HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

JAPANESE ESSAY

Marvin Marcus, Ph.D.

***ZUIHITSU* (Essay)**

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Part I : CLASSICAL ERA

Overview: The Classical Age of Japanese Culture

Japan during the Heian period (ca 800-1200) has long been heralded as a Golden Age of classical civilization. Its wide range of literary, artistic, and artisanal products are indelibly associated with courtly style, elegance, aristocratic refinement, and exquisite aesthetic sensitivity. Overall, Heian arts and culture are suffused with what may be termed a feminine aura of emotional depth, nuance, and elegant understatement. This in part reflects the fact that a number of their treasured products are the work of aristocratic women who served in the imperial court.

Aside from literary pursuits, Heian courtiers indulged themselves in a variety of creative activities— music and dance, painting, calligraphy, textile design, and so forth. Much of this work reflects the influence of Chinese prototypes and models— part of the centuries-long process of absorbing the language, political institutions, and arts of China. A key inspiration emerged from the Chinese-based Buddhist sects that took root among the Japanese elites and became widely patronized. This led to the eventual mastery of Buddhist religious arts— sculpture, painting, ritual objects, sutra copying, and of course architecture.

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

Heian Literature and the Role of *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.

Readings

Keene, Donald, *Seeds in the Heart: Japanese Literature From Earliest Times to the Late Sixteenth Century* (Columbia, 1999)

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Morris, Ivan, *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan* (Knopf, 1964)

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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.

PART II : MEDIEVAL PERIOD

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

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

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

Medieval Literature and the Role of *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.

Readings

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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.

PART III : 19TH CENTURY

Overview: Japanese Culture in the Nineteenth Century

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

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

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

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

The Place of 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 broadpersonal 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, reflectingthe 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 Japanvis 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 isbrilliantly 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*, pp170, 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.

Sources

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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?

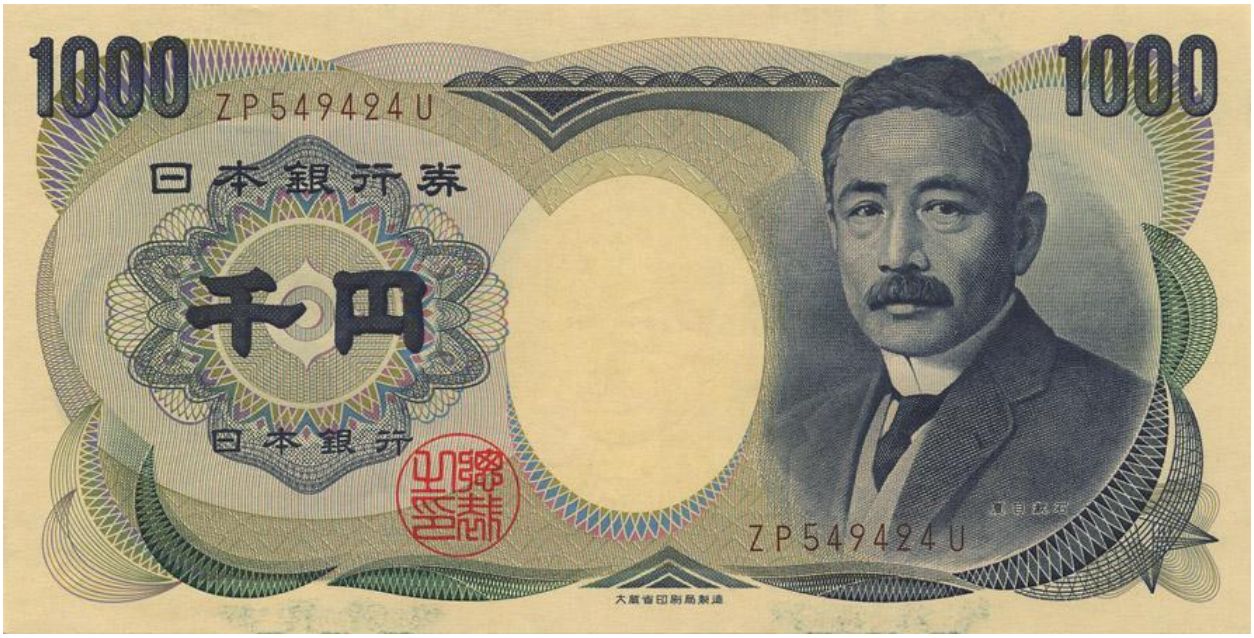
'Individual expression' is a highly subjective matter. How do essays serve as convincing and compelling vehicles for such expression? How do we respond to didactic essays, which counsel virtue and admonish vice? Have we grown impervious to moralizing and 'preaching' in the present day?
What would you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

PART IV : 20TH CENTURY

Overview: Japanese Society and Culture in the Twentieth Century

Japan in the twentieth century experienced a degree of dramatic— and traumatic— change virtually unparalleled in world history. Ushering in the century as a newly-minted imperial power under the aegis of a 'divine' Emperor Meiji, Japan ending the century as an established post-imperial, post-industrial power. But the nation's modernization agenda, forged during the Meiji period (1868-1912) took a dramatic turn in mid-century, in the form of an imperial expansionism that ended in war and cataclysmic defeat. Yet this very defeat eventuated in an extraordinary postwar reconstruction and renaissance that was set in motion by the American victors, under the aegis of their Occupation regime (1945-52).
In other words, twentieth-century Japanese history is conveniently reducible to a pre-war, imperialist component; a postwar, 'de-imperialized' component; and the intervening war, which began in China and ended with the nation's unconditional surrender in August 1945, in the wake of two atomic bombings.
Prior to the militarist regime of the 1930s, however, Japanese society and culture were surprisingly open and vibrant. This was especially true during the Taishô period (1912-26), which was marked by unfettered creativity in the arts and a free and open society. 'Tokyo chic' was all the rage, as evidenced by the thriving popular media (including film and radio) and consumer marketplace. Notwithstanding the official rhetoric of imperial divinity and Japanese exceptionalism, Japan was a seemingly 'normal' nation, with a secure place in the global order.

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

Japan's economic resurgence, as of the 1960s, is well known, as is its dominance on the world economic stage in the 1980s— the 'Japan as Number One' era. There was a corresponding resurgence on the cultural level, with an outpouring of literature, art, and film that has earned international recognition since the 1950s. And Japanese pop culture products have long been at the center of the global marketplace.
Japan's exuberant national pride, though, has diminished in the interim, with a relatively stagnant economy as of the 1990s and looming problems that offer no easy solution— for instance, the demographic 'time-bomb' that forecasts steady population decline and raises the question of the nation's viability. Then there is Japan's role in East Asia— the fraught relationship with China, for instance, and the existential threat posed by a nuclear-armed North Korea.

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

The Place of 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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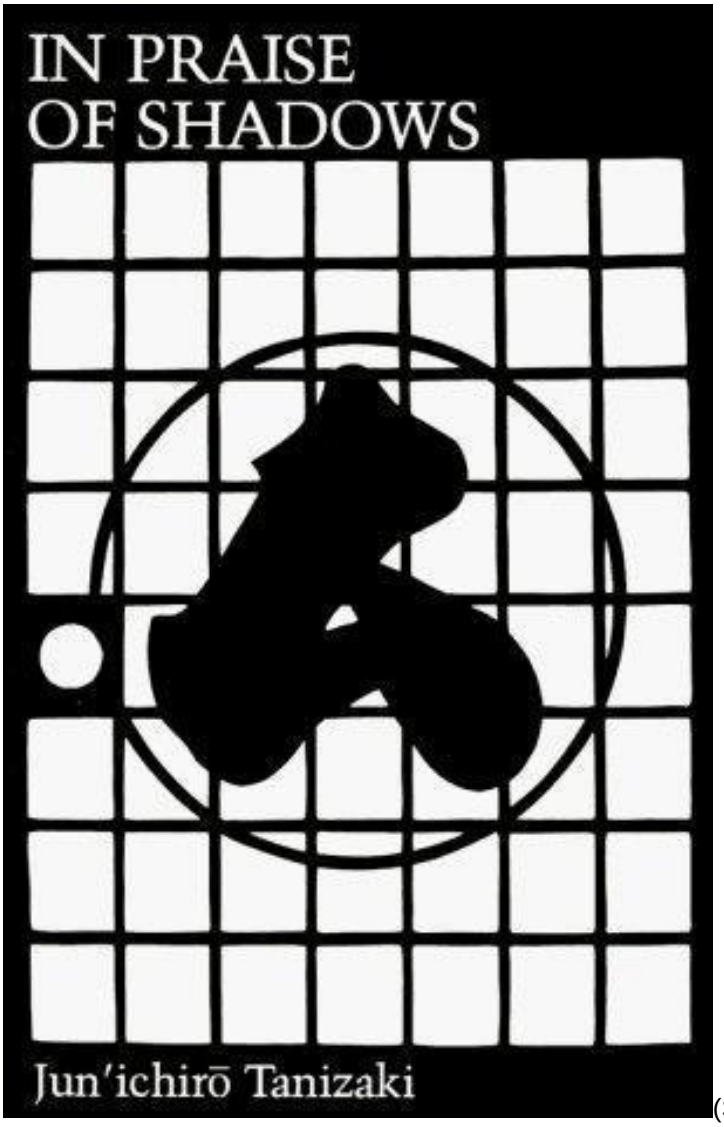
Questions and Issues

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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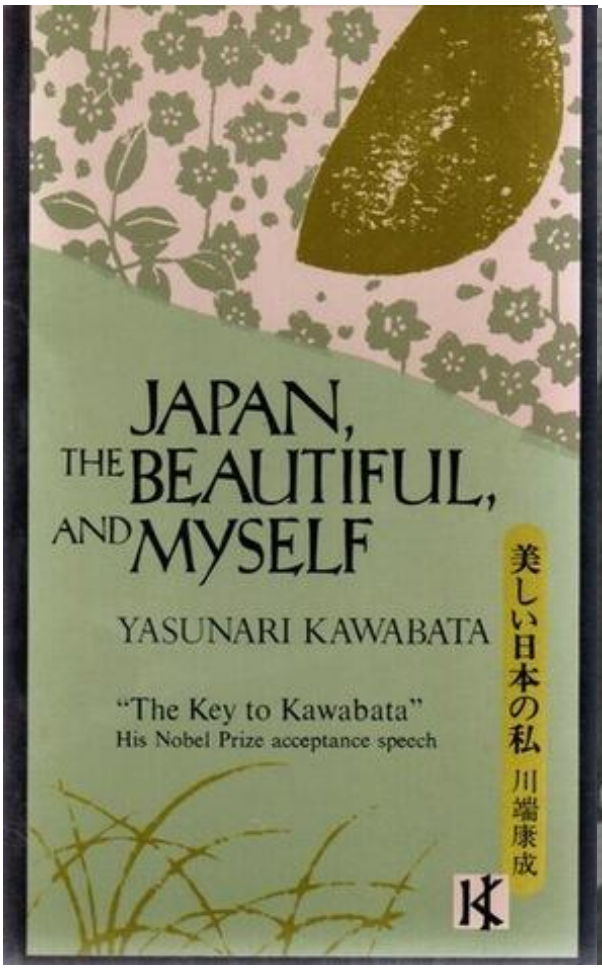

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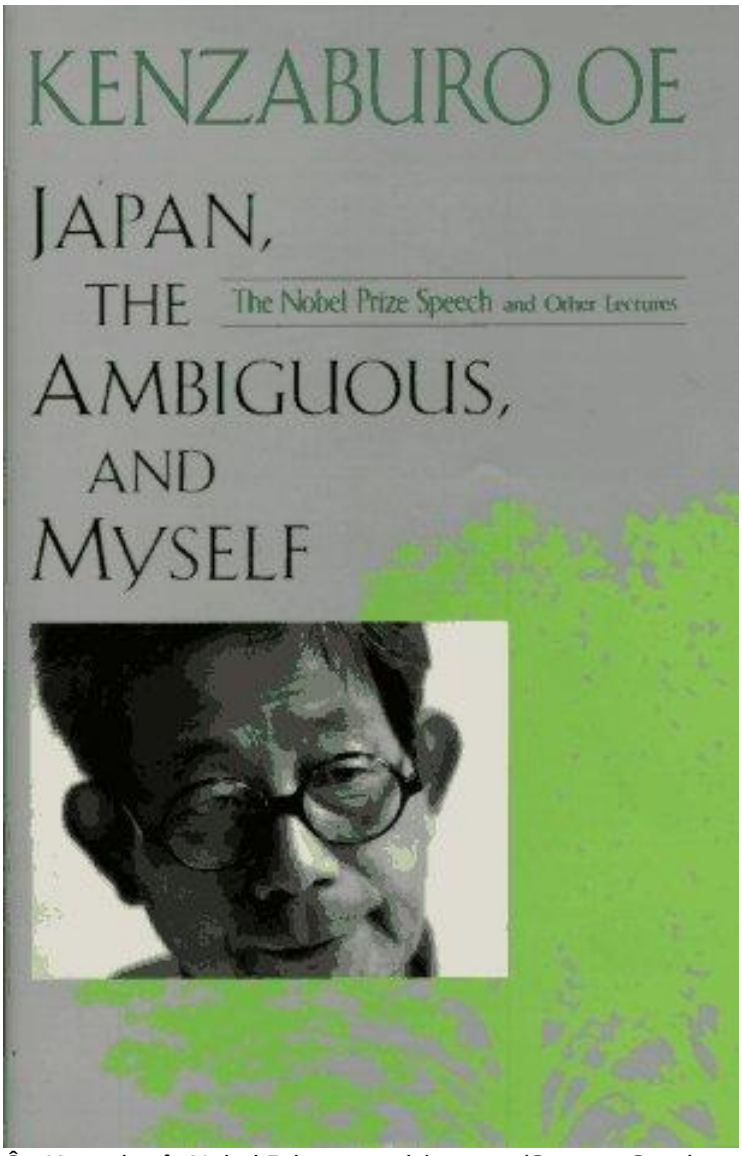

Ôe Kenzaburô, Nobel Prize speech/ essay (Source: Goodreads)