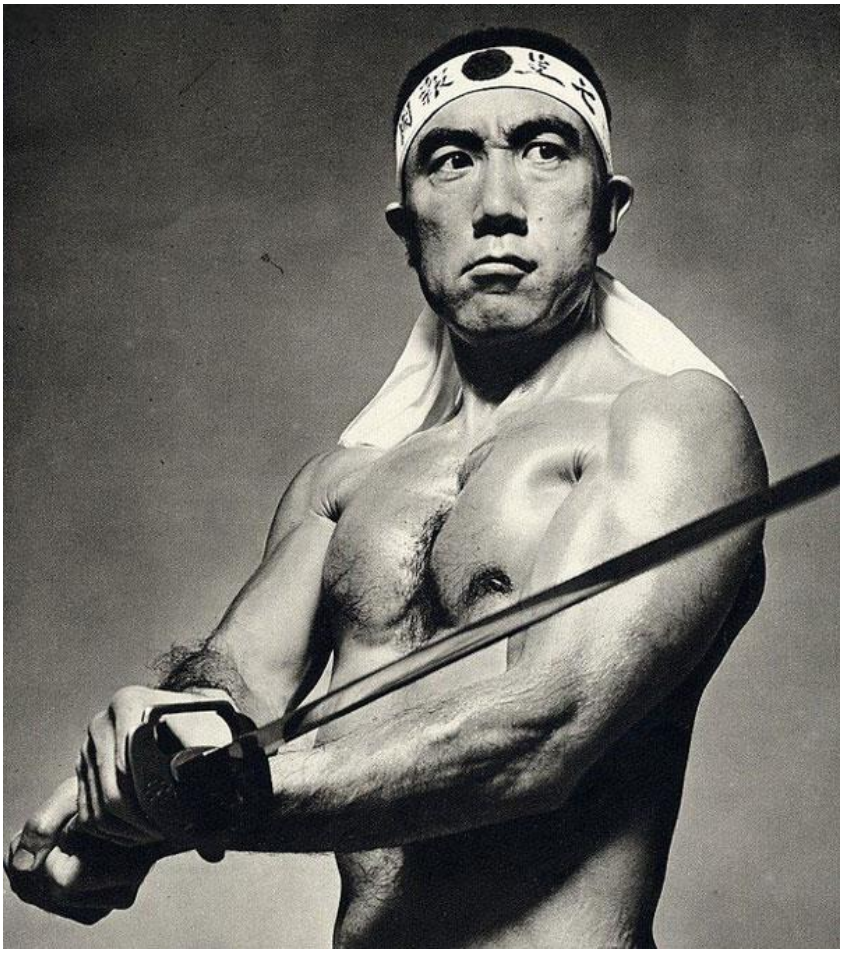
Images


Akutagawa Ryûnosuke (1892-1927)

Tanizaki Jun’ichirô (1886-1965)

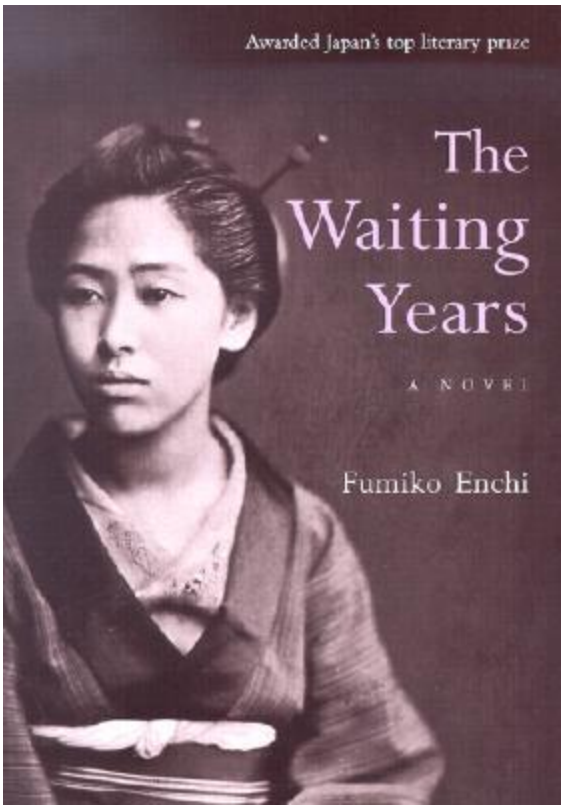


Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972) (Source: Pinterest)



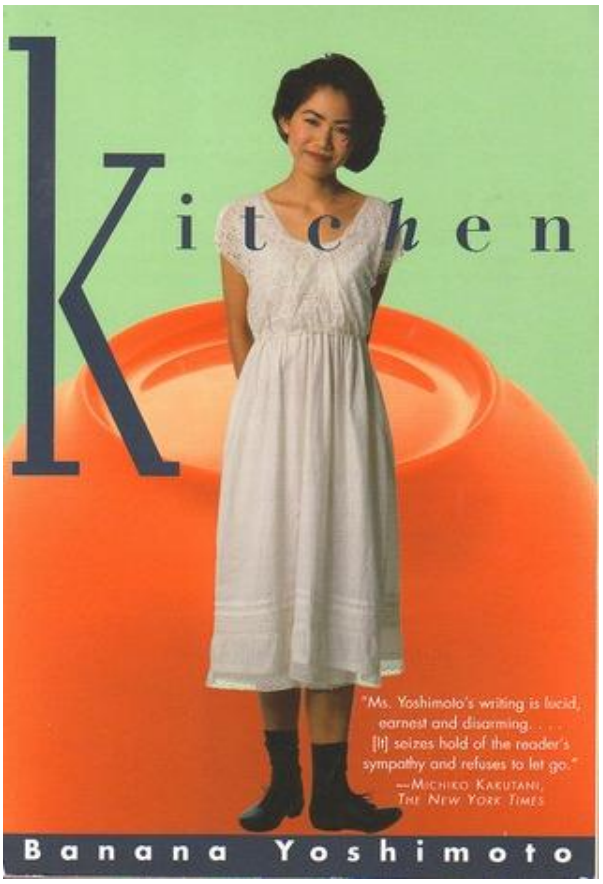
Mishima Yukio (1925-1970) (Source: Open Culture)

Abe Kôbô (1924-1986)



Enchi Fumiko (1905-1986), as depicted on the cover of one of her finest novels (Source: Goodreads)

Ôe Kenzaburô (1935-), being interviewed in Germany, in 2008



Yoshimoto Banana (1964-), as depicted on the cover cover of her best-known novel (Source: Goodreads)

Murakami Haruki (1949-) (Source: New York Times)

* Unless otherwise noted, all images are sourced from Wikimedia Commons

Part IV : AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The Place of Autobiography in Twentieth-Century Japan

Western autobiography— ranging from the work of Saint Augustine to Benjamin Franklin, Rousseau, Thoreau, and others— was introduced to Japan late in the Meiji period. These works circulated within the *bundan* literary community, and considerable attention was paid to crafting personal narratives that expressed one's inner self and the quality of one's social relationships. Yet with few exceptions— the Fukuzawa Yukichi autobiography, most notably— there was little evident interest in the Western genre of comprehensive, exhaustive autobiography. Japanese writers favored shorter, more episodic accounts of one's life and times. Confessional narrative played a key role, largely owing to the Naturalist coterie (1906-10) and its credo of authentic personal expression. This in turn led to the so-called I-novel (*shishôsetsu*) genre, whose claim to pure, unmediatedexpression free of artifice achieved currency in the Taishô period. The genre, which has generated much debate among literary scholars, remainsa hallmark of modern Japanese literature, having essentially displacing 'standard' autobiography.

In short, the most productive vehicles for modern Japanese autobiographical literature have been in the form of episodic reminiscence and autobiographical fiction. The Japanese reader has come to understand that one's most authentic voice is channeled not through an actuarial recounting of the facts and data of one's life, but rather through subjective and suggestive narrative artistry. On the other hand, there has long been a demand for biographical accounts of prominent figures in the political, economic, and cultural spheres. In fact, a number of *bundan* authors who were reluctant to produce their own autobiography took on biographical projects at the behest of major publishing houses.

On the Stages of Twentieth-Century Japanese Autobiography

Pre-war accounts

Late-Meiji and Taishô writers favored accounts of one's childhood and youth, typically expressing nostalgic longing for a world on the cusp of being transformed by urban development, mechanization, and social dislocation. Noteworthy in this regard isNaka Kansuke's*The Silver Spoon* (Gin no saji, 1913). Naka, a protégé of Natsume Sôseki, produced a fascinating record of his upbringing, told in the voice of the experiencing child as opposed to the reminiscing adult. As the narrator relates in his introduction, these memories were triggeredby a small silver spoon:

> In the drawer of the bookcase in my study, which is full of all sorts of worthless objects, I've kept a tiny box since I was a child. Made of cork wood and adorned with a peony print on each corner, the box may have been an imported snuff box. Although not particularly attractive, the soft, smooth texture of its polished wood has made it one of my prized possessions.
>
> The box is packed full with cowry shells, camellia seeds, and assorted objects that were the playthings of my infancy and childhood. Of these objects, the one most dear to me is a small, oddly-shaped silver spoon. From time to time I'd take the spoon out of the box, carefully wipe away the tarnish, and simply gaze at it, losing all sense of time. . .
>
> Based on *The Silver Spoon*, pp 25-26

As for expansive, Western-style autobiography, it is interesting to note that this literary vehicle appealed to political radicals and leftists. For instance, figures such as Kawakami Hajime (1879-1946) and Ôsugi Sakae (1885-1923) produced major autobiographies that served to promote their political agenda. Ôsugi, incidentally, was influenced by the autobiography of the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin. Of note as well are the autobiographical accounts of radical Japanese women, some of whom were arrested— and executed— by the authorities. Mikiso Hane has compiled a landmark collection of their writings, which challenge the stereotype of compliant Japanese womanhood.

Postwar accounts of the war

The Pacific war, which resulted in the cataclysmic demise of Japan's empire, gave rise to a remarkable production of autobiographical accounts that looked back on one's experiences— both on the front lines and in the homeland— and critiqued the militarism and blind chauvinism that propelled the war effort. Such candor was of course impossible during wartime, on account of the repressive military regime.

Autobiographical accounts of wartime experience were the work of both literary people and 'ordinary' citizens caught up in the conflict in different ways. Among the former, Ôoka Shôhei (1909-88) was sent to the Philippines in 1944, where he experienced the disintegration of the Japanese forces in the face of the American onslaught. Taken captive in January 1945, Ôoka subsequently wrote of his harrowing experiences in a celebrated war memoir. Consider the following episode, which recounts, with a certain philosophical detachment, one's failed suicide attempt in the face of a totally hopeless situation:

> I do not intend to belabor the question of why I failed to kill myself. The psychology of a suicide is of minimal interest, and the psychology of the man who fails in his attempt is of less interest still. . . What actually determines the outcome is in most cases an entirely extraneous, accidental factor. My having survived owes itself to the fact that the hand grenade I carried, which would dispatch me to the hereafter, turned out to be a dud. . . I had to smile. The irony of fate that refused to grant me a quick and easy death seemed somehow funny to me. (Based on *Taken Captive*, p 26)

A dramatically different perspective is presented by Sakai Saburô, whose autobiography recounts his exploits as Japan's most celebrated pilot and fighter ace— albeit on the losing side.

Complementing the many written accounts of the war is an equally impressive body of oral narratives by a broad spectrum of Japanese. One important sub-category concerns the recollections of those who survived the atomic bombings. A collection of such accounts, compiled by Haruko and Theodore Cook and reminiscent of the celebrated oral histories of Studs Terkel (*The Good War*, for instance), provides what can be considered a composite portrayal of the Japanese wartime experience.

Postwar fictional autobiography

The Occupation period (1945-52) witnessed an outpouring of fictional autobiography that variously recounts, through personal testimony and literary artifice, both the postwar privation and dislocation, and the nation's gradual recovery and regeneration.

Several autobiographical novels by Dazai Osamu (1909-48)— *Setting Sun* (1947) and*No Longer Human* (1948)— speak to the spiritual vacuum of Japan's postwar circumstance and the loss of the old imperial order and its patriarchal center.Yasuoka Shôtarô (1920-2013), for his part, crafted a darkly comic vision of the postwar dystopia through a series of autobiographical tales centering on a pathetically dysfunctional family— in particular, the figure of his hapless, delusional father. A representative account is *A View by the Sea*, which tells of his mother's dying days in a mental institution and his awkward attempts to connect with an inept father.

The career of Mishima Yukio (1925-70), among modern Japan's most celebrated— and enigmatic— literary figures, was launched by an unprecedented autobiographical exposé of the author's sexual awakening. Entitled *Confessions of a Mask* (1949), the novel reveals the protagonist's complex and conflicted interiority through a series of homoerotic encounters recalled with dramatic intensity. What follows is the first of these memories:

> My earliest memory— I was around four at the time— has haunted me with a strangely vivid image. . . It is of a young man who was approaching us, with ruddy cheeks and shining eyes and wearing a dirty roll of cloth around his head as a sweatband. . . He was a night-soil man, a ladler of excrement, dressed as a common laborer with close-fitting cotton trousers. I found myself choked by desire, thinking that I wanted to *be* him. . . An inexpressible adoration for those

> trousers was born in me, for reasons I could not understand. (Based on *Confessions of a Mask*, pp 7-9)

A very different perspective on one's childhood and youth is provided by Kita Morio (1927-2011) in his beautifully evocative autobiographical novel, *Ghosts*(Yûrei, 1954).The son of one of Japan's preëminent modern poets, Saitô Mokichi, Kita captures the exquisite sensitivity of his younger self through his masterful use of lyrical prose. *Ghosts*— an homage to those departed souls whom he recalls— begins with the following reflection upon what makes us human:

> Why this desire to relate what we recall of the past? Because, just as any race has its mythology, so an individual bears within him his own private myths— myths that gradually fade, finally disappearing into the depths of time. And yet things leave their traces, and are a constant preoccupation of the deeper reaches of the mind, lasting until that time when all our actions cease.
>
> And suddenly one day this normally unconscious activity may open up for us and become an awakening of sorts— much like a silkworm, as it slowly consumes a mulberry leaf for no reason it can comprehend, becomes aware of the faint sound of its own mastication. So it raises its head, unsure, fearful almost as it gazes around its small world, experiencing itself as something— whatever that something might be. (Based on *Ghosts*, pp 1-2)

In bears noting that several writers did opt for the more comprehensive, Western-style autobiographic account of their upbringing. Tanizaki Jun'ichirô's *Childhood Years*and Yoshikawa Eiji's *Fragments of a Pas*t present fascinating and engaging accounts of their respective families and boyhood friends, while serving as valuable documentary sources on life and times in late-Meiji Tokyo and Yokohama.

Family chronicles

An important category of twentieth-century Japanese autobiographical writing is the family chronicle, which broadens the scope beyond the individual subject to encompass one's family and social sphere. Important examples include *Chronicle of My Mother* (1982) by Inoue Yasushi, a renowned author of historical fiction. This deeply moving work recounts his mother's mental decline and eventual death as experienced by her children and grandchildren over a period of ten years.Kita Morio, whose childhood memoir is noted above, published the multi-volume *House of Nire* (1984), which relates the rise and gradual decline of three generations of a family-run psychiatric clinic. Ôe Kenzaburô departs from his elite literary persona in *A Healing Family*(1996),which tells of parental devotion to their brain-damaged son, Hikari, and a father's promotion of Hikari's remarkable career in musical composition. And finally, Inoue Hisashi can be credited with producing a composite family autobiography in the form of numerous personal essays and reminiscences thatrecount, in a voice at once comical and poignant, the pratfalls and antics of his youth and the challenges of being a father to his three daughters.

Women writers and their autobiographical collages

A number of women writers turned to personal narratives centering on family, acquaintances, and career. For some, the accumulated volume of such narratives amounts to a sequential, composite autobiography. For example, Kôda Aya (1906-90) embarked on her distinguished literary career on the strength of a series of remembrances of her father, the celebrated author Kôda Rohan (1867-1947). Aya's personal writings offer a trenchant and sensitive account of a father-daughter relationship that witnessed the vicissitudes of Japan's imperial and wartime history.

For her part, Uno Chiyo (1897-1996) wrote widely of herself as a liberated modern woman— a so-called *moga*— and of her many romantic encounters and escapades. Mukôda Kuniko (1929-81), representing the next generation of Japanese women, wrote numerous personal accounts of herself as a daughter, professional writer, and keen observer of the social scene. The penchant for publishing collections of literary personalia marks as well the work of Mure Yôko (1954-), representing the next generation of Japanese women writers. Mure's savvy, occasionally sassy narrator delights in her pithy, stylish observations and personal revelations.

A recent autobiography entitled *Will Not Forget Both Laughter and Tears* (2013) is the work of Mitani Tomoko (1945-), an 'ordinary housewife' who took it upon herself to write about her world in appealingly down-to-earth language.

Other voices

An important category of autobiographical literature is the recent work of expatriate Japanese who reflect on their bifurcated identity in Japanese and/ or their adopted language. For instance, Kyoko Mori (1957-) has written numerous works of autobiographical fiction in English— most notably, *Polite Lies: On Being a Woman Caught Between Cultures* (1997)— that recount her dual heritage and the circumstances of her rejection of her Japanese 'self' in favor of the freedom she gained in the American Midwest.

A far larger category— two complementary categories, actually— consists, on one hand, of the personal writings by foreigners— *gaijin*— reflecting on their experiences living and travelling in Japan. On the other hand, there are numerous accounts by Japanese reflecting on their 'expat' experience, be it in the U.S., Brazil, Germany, China, or elsewhere. Such writing can be traced back to the late Tokugawa era, when foreigners were allowed into the country, and when Japanese were once again able to leave their homeland and experience the larger world. Of particular interest is a fascinating anthology, edited by George and Carlson, of expat reminiscence by a range of Western writers.

Conclusion

Twentieth-century Japanese autobiography offers a kaleidoscope of forms and voices, ranging from the 'standard' comprehensive account of one's life to the assorted personal episodes and reflections that collectively yield a composite profile. The proportion of 'standard' autobiography appears to have increased since the postwar era, but the predilection for the personal essay and for autobiographical fiction remains strong. The border separating the 'genuine' and 'factual' from the fictive and fanciful remains obscure at best.

Autobiographical expression in the age of electronic and social media— in Japan and elsewhere— has been radically transformed, and narrative itself has given way to (or been augmented by) images and graphic display. One can imagine autobiography presented as a pastiche of tweets and blog postings, a graphic narrative mixing image and text, or simply a sequence of images and graphic display. The possibilities are limitless, and the status of exclusively literary self-representation is anything but clear.

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Questions and Issues

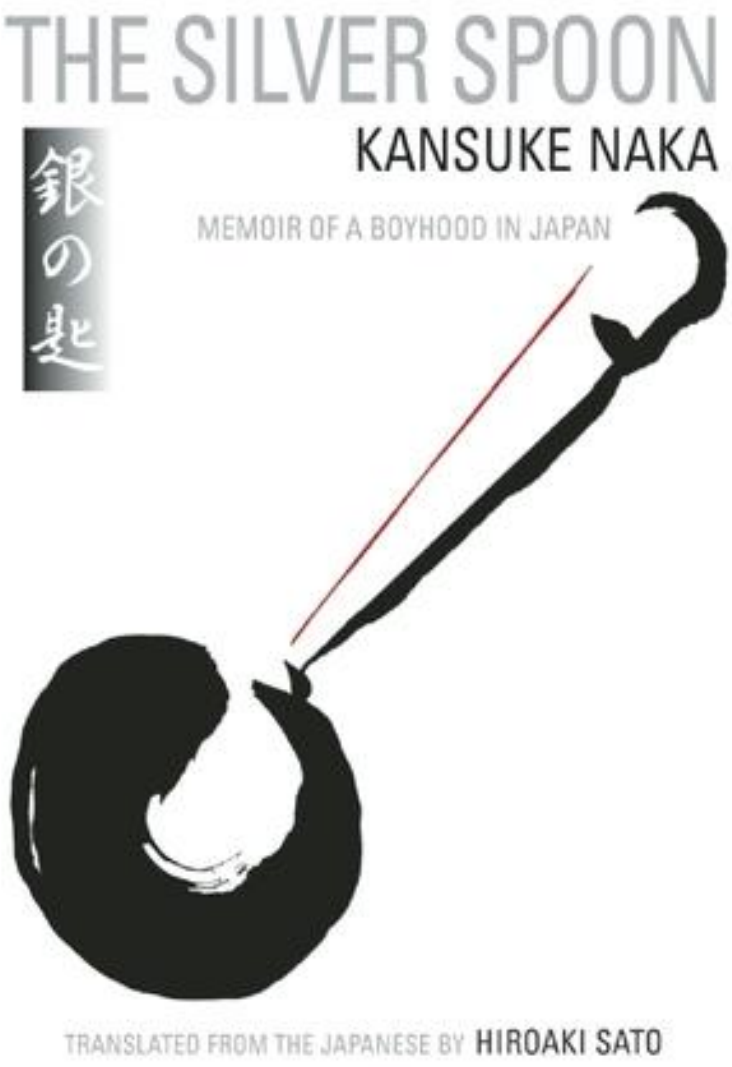
How would you explain the difference between biography and autobiography? What are the benefits and drawbacks of each? Do these genres appeal to you equally?

What are the pros and cons of the 'standard,' full-length autobiography versus the episodic, 'fragmentary' approach to personal narrative favored by many Japanese writers?

Childhood and youth reminiscence is a hallmark of Japanese autobiography— and arguably of autobiographical writing more generally. What do you find moving about such reminiscence? How would you approach writing an account of your own upbringing?

What 'life lessons' can you glean from the autobiographical passages presented above? Is there anything distinctively Japanese about the quality of self-reflection expressed here, or does it reflect universal concerns and understandings?

Images



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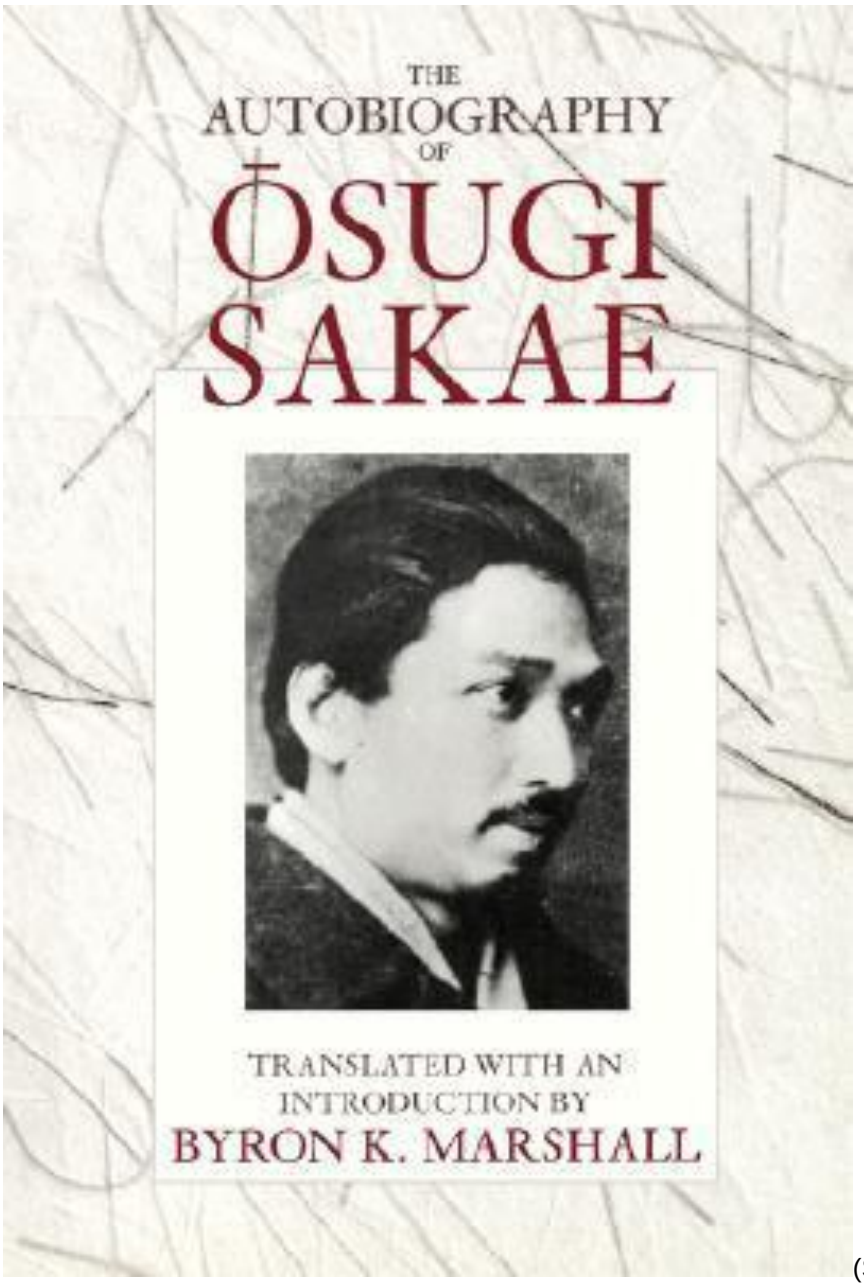

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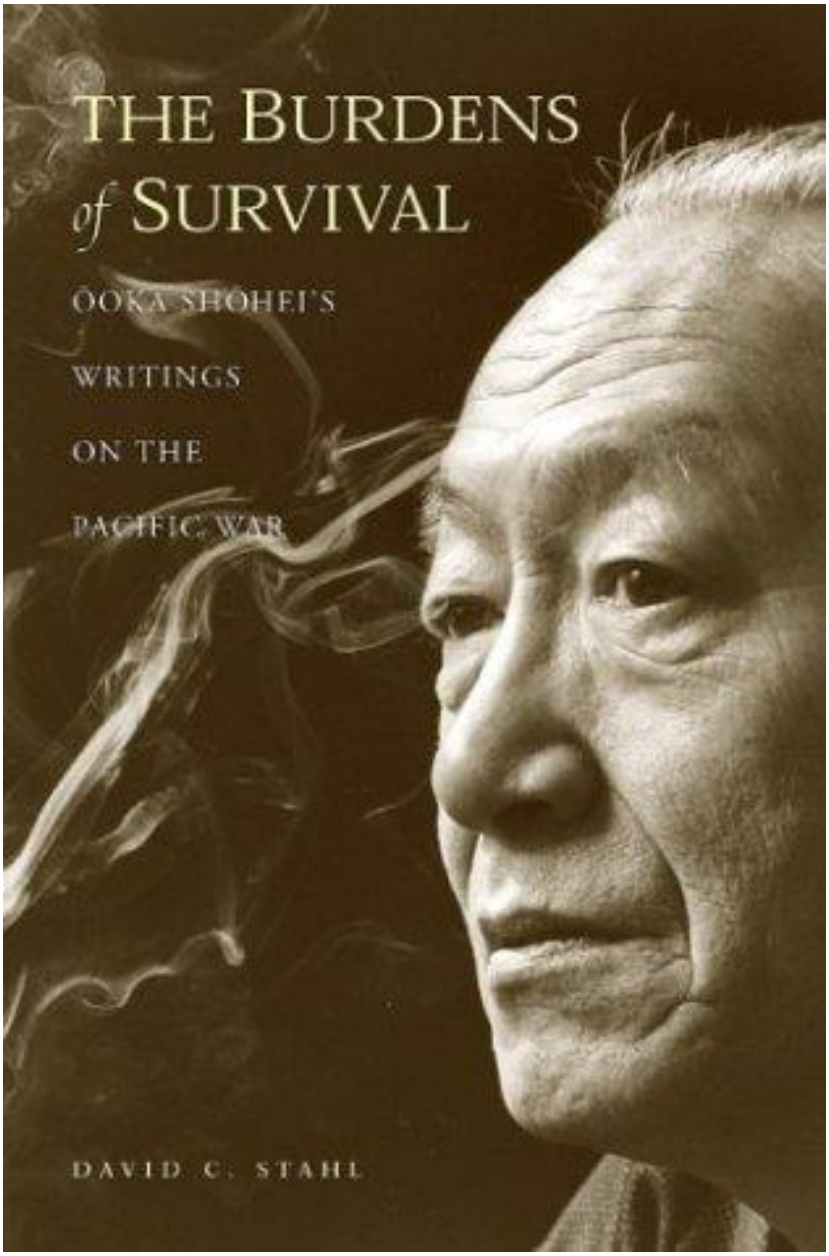
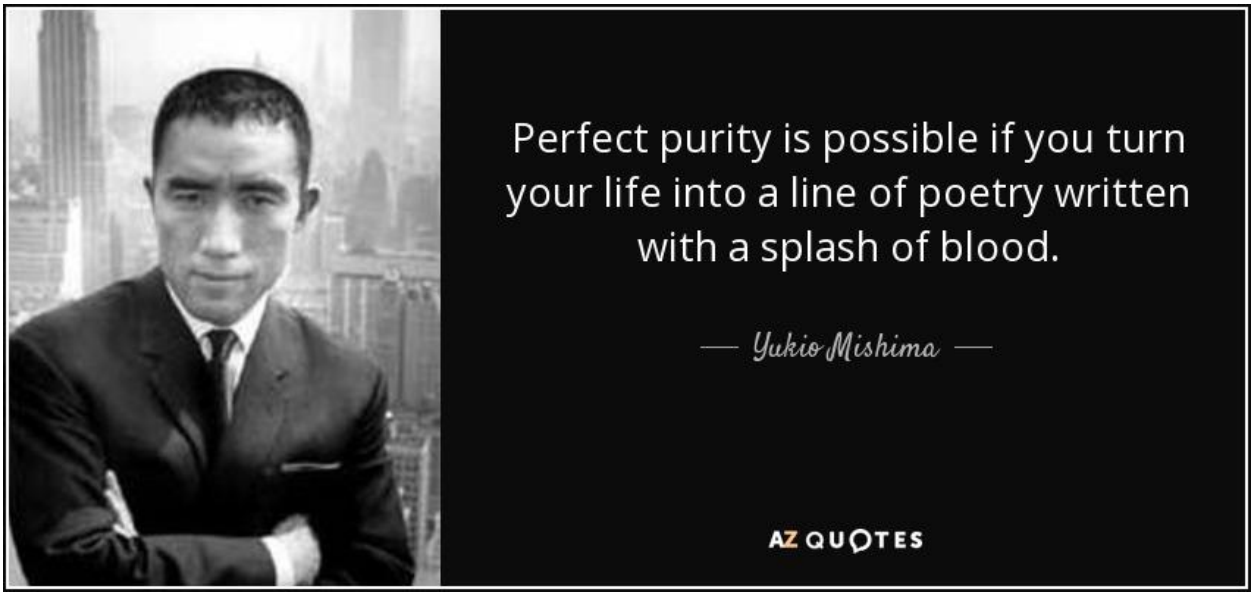
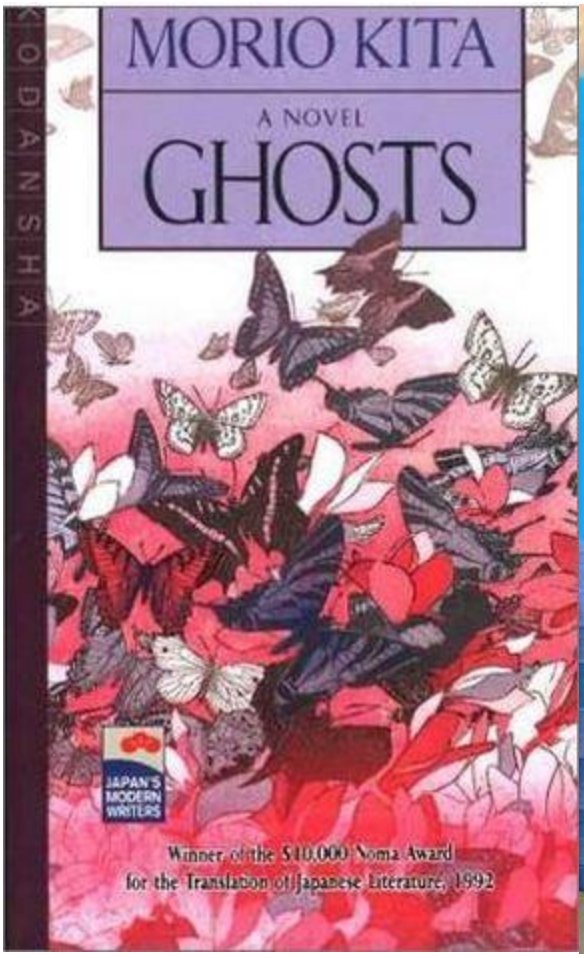


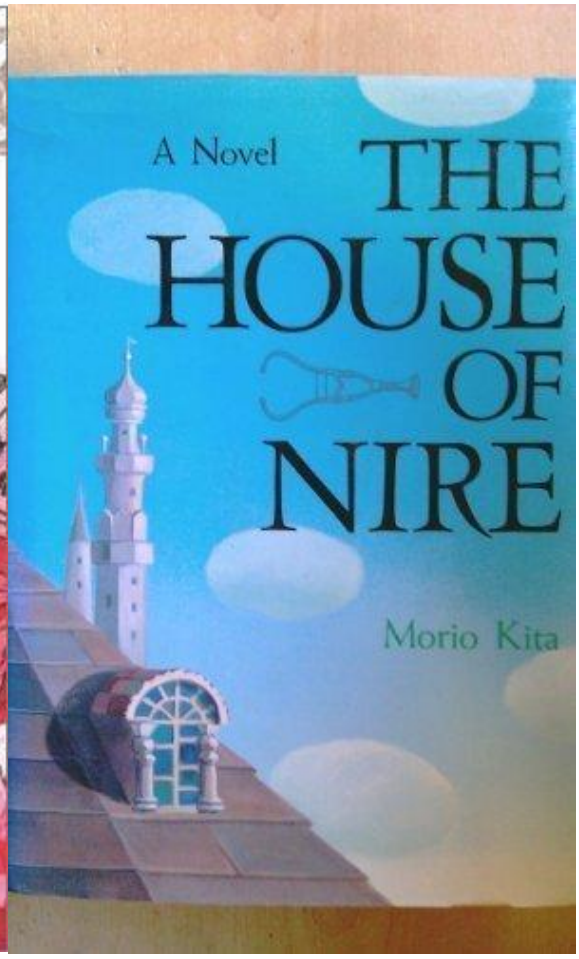
Scholarly study of Ôoka Shôhei's writings on the Pacific War (Source: Abe Books)

Yasuoka Shôtarô (Source: Wikimedia Commons)



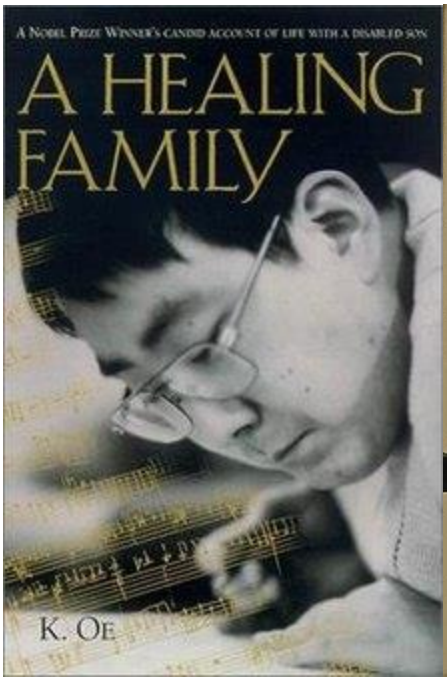
Mishima Yukio: the photo and the aphorism (Source: AZ Quotes)



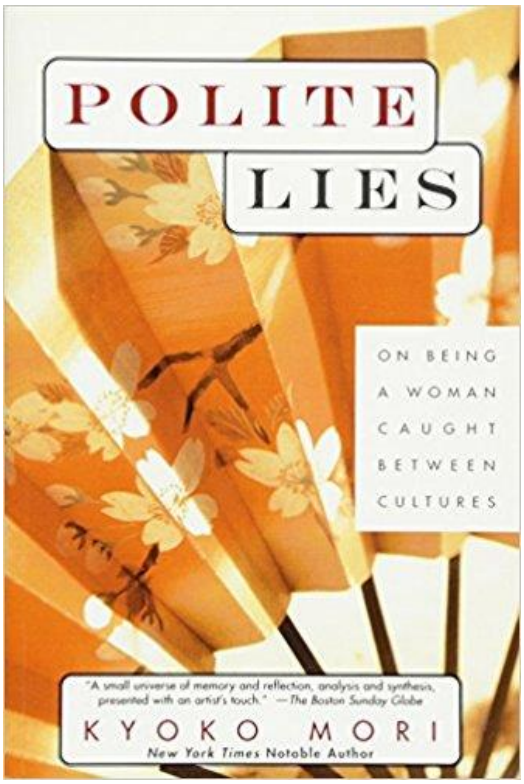


Kita Morio, *Ghosts*(Goodreads) Kita Morio, *The House of Nire*(Abe Books)

Inoue Yasushi (Source: nowheretostay.blogspot)



Ôe Hikari (Wikipedia) Ôe Kenzaburô, author of *A Healing Family* (Japan Times)



Kyoko Mori's memoir (Amazon) Kyoko Mori's photograph (Harvard Review)

Part V : ESSAY

The Place of Essay Writing in Twentieth-Century Japan

Once established during the Heian period, most notably through the *Pillow Book* writings of Sei Shônagon, 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.

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Questions and Issues

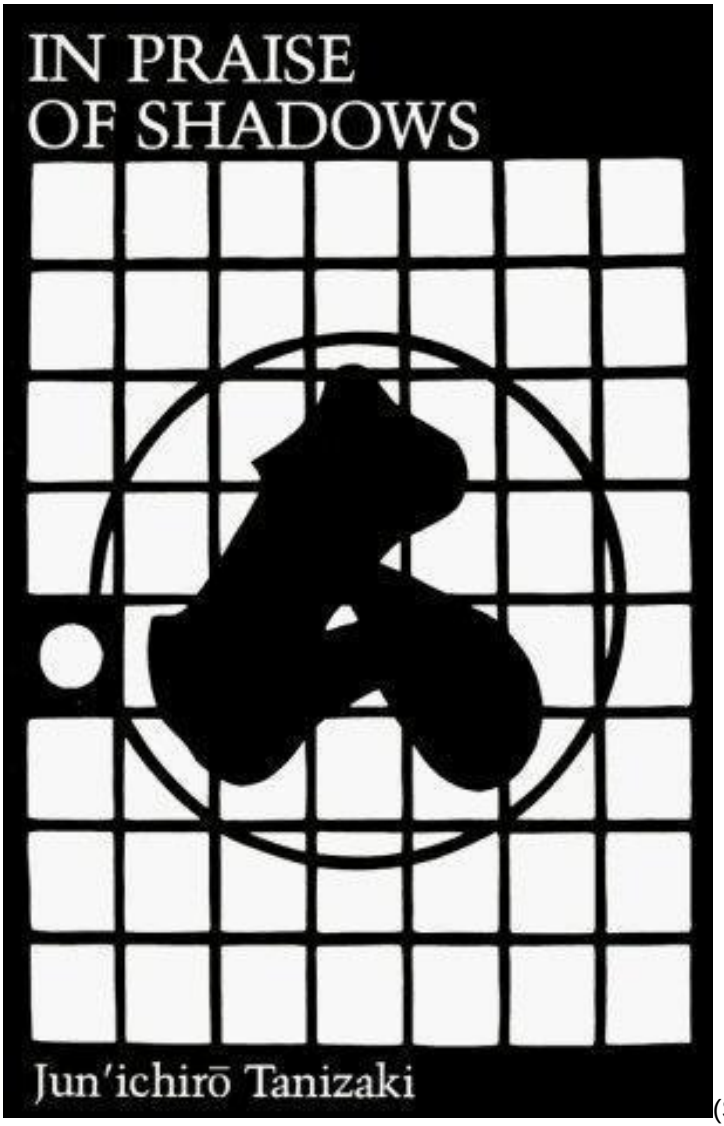
What do you regard as especially appealing about the essay form? What are its drawbacks?

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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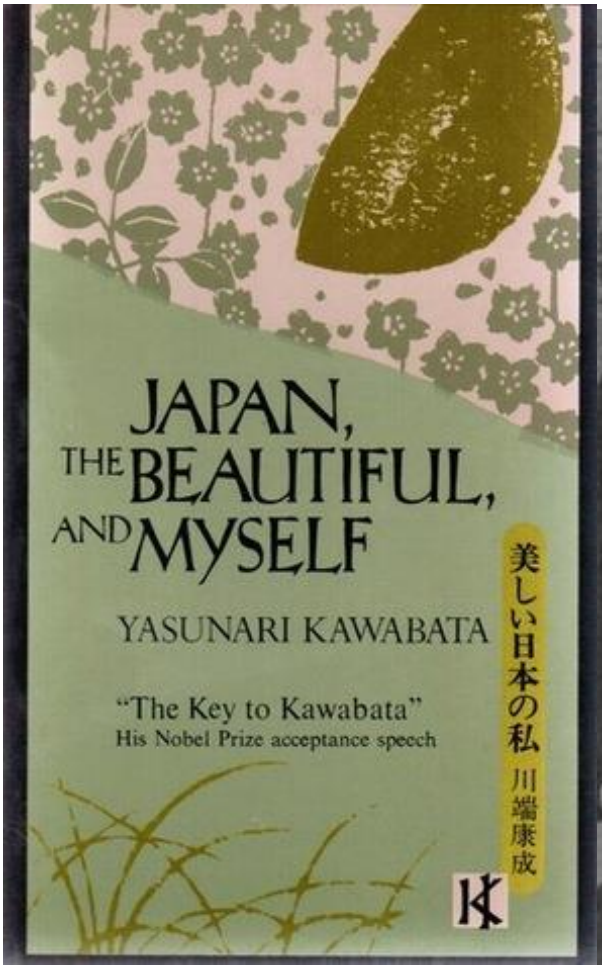

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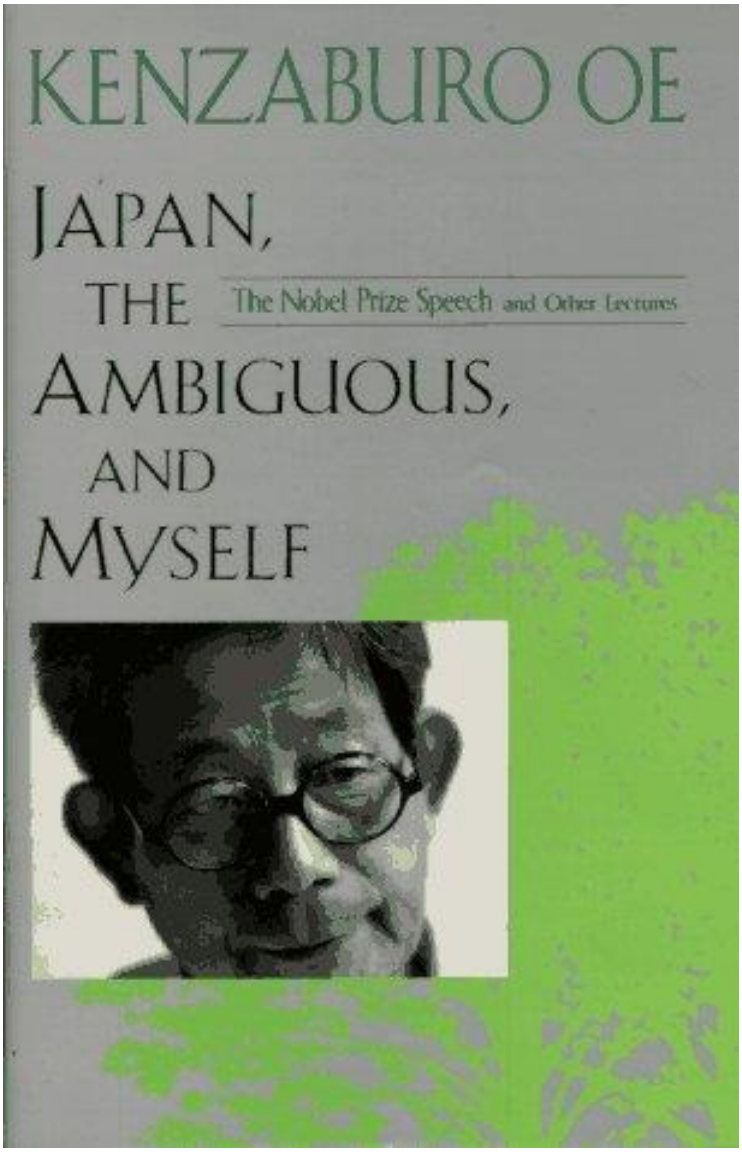

Ôe Kenzaburô, Nobel Prize speech/ essay (Source: Goodreads)