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Japanese Literature as "Other": Women Poets and the Search for a Uniquely Japanese Aesthetic

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日本の女流詩人の発想による「美学論」について検討する。例えば「陰翳」や「遠回し」というのが日本人作家の文の特徴だと多くの研究者によく指摘されているが、実は与謝野晶子氏の詩を始め、茨木のり子氏、伊藤比呂美氏や青山みゆき氏の詩もそれとは反対の特徴をみせていると思われる。英訳した作品を通して示しているように、国文学において、「美学論」の単称命題では無く、批判的なテーマや、明確で力強い言葉の利用及び役割も目立っていると言える。

This study looks at poetry by Japanese women in an attempt to determine the accuracy of traditional characterizations of the so-called "Japanese aesthetic." For instance, numerous commentators have described Japanese literary writing as indirect, discrete and non-confrontational. However, these characterizations seem contradicted by the language and themes seen in the work of such writers as Yosano Akiko, Ibaragi Noriko, Ito Hiromi and Aoyama Miyuki. Indeed, as the translated poems discussed suggest, the narrow institutional focus on a single aesthetic ignores the powerful--even confrontational--themes and dynamic, forceful language that have been a mark of poetry by Japanese women for much of the last century.

> The word I see most often in connection with contemporary Japanese women's poetry is *yureteiru*, shaking. The poetry is not unstable and certainly not indifferent, just shaking--in flux and reaching for a landing point, however impermanent.
>
> Malinda Markham, Antioch Review, 2004

One peculiarity of the Japanese language is the clear demarcation between active and passive, transitive and intransitive. In English, for example, a house can *shake* from an earthquake and a person's actions or words can *shake* the very foundations of a society – i.e., though the relationships denoted between *actor* and *acted upon* in these sentences are different, the verb (including spelling) is the same. In Japanese, however, only *yusuburu* can suggest the latter usage, making Markham's choice (in the quoted text above) of the term *yureteiru* particularly suggestive. *Yureteiru* is always without an object, always at least implies the acted upon, the influenced, the recipient of another's actions or words.

Markham's observations about Japanese poetry–particularly the poetry written by women--partake in a long critical tradition. For a variety of reasons, researchers (both Western and Eastern) have consistently sought to characterize the Japanese in general, and Japanese women in particular, as anything but "active," anything but aggressive, dynamic, confrontational, or forceful. On the contrary, Matsumoto, Reischauer, Sakaiya, Smith, among many others, have almost invariably described the Japanese as indirect, discrete, consensus-building and non-confrontational. As seen in critical essays by Henderson, Jackson, Miner, Nishida, Okakura, Rimer, and Tanizaki, this depiction extends to literary studies as well, for Japan has long served as a kind of anti-West, the antithesis of a society ostensibly too logic- and profit-driven for its own good. Sometimes, the results of this stereotyping have been unintentionally amusing, such as when Johnson & Dillon go so far as to advise Western job-

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seekers not to make "eye contact" during job interviews to avoid appearing "aggressive" (28). However, as Ma also notes, academic commentary in this vein too often serves but to "reinforce various ongoing and destructive stereotypes, such as the Western idea that Japanese women are still little more than compliant, doll-like objects of fantasy" (17).

In this essay, then, I hope to offer a "Japanese" challenge to the critical othering of its literature, discussing as well the historical context which necessitated the invention of a Japan-specific artistic vision. As the translated poems discussed below suggest, the narrow institutional focus on a single aesthetic ignores the powerful--indeed confrontational--themes and dynamic, forceful language that have been a mark of poetry by Japanese women for much of the last century.

Before introducing the poems, it is perhaps best to explain the "Japanese aesthetic" they work against. Indirectness and understatement, the idea that complete revelation in art is equivalent to sterility and must be avoided, have long dominated the discussion of Japanese aesthetics. Tanizaki, for instance, argues that shadows—i.e., the absence of revelation—have traditionally played an important role in Japanese art and architecture, in the same way that pauses--i.e., the absence of conversation--continue to be a crucial element in inter-Japanese communication. Nishida equates the aesthetic experience with achieving a state of "muga" (無我) or "selflessness," writing further that "この真理は吾人が己を離れ能く物と一致して得たる所のもの" [For true art is that place where we can attain separation from ourselves] (2).[1] According to Nishida, art is an "absolute background," a place of "nothingness" wherein one's consciousness, divested of self, can expand infinitely. Rimer echoes Nishida's ideas regarding the nature and usage of this "place," observing further that "The intent of Japanese literature is to provide the reader with a means to develop himself" (14). Finally, Okakura argues that the mark of the true artist is knowing how to create this place, especially where to stop, when and where to leave a work incomplete. For artists must avoid at all times both "completion" and "repetition," seeking through intentional ambiguity of thought and/or incompleteness of action to allow "each guest in imagination to complete the total effect in relation to himself" (61). Hence, so-called flaws (by Western standards, at least) are not only allowed but encouraged because of the emotional responses they can trigger. Such imperfections, Okakura writes, are what trigger the imaginative responses so crucial to aesthetic appreciation, for they allow participants the freedom to fancy, to elevate in their imaginations the artist's efforts to the level of art.

This latter idea, placing as it does so much of the responsibility for artistic appreciation on the viewer, is seen as a defining characteristic of the aesthetic—i.e., it is only with the active participation of his or her imagination that true beauty becomes possible. In discussing specifically the appreciation of haiku poetry, Henderson writes:

> Of course, cooperation is required. The reader must consciously try to put himself in the poet's place--see what he sees, hear what he hears, etc., and so feel what he feels. This is one of the reasons why haiku-reading has been called an art in itself. (23)

Indirectness and imperfection, Okakura adds, allow for the imaginative responses so crucial to aesthetic appreciation. The viewer must then complete the picture, for "true beauty can be discovered only by one who mentally completed the incomplete" (60).

Standing in direct contrast to the Japanese aesthetic delineated above, however, are the following poems, themselves but a sampling of the large number of similar poems written and published by Japanese women over the last 100 years. My first example is from Noriko Ibaragi,

[1] Iwaki and Marra make this observation as well.

who until her death in March was considered Japan's preeminent living female poet. (Unless stated otherwise, all translations are my own.)

Girls" March

I like bullying boys.
I really like making them whine.
Just today, I knocked Jirou about the head in school.
He said *Ouch* and ran away, tail between his legs.

A hard-headed boy, Jirou
put a dent in my lunch box....

Pa says I mean Father the Doctor says
girls shouldn't race about, act wild.
Inside each of our bodies is a special room,
so we must go quietly, softly.

Where's my room, do you think?
Tonight, I'll look for it....

Grandma's pissed Ms. Dried Plum
tells me girls who don't eat all their fish get kicked out,
they don't last three days as brides before they're returned.
Eat everything but the head and the tail, she says.

Well, I'm not marrying
so you can keep your damn fish bones!

The old baker started yelling,
Women and socks have gotten tough! Women and socks!
The women behind the counter were laughing at him.
Of course women have become strong -- there's a reason for it.

I, too, am going to be a strong woman.
Tomorrow, who should I make cry?

This poem deviates from the Japanese aesthetic in a number of important ways. Lines such as "I like bullying boys/I really like making them whine" and "Well, I'm not marrying/so you can keep your damn fish bones!" are certainly difficult to reconcile with Tanizaki's assertion that Japanese "prefer the soft voice, the understatement," not to mention seem to be devoid of the kind of ambiguity of meaning advocated by Okakura. The revelation implicit in the ending declaration--"I, too, am going to be a strong woman"--is another apparent violation, both in its directness and completeness. Indeed, the assertion's outspokenness would appear to negate its ability to serve as the proper backdrop for the reader's imagination, at least as delineated by Nishida, Okakura, and Tanizaki. However, even more than these apparent violations, the most interesting thing about this poem is its initial date of publication: 1958. (It first appeared in a poetry collection entitled *Mienai Haitatsufu* [The Invisible Delivery Husband|). This would, of course, place the poem after the appearance of the Tanizaki article (1933-4), and before Henderson (1967)and Miner (1966), again seemingly belying their claims to describing a current, uniform Japanese aesthetic.

Women writers have traditionally been some of the harshest, most confrontational opponents of Japanese domestic and foreign policy. The following are two representative poems by Akiko Yosano. The first, written at the height of Japan's 1904-5 war with Russia,

appeared two years prior to Okakura's famous treatise on the Japanese aesthetic; it remains perhaps the mostly widely anthologized poem in Japan today.

Love, You Must Not Go To Your Death

Ah, younger brother, I cry for you,
do not go to your death.
Born the youngest though you were,
you can still surpass our father in mercy,
though he makes you grab the sword,
though he teaches you to kill,
as if you had been raised 24 years
only to kill and to die.

Even among the shopkeepers of Sakai
our old shop is one of honor,
and so you, love, born to carry on our father's name,
you must not go to your death.
Whether Port Arthur's fortress is razed
or not   what does it matter?
You must see this   we are shopkeepers
it is not our way.

Love, you must not go to your death.
The emperor, he does not
cross the sea to fight,
to spill the blood of others,
to die like a beast on a trail.
All die for an emperor's praise
who if truly worthy
would not force death on others.

Ah, younger brother, you must not go
to war and to your own death.
Autumn passes, will our father outlive
the season's change? And our mother,
who saw you off in grief,
in agony, calling to you,
can she protect our house? In the midst
of the emperor's so-called peace,
your mother's hair turns white.

In the shadow of store curtains, she bends down and cries,
your new wife, so frail and young,
do not forget her, think about her.
Think about this young girl,
torn from your side after only 10 months.
In this world, she has only you,
who else is she to rely on?
My love, you must not go to your death.

The contraventions here of the Japanese aesthetic should be readily apparent. Certainly, there is no "intentional ambiguity of thought;" Yosano's poem, written during the Russo-Japan war, is unabashedly clear in its message: a poignant attack against both this war and the impulse to war. Repetition serves as an important rhetorical conceit. The refrain "My love, you must not go to your death" both opens and closes this poem, serving as both a structuring device and as a sort

of moral chorus, a direct appeal to her brother not to participate. The symmetrical structure, combined with the unambiguous revelation of the poem's intent, obviously limits the spectrum of plausible reader interpretations, seemingly negating the poem's ability to satisfy Nishida's requirement that art stand as a "place of nothingness." However, the clearest violation of the aesthetic appears in stanza three, with its overt criticism of the emperor. There is nothing of Tanizaki's ideas of "silence" or "shadow" here; in lines such as "The emperor, he does not/cross the sea to fight," Yosano baldly accuses the emperor of the twin crimes of hypocrisy and insincerity. (Indeed, this particular stanza helped result in Yoshano's 6-year semi-exile.) Her criticism continues in the fourth stanza with the ironic reference to "the Emperor's peace"; in a stratagem used by certain countries even today, the Japanese government had justified its invasion of Russia as necessary to "preserving peace"--an idea Yosano strongly rejects. That this poem appeared before the appearance of Okakura's influential treatise demonstrates the presence of alternative voices and styles in Japan even at that time, ones which did not fit comfortably under his definition of a single, so-called "Japanese," aesthetic. Given as well this poem's enduring popularity, it seems clear that a large Japanese reading audience existed--and exists--for work at odds with this aesthetic.

Almost as forthright and confrontational is this second poem by Yosano, composed in about 1910 yet eerily prophetic of the horrible war that would begin less than thirty years later:

A Certain Country

A country that takes joy only in rigidity,
in ritual, yet how rash,
how enslaved by whim.
Like impatient China
a self-absorbed and short-sighted country,
a country lacking the resources of America
yet obsessed with becoming America.
A country incapable of questioning,
its men too stooped by fatalism.
A country which congratulates itself,
which repeats without thought,
Ban-Banzai!

Again, both images and theme are transparently critical, though Yosano's target this time is not limited to government policy. Here, she disparages the "fatalistic" Japanese national ethos, and especially the acquiescence of its citizens--without whose support no government could long stay in power.

Best-selling poet "Tawara Machi" (her pen name) also habitually violates the Japanese aesthetic. In her influential 1989 book *Sarada Kinnenbi* [The Anniversary of Salad], for instance, she uses the haiku form to narrate the course of a failed romantic relationship, with each haiku depicting a particular stage (e.g., her realization of love, doubt, and finally loss) in that relationship. Here is a small sampling:

Suddenly, I'm aware that all
the clothes I'm trying on have
your favorite flower pattern. (15)

The falling rain
and just like that I want
your lips. (18)

Believing no promises, you play
in sand where waves cannot reach,
building nothing. (33)

I try James Dean poses
outside in a jacket
musky with you. (83)
I realized I'd given up on you
while wearing a hemp skirt, drinking
the first "ice coffee" of summer. (122)

It was there we said
goodbye. Like an exit interview,
that evening. (180)

While devoid of the biting political/social commentary that characterizes the work of Ibaragi and Yosano, Tawara Machi's poems share with these authors a similar stylistic virtuosity. These are not the haiku of Basho, Buson, or even Issa; seasonal references are blurred or omitted, and Nature itself is a mere backdrop for an intensely personal, very human drama. Indeed, the directness of the images, not to mention the coherent narrative of a failed relationship depicted in the collection, mark a clear departure from the Japanese aesthetic discussed above. From the bold declaration of "and just like that I want/your lips" to the audacity of her referring to a final discussion with her lover as an "exit interview," Tawara Machi is forthright, unabashedly assertive, and even confrontational; the success of the book (over two million copies sold--by far the most successful poetry collection in modern Japanese history) again demonstrates the extensive market in Japan for work with such qualities.

Other Side River, a 1995 anthology of women's poetry, contains further examples of poems by Japanese women that appear similarly to violate the conventions of the Japanese aesthetic. Here, for instance, are the ending stanzas (the full poem is quite long) from "Harakiri," Hiromi Ito's devastating indictment of "bushido," the so-called Japanese "way of the warrior"-mentality that had played (and continues to play in some political circles) such a tragic role in modern Japanese history.

"I know it's kind of sick," he said.
He thinks *bushido* should have cherry blossoms
He thinks samurai are always
looking for a place to die.
I failed to hear
If his ancestors were samurai.
He thinks pain will become pleasure
If he trains himself
"That's why I'm training myself now," he says,
(masturbating)
I'm sure it's extremely exciting
To commit harakiri facing a woman
Mr. O says,
(masturbating)
samurai
(masturbating)
ha ha
(masturbating)
cherry blossoms
(masturbating)
falling
(masturbating)
It's really kind of kinky.

Translation taken from Lowitz, et. al. (86-9)

As with the poems described earlier, the contraventions here of the Japanese aesthetic are readily apparent. There are no "silences" in this poem--even masturbation is conducted through a stream of dialogue. From the mocking "I failed to hear/If his ancestors were samurai" to the conceit of having the would-be "samurai" masturbate in his excitement, Ito's sarcasm is neither subtle nor opaque. On the contrary, her poem seems to represent a direct and extremely lucid criticism of those who would continue to espouse the virtues of an anachronistic "warrior mentality" in a modern industrial society. Furthermore, the ending line appears to violate the aesthetic as well in both the overtness and completeness of its revelation; indeed, "It's really kind of kinky" deftly skewers her target, suggesting as it does that "bushido" is ultimately just another deviant sexual obsession.

Still, there are a number of poems written by Japanese women which seem "Japanese"--in the sense that they are indirect, understated, non-narrative driven and open to various interpretations. However, this brings up an important salient point--is this not equally true of some Western poetry in English as well? Ashbery—who once said that in his poems he "attempts to use words abstractly, as an abstract painter uses paint"—comes to mind immediately. St. John's "Acadian Lane," Plath's "Watercolor of Grantchester Meadows," Scheele's "The Gap in the Cedar"--there appear to be a large number of poems in the English language as well where image enjoys precedent over meaning, where the ending revelation is either muted or left seemingly incomplete, stimulating the imagination and inviting a variety of interpretations. Do not these poems also partake of a similar, so-called "Japanese" aesthetic?

Which leads me to this final question: with so many exceptions existing in the Japanese language, not to mention so many Western poems seeming to conform to the aesthetic ideal delineated above, why has an argument been made for there being a uniquely "Japanese" aesthetic? One explanation that has been offered is racism, i.e., that the West's "imperialist tradition" has resulted in an obsession with "essentializing" or "othering" the Orient. Ma, Said, and Susser, among others, have argued that Western researchers frequently minimalize (or omit entirely) the historical and cultural complexities of their Oriental subject matter, emphasizing instead areas of perceived differences vis-à-vis the Western societies. Worse, this assumption of, and fascination with, "difference" ostensibly leads many Western researchers to "create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe" (Said, p. 3), exaggerating (or even inventing) the exotic in an attempt to "polarize the distinction--the Oriental becomes more Oriental, the Westerner becomes more Western." According to these critics, the end result is too often a false dichotomy where the Orient is reduced to an artificial construct, an "Other" which has less to do with the actual reality than with the "identity of the subject who is gazing at the "Other"" (Susser, 1998, p. 52).

However, this line of reasoning belies the fact that, at least in the case of Japan, many of the most egregious offenders in this myth-building process are Japanese. For instance, in asserting the importance of incompleteness and indirectness in Japanese art, Okakura supports his argument with references to both the semantic origin and modern usage of the Japanese word for "tea ceremony house" (数寄屋 [sukiya]). These oft-cited assertions:

(1) The Chinese characters, taken together, originally translated to mean "abode of fancy."

(2) The Chinese characters used to express this term have changed repeatedly over the years.

(3) Currently, depending on the characters used, the term "sukiya" can be translated to mean "abode of vacancy" or "abode of the unsymmetrical."

However, as even Okakura himself must have been aware when he wrote this article, all three of the above assertions are false. Here are the original characters and their former (and present) meanings:[2]

> 數 chant while holding sticks ["shamaness" in Chinese] (now: "count" or "number")
> 寄 seeking protection in a stranger's house (now: "draw near," "visit" or "send")
> 屋 a room where, having arrived, one can relax (now: "house," "shop," or "shopkeeper")

As can be seen, except for a slight difference in the shape of the first Chinese character, the standard characters used to represent "sukiya" (数寄屋) have remained almost unchanged for over 400 years. Also, it is difficult to imagine how this term, whether the characters are taken separately or together, could be construed to mean "abode of fancy," "abode of vacancy," or "abode of the unsymmetrical." Indeed, I would argue that the best literal translation of the modern Japanese would be simply "a house where people can gather together." Now, some scholars have also noted how "sukiya" has in the distant past sometimes been shortened to just "suki" (数寄), a term which had an additional connotation of "like." Hence, the term "sukiya" can also be translated as "a gathering place for people who like tea"--i.e., a concept certainly intelligible to most Western readers as well.

The oversights in the Tanizaki article, while more subtle, are nonetheless equally intriguing. A key concept in his article is the idea of there being an "Oriental" aesthetic, one broad enough ostensibly to encompass both the Chinese and Korean aesthetic traditions, yet distinct from (and threatened by) the so-called "Western" aesthetic. Indeed, this latter idea of Western aesthetic encroachment is a central concern for Tanizaki, who writes poignantly at the end of his long defense of the Oriental aesthetic:

> No matter what complaints we may have, Japan has chosen to follow the West, and there is nothing for her to do but move bravely ahead and leave us old ones behind. But we must be resigned to the fact that as long as our skin is the color it is the loss we have suffered cannot be remedied. I have written all this because I have thought that there might still be somewhere, possibly in literature or the arts, where something could be saved. (65)

However, when this article is viewed in its historical context, the above passage, not to mention Tanizaki's argument as a whole, appears to raise more questions than it answers. Published as it was in December/January of 1933/1934, this article appeared three years after the military had begun its takeover of the Japanese government.[3] It appeared after the beginning of active media censorship, and after foreign books, movies--even loan words borrowed from other languages--had begun to be banned. It also appeared after Japan's systemic destruction of the fine arts in Korea, and after the Japanese had begun a similar destruction in occupied China.

All this raises questions about the Tanizaki piece, the most important being why it was written. Was it meant as just another example (only comparatively highbrow)of the jingoistic propaganda so common to the era? Any article written in such a climate (Japanese historians refer to this period by the term 狂気の時代 or "the years of insanity"), especially one attacking the nature and prevalence of Western influence, would seem suspect to this charge. The inclusive reference to an "Oriental" aesthetics certainly mirrors much of the government brochures of the time, ironic given that it was Japanese policy (with some public support) to repress non-Japanese forms of the aesthetic in the occupied areas, to the point that Chinese and

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[2] See Henshall, Shinmura, Nelson, etc.

[3] The following history is condensed from Beasley, Irie, Schirokauer, Storry, and Watanabe.

Koreans were forced to study Japanese language and literature at school and to use Japanese for most business and government transactions.

Whatever his intentions, the veracity of a number of Tanizaki's statements seem open to debate. For example, his assertion that the Japanese literature of his time was imitating the West is difficult to support. While some of the fine arts (especially painting) were strongly influenced by the West, and while it is true that many major writers had flirted with Western forms during the early- to mid-Meiji period (1868-1900), by the time of Tanizaki's article, most of the major novelists in Japan--Mori Ogai, Natsume Soseki, and even Tanizaki himself—had moved beyond the Western literary tradition. Certainly it is difficult to see how the classic novels of the period—Mori's Gan, Soseki's Kokoro, and Tanizaki's Makioka Shimai—could be argued to be merely Western imitations.

Okakura, too, may have been motivated by similarly complex, and at times contradictory, desires in articulating his views of a unified, Japan-specific, aesthetic. While symbolism, not to mention an artistic consciousness (see, for instance, Kyorai's "Conversations with Basho"), certainly did exist in Japanese literature prior to encountering the West, no systemic Japanese attempt had been made to codify these often contradictory arguments into a single, coherent aesthetic theory. (Jackson and Marra, among others, have noted that before contact with the West, "aesthetics"—now translated as "bigaku" 美学—and "symbol"—now translated as shouchou 象徴—did not have Japanese language equivalents.) Accordingly, some scholars have argued that many of the seminal articles written on the Japanese aesthetic in the latter half of the Meiji period (1890-1912) were motivated at least partly by a perceived need to define a "national essence" (Schirokauer, 436), to demonstrate artistic and cultural independence (later, superiority) from the West. In an exhaustive study of Okakura's life and work, for instance, Notehelfer demonstrates convincingly how his aesthetic arguments were but a part of a much larger agenda: both to promote popular acceptance of an idealized past and to justify the military expansion that had already begun to dominate Japan's present. According to Okakura, Japan's artistic sensibilities were the result of a "remarkable synthesis" of the best of Asian thought, made possible only by the "particular genius of the Japanese race" (qtd. in Notehelfer, 331). Okakura argued further that these superior sensibilities (i.e., the unique aesthetic he had described) justified Japan's "mission" to "revive the dormant life of the old Asiatic unity" (qtd. in Notehelfer, 335), observing as well that "The Chinese War, which revealed our supremacy in Eastern waters, and which has yet drawn us closer than ever in mutual friendship [with China], was a natural outgrowth" of this mission (qtd. in Notehelfer, 341-2).[4] As Notehelfer himself concludes:

> Here the ambiguity of his upbringing and education, his peculiar need to defend Japan among foreigners, and his romantic adherence to "what should be" instead of "what was" all worked to inhibit a clear expression of the reality in which late Meiji Japan found itself. (354)

In other words, there is reason to question the motivations behind, not to mention some of the substance of, Okakura's foundational work in Japanese aesthetics as well.

Is there a uniquely Japanese aesthetic? While the possibilities are intriguing, I would argue that there is not. At least no clear articulation of one has been offered that can encompass the myriad of voices and forms existent in Japanese literature today, let alone one which can delineate a clear and consistent contrast with Western ideals of the aesthetic. Moreover, considering the pace and the extent of the changes occurring just in the area of women's letters,

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[4] To this, Notehelfer drily responds: "One wonders how any Chinese or Korean, even of the deepest idealistic convictions, could have agreed with Okakura's evaluation of Japanese foreign policy...."

the task of describing such an aesthetic would appear more impossible with each day. Indeed, instead of attempting to delineate a race-specific idea of beauty, it would seem that Western (and Japanese) scholarship would be better served by learning to recognize, and to celebrate, the variety of styles and themes in the Japanese literary arts, not to mention those areas of their overlap with Western styles and themes. For it is not only in contrast that intercultural understanding is advanced; comparison should (and must) play its part as well.

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