

Current Project Outline: Japanese-language Poetry in Transition: Poetic forms Exploring the Limits of Genre, language, Culture and Society

Boundaries of Genre

Japanese contemporary poetry rubs shoulders with many other genres, for example, narrative (here I am thinking of fiction), philosophy, religion, theatre, film, music, the Internet and the visual arts. This project will research and elaborate upon the connections between contemporary Japanese poetry and the aforementioned genres. A variety of theoretical perspectives will be employed to contextualize, cognize and comprehend how these genres interact with contemporary poetry, and the significance of these interactions on culture and society generally. A number of observations are already possible when considering the trends appearing in Japanese poetry over the past three or four decades. Classical Japanese poetry reaches back to the roots of Japanese tradition as its conceptual framework. Contemporary Japanese poetry often gestures to this classical tradition, and reconstructs some of the most fundamental tropes of this tradition in its reworking of the Japanese past for the present. One of the most prominent of these tropes is Buddhism, the most significant and influential religion throughout the whole of Japanese history, and the reworking of Buddhist tropes in contemporary poetry in the hands of such poets as Shibusawa Takasuke results in a profound commentary on Buddhism and the present. Even in poetry which clearly engages in non-Buddhist religions such as Christianity we see the influence of Buddhist ideas, both in a positive and negative sense. This engagement of poetry with religion is apparent in American and European poetry, and the interplay between poetry and tradition is a common feature of contemporary poetic discourse and practice.

Another good example of contemporary Japanese poetry exploring the boundaries of genre is film and the visual arts. There have indeed been films inspired by contemporary Japanese poetry; sometimes inspired by only one line, as in the example of Yoshihara Sachiko's famous poem sequence *Yume Arui wa* (Dream Or) being the source of an experimental contemporary film. The interaction between visual arts and contemporary poetry is manifold and widespread: from Tanikawa Shuntarō's visualization of Paul Klee's paintings to more recent poets working in a similar area (too numerous to mention). Questions arise as to the significance of these interactions for contemporary Japanese culture and society generally. This project will investigate how these interactions constitute a form of dialogue between different genres of culture, and a larger dialogue with society, particularly in respect of multimedia and contemporary problems relating to the ubiquity and banality of multimedia and social media.

Philosophy creates and inspires much contemporary writing. In the case of contemporary Japanese poetry, the language poetry of the 60s, 70s and 80s, and the debates that were subsequently

generated, form much of the template upon which a dialogue between poetry and philosophy was carried out. Even in the 21st century, the tensions between the ideas expressed in language poetry relating to a crisis in expression underpin much poetry — whether written in support or in opposition to that mode of verse. Philosophical debates spill over into political and ideological debates and contemporary Japanese poetry provides many examples of such verse.

Methods

The means by which these themes and problems will be analyzed are various. First and foremost, we need translations of contemporary Japanese verse, the overwhelming bulk of which is not available in translation. By publishing translations of a number of major contemporary poets we permit cross-cultural discussion and analysis, in particular among researchers who cannot read Japanese. The poetics of translation itself also constitutes another sphere of intellectual investigation, and translation theory is now one of the hot topics in contemporary research. Thus, working through selected translations of selected poets will generate an accompanying discourse on translation theory, which will enrich and enhance the existing Eurocentric framework of such studies. There are obvious links to the emerging field of ‘World Literature’, and by workshopping translations of Japanese contemporary poetry with European and American contemporary poetry the field of ‘World Literature’ can be expanded and given additional depth.

Analysis and discussion of poetry in translation, translation strategies and the thematic field revealed in our translations of contemporary Japanese poetry will also constitute a major methodology for comprehending and comparing contemporary poetry in general. However, analysis must also include consideration of the particular Japanese poetic genres to which contemporary poetry belongs. This will involve a rereading and rewriting of Japanese literary history to fully conceptualize the direction in which contemporary poetry is headed. Such an exercise demands examination of particular linguistic styles—sociolects-ideolects, bilingualism and experiments in grammar, morphology and vocabulary. Such analysis will take place at the deepest linguistic level and so will entail close reading of a number of contemporary poems, as well as the sociolinguistic and cultural contexts surrounding their production. Such analysis and exegesis will result in draft chapters for a proposed monograph on contemporary Japanese poetry.

The collection of materials for examination requires purchasing or at least accessing several collections of contemporary Japanese poetry and poetry criticism. This project therefore also needs to purchase or access a number of contemporary journals published in Japan in order to establish the hermeneutic context in which debates over poetics and poetry are conducted. Some references will be made to these basic research materials in the section on literature.

Hypotheses

Various hypotheses can thus be tested as part of this research project. The relationship between literature, specifically in this case poetry and culture, can be explored in order to ascertain whether literature and art is, using the traditional trope, a mirror of society, or if it is in fact one of the primal elements in social and cultural formation. This is an old question, one much discussed in literature from ancient times till today, but a question which is still deserving of an answer. Contemporary poetry in Japan is particularly sensitive to political, cultural and social debates: thus it is an ideal medium in which to explore the relationships between these fields.

Another hypothesis worth exploring is the relationship between language (in its spoken and dialect forms) and art and literature in general. Contemporary Japanese poetry, like contemporary poetry elsewhere, links debates over language and ethnicity in its very essence: that is to say, in the bones and blood, the very sinews, of poetic language. This is especially the case when looking at the poetry of minorities—the most obvious being the poetry written by Okinawans and also poetry written by Koreans living in Japan (Zainichi). The proposition that poetry is a more immediate and accessible form of expression than prose, especially for minorities, is an eminently testable hypothesis if we restrict ourselves to contemporary poetry. The interaction between local politics and poetry also raises the question of global political issues and poetry. With the Internet and satellite television, digital media and the like, we are confronted with almost instantaneous communication from the global stage to the local. Whether this results in a degree of universality in respect of discussions relating to ethnicity and reality can be studied through the lens of contemporary verse. In this way we can test the prophecies of such futurologists as Marshall McLuhan and see if they are correct in their assumptions relating to universal, global culture and political domains and much else. Or whether the lens of the local diffract and refract such concerns into something very local and specific to Japan.

In this way, issues of the transcultural are also able to be tested by comparing poetry from different linguistic domains: we can contrast their perspectives, their ideals, and their relation to the specific grounds from which they spring, in order to fully evaluate the notion of transculturality and its possibilities. The Internet plays a major role in permitting such comparisons to be made, and thus the nature of the representation of Japanese poetry on the Internet will become a subject for examination and will permit further scrutiny of the internet as a medium of cultural exchange.

Concluding Remarks

A monograph exploring contemporary Japanese poetry on the basis of the outline above is a realistic and attainable goal. It is too early to develop anything but preliminary proposals, but some possibilities are:

Contemporary Japanese poetry and its Polarities, Contemporary Japanese Poetry and the World, Contemporary Japanese Poetry and the Boundaries of Culture, and Contemporary Japanese poetry in the 21st century.

My thematic focus will be on translation, exegesis and comparative analysis. It will require the full four years projected for the project.