

DENNIS KEENE

# The Modern Japanese Prose Poem

*An Anthology of Six Poets*



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**THE  
MODERN  
JAPANESE  
PROSE  
POEM**



# THE MODERN JAPANESE PROSE POEM

AN ANTHOLOGY  
OF SIX POETS

Miyoshi Tatsuji

Anzai Fuyue

Tamura Ryūichi

Yoshioka Minoru

Tanikawa Shuntarō

Inoue Yasushi

TRANSLATED AND  
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
DENNIS KEENE

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## Preface

The term "prose poem" is one which can be endlessly argued about. What is being referred to here is the literary genre which came into existence in French literature in the nineteenth century, and which the twentieth-century Japanese poets represented in this book certainly had in mind when writing their own prose poems, or *san-bunshi*. Poems in prose have been written in the English language, but there are hardly enough of any real quality to permit the making of an anthology, whereas the modernist movement in French literature (assuming that to begin with Baudelaire) has produced a number of such writings, and the same can be said of Japanese modernism. Almost any French poet with modernist leanings over the past one hundred years will have written something in this form (although there are exceptions, such as Apollinaire), as will also their Japanese counterparts, although over a shorter period. The fact that this cannot be said of poets writing in the English language seems to indicate, not simply a resistance of the language to that form, but rather how little the literatures in English have been truly affected by modernist poetics.

Given the number of Japanese poets who have written such poems it would have been possible to represent certainly thirty, perhaps as many as fifty, with one or two poems each. This idea was rejected since in translation it is quite impossible to achieve an individual voice for any poet in the two or three pages consequently available to each, and also because there are many poets whose work seemed unresponsive to English translation. I had originally planned to include the work of twelve poets, but dissatisfaction with the translations produced obliged me to reduce the number to six. Of these six the first two represent the "New Prose Poem Movement" of the late 1920's; the next two the postwar modernism of the 1950's; and

the final two show aspects of the poetic scene of the present day. Except in the case of the last poet, I have translated poems from one volume only in order to give a fairly complete representation of a writer at a particular stage in his poetic career. In the cases of Tamura and Yoshioka, for example, I have given all the prose poems in one book (in both cases volumes containing prose and free-verse poems). I have done this in the belief that the reader should not be a complete victim of the translator's own taste in these matters.

The exception to this is the case of the final poet given, where I have chosen work from all five of his published books of poetry, since his poetic style shows almost no change throughout his career. In this case the decisive factor was whether the poems would "go" or not, and I rejected some poems which seem to me superior to certain of those translated because I could not manage them so as to produce even that small satisfaction which translation provides. The fact that this poet has been given more space than the others indicates not any value judgement, but rather a feeling that he represents something old, something non-modernist which is not found so readily in modern Japanese writing, and which required space to make clear.

NOTE: Japanese names have been given in the Japanese order with surname first. Long vowels have been marked with a macron, e.g., Tamura Ryūichi, except in the cases of certain place names, such as Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka, Kyushu etc., which have been assimilated into the English language. In the case of less well-known place names, e.g. Ōtsuka, it has been used.

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## Introduction

It is arguable that the poem in prose in some form has a much longer history in Japanese than it has in French, for certainly the prose writings of Sei Shōnagon or of Matsuo Bashō could be thought of as poetic prose and, since they readily break up into short sections, as collections of prose poems as well. There is even a genre called the *Fu*,<sup>1</sup> based upon the Chinese form of the same name (a very free verse form by Chinese standards often found mingled with actual prose). *Fu* is appropriately translated as "prose poem" since in Japanese it is in prose, and tends to be a mixture of pictorial description and quasi-philosophical reflection fairly close to some of those prose poems written in France in the nineteenth century which do not truly belong in the modernist tradition. I have assumed that all these writings are not of the genre I am dealing with here, as also the poetic prose of Flaubert or Joyce is not; and I have done this because the poets in this anthology have, on the whole, made the same assumption.

Modern Japanese poetry has been written very much with the French example in mind. Influence from other Western languages has been only slight by comparison. The main reason for this is no doubt the fact that, as Valéry said, with Baudelaire French poetry became international poetry, as it seems to have remained up to, perhaps even beyond, the surrealist movement. Since poetry in English has also been subjected to this same influence there is little to be surprised at here, although in the Japanese case there has also been a fairly wholesale rejection of the native tradition. It is true that the same might be said of one of the streams of modern American poetry (Whitman-Williams-Olson-Creeley), but the change involved has been of a much less revolutionary kind, and it is at least arguable that this is perhaps not the mainstream of American poetry either.

In order to make sense of modern Japanese poetry (and in particular of the mainly modernist kind with which I am dealing here), one is obliged to look at its sources in the French poetry of the nineteenth century. Looking at these sources means giving examples, and I have provided a generous number in my own translations, not because I feel that superior translations are not available, but from a belief that if the reader sees examples of works he can probably read in the original, he can then gain a fairly good idea of what kind of translation I have made of works he cannot read in the same way. In consequence, as the reader observes what has happened to, say, Rimbaud, his sympathy for the Japanese poets should grow.

The simplest distinction between verse and prose is that prose fills up the page and verse does not, verse providing intervals of emptiness for the eye and silence for the ear. Verse also establishes a regularity of rhythm, depending on the principle of repetition, a characteristic which most distinguishes it from the forward narrative movement of prose. This invites an attention upon what the words are in themselves rather than upon only what they signify in context, providing the particular thickness or depth which characterizes poetic language. The danger with such verse is that the set rhythm may lose its proper incantatory function whereby the words are given life, and degenerate instead into the mechanical stresses of rhetoric. Thus the language becomes frozen, virtually dead in its power to signify, leading to a specialized poetic diction in which the word seems to be more an absence, rather than a plenitude, of meaning. The reaction against the alexandrine which characterized French poetry in the eighteenth century and later was directed against what was seen (perhaps mistakenly) as a situation of this kind, a reaction of an intensity which surely no writer of English has felt against his equivalent form of blank verse. Also, by the eighteenth century, the French language had established a rupture between verse and prose of a kind

unknown in English, where the powerful rhythms of the Bible and seventeenth-century prose always allowed a bridge between the two; and the turning away from verse to prose which characterizes so much French writing of this period has no counterpart in English literature. The English Romantic reaction against even the heroic couplet is something quite mild by comparison.

In eighteenth-century France this turning away from verse took the form, for example, of referring to novels as poems in prose (as Boileau did), and of considering the "great poets" of the period as being writers of prose rather than of verse. However, ironically, what most of the "poetic prose" of the time represented was little more than a taking over of some of the duller aspects of the verse tradition, its elevated phraseology, its elegant periphrases, its heavily stressed commonplaces.<sup>2</sup> What the movement did indicate clearly, however, was that a real dissociation between the idea of poetry and the forms of verse was taking place.

Probably what gave the strongest impetus to the movement toward prose was the great vogue for translations of foreign poetry at the time, which were almost invariably made in prose. In the early years of the second half of the century there were translations of the *Eddas*, of Ossian, and of Young, which seemed to give their readers more poetic satisfaction than did the efforts of French versifiers. The fact that Ossian was already in rhythmic prose, and Young in blank verse, would obviously have encouraged the choice of prose, and it does seem to be true that the freer form allowed a more faithful representation of certain technical aspects of the original, such as the rhythm.<sup>3</sup> What is also significant is that the translations tended to be brief and fragmentary rather than extended. It was the short works of Ossian which made the most impact, and each English night of Young became, in Le Tourneur's translation, inevitably it seems, a number of French ones. The gradual tendency of Romantic aesthetic (if considered as something extending

from the second half of the eighteenth into the twentieth century) to see the short poem as more essentially poetic than the long was perhaps at work here, and by the 1820's the pronounced taste of French romanticism for foreign literatures showed itself mainly in a considerable number of translations of ballads (Arabian, Spanish, Greek, English, Scots, German), all of which were presented in prose since classical French verse seemed incapable of handling such material.<sup>4</sup> Even nowadays the standard French translation of Shakespeare (like most of the English poets) remains in prose; as does the Japanese, after an attempt in the Meiji period to render him in the older, more poetic literary language. The fact that Shakespeare as a poet has to remain a closed book to readers of French and Japanese does not appear to be simply a question of translation per se (German and Hungarian, I am told, have managed well enough), but more a matter of what these two languages are and what their literary traditions have been.

The upheaval which occurred in Japanese literature with its exposure to Western literatures in the late nineteenth century can be seen as a similar movement away from the classically "poetic" toward the wider possibilities of prose, away from the use of standard poetic diction, rhythmical devices, elegance, toward the world of plain statement. Obviously so large a generalization creates any number of possible objections, but the rejection of the classical literary language for that of the colloquial surely has to be interpreted in such overall terms. In the world of prose writing this movement is fairly easy to discern, although it still does not proceed with quite the relentless logic that a literary historian might wish for, but in poetry what took place is harder to make out since it took so much longer. By the first decade of the twentieth century the colloquial language was established as the language of the novel, but in poetry the first successful poems in that language did not appear until almost the end of the next decade. Even after that the

literary language still remained in use in some form until the postwar period. (Here I am not talking about the traditional forms of *waka* and *haiku*, but of *shi* or poems.) One of the truisms about the use of the colloquial language in the novel, for example, is that it permitted a directness of approach more suited to personal, confessional statement than did the ornateness of the previous literary style, thus encouraging the "naturalist" tendency to talk about oneself in the modern Japanese novel. The truism is valid enough, but on looking at some of the prewar poetry one finds what appears to be the reverse of this, for really personal statement seems to require either the vigor of a Chinese style of writing (as in the later works of Hagiwara Sakutarō [1889-1942]), or the more emotive rhythms of the purely literary style, as in the case of Miyoshi Tatsuji (1900-1964), who, after his first volume (some of which is translated here) seems to have written in the literary language whenever he wished to write directly from his own experience. This may demonstrate that the "I" of the poem is more of a literary construct than the "I" of the novel (not to say the "I" of real life, as one can see in the difference between the "I" which appears in Keats's poems and in his letters), or it may indicate the tenacity of the old tradition. However, the way in which this tradition has appeared to Japanese twentieth-century poets provides a problem in itself, since the concept of "poem" as it exists in that tradition is not an easy one to grasp.

Traditionally, Japanese has made clear distinctions between its different literary genres, and even today people who write *haiku*, *waka* or *shi* are called by different names, which must all be rendered in English as the same "poet." When the Japanese require a term which will refer to what we would call "Japanese poetry" they speak of *Nihon Shiika*, the character *shi* ("poem") combining with the character *ka* (or *uta*) which is best translated as "song." *Shi* has traditionally meant poems written in Chinese (by Chinese poets or by the Japanese



themselves) and *uta* or *waka* ("Japanese song") is applied to the native product. In addition to this difference of the language in which both types were written, there was also a sense (taken over from the Chinese use of these two characters) that the *shi* was written to be read rather than to be sung, whereas the *ka* or *uta* was to be sung and heard, being musical rather than visual.<sup>5</sup> The fact that these songs were written down and that Chinese poems were read aloud does not affect this essential distinction. Thus, when the Japanese first encountered the poetry of the West they considered it as *shi*, and their first attempts at translation (hymns, extracts from Virgil) were into Chinese. One might therefore conclude that the Japanese literary tradition considered the "poem" as something related to foreign literatures.

One may object to the misleading nature of this statement, and maintain that the idea of "poetry" applies as much to the Japanese song as to the Chinese poem. Even so, it would still remain a fact that Japanese poetry has not shown that concern with form, in the sense of a controlled regularity, which dominates Western and Chinese poetry. Although it has its five-seven syllabic rhythm, making breaks in this brief pattern has always been a possibility, since the pattern is not of a kind to encourage rigorous ideas about it. Thus the idea of verse can hardly be applied to Japanese poetry (whereas it fits Chinese poetry well), and it is less misleading to speak in terms of a rhythm. The very simplicity of this basic rhythm seems to have worked against the idea of the long poem. The fact that long poems of a kind exist in the *Manyōshū* would then be explained by saying that the song still had a public function in the society which produced such poems, and that as society changed the song became more of a private affair, restricting itself to the brevity natural to it. Long works after that period tend to be either sequences of short poems, or to surround the poems by prose, although this "prose" tended to be as musical as the "songs" themselves.

The foregoing summary is not meant to be a correct account of the Japanese poetic tradition in its entirety, nor does it represent my own views on the matter. There has been enough research done in this century to show that a stereotyped image of all Japanese poetry (brief and song-like) is inadequate as a description of a more complex reality. What I am attempting to outline are some of the causes of the dissatisfaction many Japanese writers in this century have felt with their own poetic tradition. In the same way, my remarks about the state of French verse as it was seen by writers of the eighteenth century, who turned to prose, are an attempt to account for that movement. As a view of the poetry of the previous century alone (Racine, La Fontaine) they would be misleading, since they do not describe the verse tradition in French, but only a dissatisfaction with it at a particular time. One may see this dissatisfaction as misplaced but still as important, even decisive. This same judgment should be extended to the account of the Japanese situation, since, without it, the whole modernist attempt in Japanese poetry, of which the prose poem in the sense I have defined it here is the supreme example, becomes virtually impossible to understand.

One can grasp the nature of this discontent by considering this image (obviously simplified and only partly true) of the state of Japanese poetry at the time it came into contact with the West. Imagine an English poetry at the time of Browning, which consisted of Medieval lyrics still written in Middle English (but with a vocabulary limited to words of Anglo-Saxon origin), and showing little variation in poetic theme from what had been written centuries before. There would also have been briefer versions of these lyrics, sometimes on more realistic themes than the lyric normally permitted, and they might at times be combined in sequences. The most serious poetry would have been in Latin, which showed little change from the Medieval Latin lyric as it had been written on the continent. One then has to imagine this poetic tradi-

tion confronted by the existence of the highly developed literatures of Europe. Clearly, people who saw their native tradition in similar terms (and a number of Japanese people certainly did so) would have felt it inadequate for their idea of what poetry should be. They would have seen this inadequacy as something principally brought about by the traditional form of the literary language, the desire for change being most consciously directed at that language itself.

Even given this discontent, however, the first attempts to put Western poetry into Japanese were in the old literary language, since the colloquial seemed to be incapable of poetic expression. The *Shintaishishō* (*Selection of New-style Poems*, 1882, which consisted mainly of translations, but which included a few original poems) showed an eagerness to expand the vocabulary and themes of poetry. However, the language remained literary with the traditional rhythms, even though it seemed resistant to the kind of subject matter these editors, and later poets, wished to treat. Even as late as 1905 the very influential volume of translations by Ueda Bin (1874-1916), *Kaichō-on* (*The Sound of the Tide*) of mainly French symbolist and parnassian poets, was still in the literary language, and made use of new combinations of what remained the traditional rhythmic patterns. The success of the translations seemed to confirm the viability of a lyrical poetry in the literary language which would lay its main emphasis upon musical values, and this in fact is what the "symbolist movement" in Japanese poetry became. However, the two important poets of this movement, Kitahara Hakushū (1885-1942) and Kambara Ariake (1876-1952), did not write new-style poems for long. Kambara retired from the world of poetry in 1908, and Kitahara, after his volume *Omoide* (*Remembrance*) in 1911, wrote mostly children's verses and *tanka* ("short songs"). One sees the same process of giving up the poem (in this case for the naturalist novel) in a slightly earlier writer, Shimazaki Tōson (1872-1943). These poets created

a lyrical tradition which extended in some form up to the Pacific War, which produced perhaps the only twentieth-century poetry to have been read with real affection by the common Japanese reader. But no amount of experimentation with fives and sevens could stand up to the flood of European modernism which entered the country in the 1920's, and the literary language itself gradually became something quite remote from everyday life.

The kind of apathy a Japanese poet could feel toward this poetic tradition can be seen in the case of Nishiwaki Junzaburō (b. 1894). In an introduction to a selection of his works he has given an account of his spiritual development.<sup>6</sup> He writes that his interests at school had been more in the direction of painting than literature, but that there had been young men with a taste for literature, which was much like their tastes for talk about sex, for drink, and for visiting the ladies of the town. He found the way of thinking that all this implied offensive in its vulgar sentimentality, which showed also in the form their interest in poetry took, for they produced *waka* and indulged in *haiku*. Although he amused himself with these people, his true emotional interests were elsewhere. The only poetry he encountered at school which genuinely moved him was Chinese poetry, which he felt to be superb and which made him realize that the poem could be a literary form of great beauty. His own decision to write poetry in English was, as he saw it, the same kind of practice as that of priests and scholars in the Tokugawa period who wrote poems in Chinese. He did not attempt to write poetry in Japanese because that implied using the old-style language, with its outmoded elegance; writing in English meant that he could bypass that problem. Hagiwara Sakutarō's poetry showed him that poetry could be written in Japanese, not only because it used the colloquial language, but also because its "naturalism" was opposed to that romantic sentimentality which, in his view, had infected Japanese poetry, that sentimentality which had embarrassed him so much at school. Nishi-