
The following book introduction by Kenneth Rexroth appears in the book *One Hundred Poems from the Japanese*. The following text has been transcribed from the 1964 paperback edition, published by New Directions. Pages IX-XX.

Introduction; *One Hundred Poems from the Japanese*

Kenneth Rexroth

It is common to stress the many ways in which Japanese poetry differs from English or Western European, or, for that matter, all other verse. Great as these differences are, and they are profound, the Japanese still wrote poetry. Japanese poetry does what poetry does everywhere: it intensifies and exalts experience. It is true that it concentrates practically exclusively on this function. The poetry of other peoples usually serves other functions too, some of them not particularly germane to the poetic experience. It is possible to claim that Japanese poetry is purer, more essentially poetic. Certainly it is less distracted by non-poetic considerations.

Many, especially Japanese, editors and translators have been embarrassed by this intensity and concentration and labored to explain each poem until it has been explained away. Often the explanation has obtruded into the poem itself, which has been expanded with concealed commentary and interpretation. Often the translator has simply expanded the poem, relaxed its concentration, usually into platitude. This is all too easy to do, because Japanese poetry depends first of all on the subtlety of its effects. It is a poetry of sensibility. If these effects are extended and diluted, the sensibility easily degenerates into sentimentality.

There are of course manifest differences from Western poetry. One is apparent at a glance. Japanese poems are much shorter, shorter than all but a few poems which consist of a quatrain, couplet, or elegiac distich only. Until modern times the largest body of Western poetry like them was in the *Greek Anthology*. And it is in the *Anthology*, in the poems of a few writers, especially Anyte of Tegea, that the special kind of sensibility cultivated by the Japanese is to be found as the exclusive preoccupation of the poet.

A poetry of sensibility no longer seems as strange as it did to the first translators. Mallarmé, the early Rilke, Emily Dickinson, various others, deal with experience in similar terms. Also, there is a large body of verse directly influenced by Japanese, and there are the fine translations of Arthur Waley.

In my own translations I have tried to interfere as little as possible with the simplicity of the Japanese text. I have always striven for maximum compression. Some of my versions manage with considerably fewer syllables than the originals. On the other hand, I have not sacrificed certain Japanese ornaments which some have considered nonsense or decorative excrescences.

None of the poems is of a character to require an extensive apparatus of notes. They do not deal with experiences special to the Japanese. If they echo other poems, or make use of references unknown to Western readers, this is not essential to an appreciation of the poems. As a matter of fact, in the best periods literary and historical allusion is much less common in Japanese than in Chinese poetry.

I should like the poems in this collection to stand as poetry in English, and even, in a sense, as poetry by a contemporary American poet, because I have chosen only those poems with which I felt considerable identifications. On the whole, they are as literal as any versions I know except Waley's. Nonetheless, the putting of them into English has been a creative process, differing only in power from that with which I would express my own thoughts.

The earliest surviving Japanese poetry is in the two mythical and semi-mythical chronicles, the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki* (*Nihonji*). It is not unlike other primitive poetry. Many of the poems were probably folksongs. Many of them are erotic. They can best be understood by comparison with the songs of the Chinese *Shi Ching*, especially as that collection is interpreted by Marcel Granet in *Festivals and Songs of Ancient China*. They are commonly spoken of as almost devoid of literary value, a judgment with which I do not concur.

With the introduction of writing, in Chinese characters, probably early in the fifth century, Japanese poetry seems already to have assumed the form it was going to keep for over a thousand years. The oldest and most important anthology, the *Manyōshū*, which was compiled in the middle of the eighth century, has nothing primitive about it. If there are any archaic echoes, they are as likely to be from the *Shi Ching* as from the songs of pre-civilized Japan. Later Japanese poetry will show considerable Chinese influence, especially of Po Chu-I, who became a sort of deity of poetry in Japan. The poetry of the *Manyōshū* is courtly, highly sophisticated, formally restricted, and, compared with Western verse, somewhat restricted in subject matter. Most of the accepted themes — autumn leaves, falling snow, plum and cherry blossoms, the moon in its phases and seasons, the rustle of leaves, the songs of cicadas, crickets, frogs, cuckoos, and the *uguisu* (called by some translators a nightingale), assignations with clandestine lovers, famous beauty spots, court ceremonies, the quiet of the monk's hermitage, the death of rulers, patrons and mistresses, and the poem written by the poet on the eve of his own death —

the whole repertory of classical Japanese poetry appears at once. The principal changes will take place, not in subject matter, but in quality of sentiment. Later centuries will show the influence of Shingon Buddhist sacramentalism, Zen mysticism, Amidist piety, and finally, the middle class sentiment of the Yedo period.

Curiously enough, there is less apparent influence of the Chinese than might be expected. There is a vast quantity of Chinese poetry written by Japanese and it seems to have absorbed most such tendencies. It happens that with very few exceptions — Murasaki and Sei Shonagon are possibly two — the ability to write in Chinese was confined to men. Poetry in Japanese was written in the Japanese syllabaries. These, however, were not introduced until the ninth century. Prior to that time it is possible that the poems of the *Manyōshū* were more current orally, and the written text, which is in a barbarous, and today not completely intelligible, adaptation of Chinese characters to partly phonetic use, called *Manyogana*, was kept only as a mnemonic, or at best as a book of reference. Incidentally, few translators mention that poems such as these in this book are still sung. All the more famous ones can be obtained on records. Also, each poem has its characteristic patters of dance gestures. These are not, however, to be thought of as stereotyped as the mudras of India or the ritual gestures of the Shinto priests.

A few poems in the *Manyōshū* are *naga uta*, "long poems." None of these are long by our standards. They are mostly elegies or reveries or moderate length. A few are ballads with archetypal plots found all over the world. Most of the poems are *tanka* of thirty-one syllables arranged 5-7-5-7-7. A few are *sedōka*, "head poems," arranged 5-7-7-5-7-7. Both the *naga uta* and the *sedōka* were soon abandoned. Exclusive of poems in Chinese and folksongs, the latter almost always in lines of seven and five syllables, as in the common *dodoitsu*, 7-7-7-5, the *tanka* became the only form to be used until the development of the *haiku* (*hokku*) of only seventeen syllables. A possible exception are the *rengō*, linked poems, *tanka* in series, popular at poem parties, which sometimes assume the organic unity of a continuous poem.

I am aware that most Japanese do not share my opinion of *haiku*. But I feel that the great period of classical art and literature ended with the Ashikagas. Thereafter something different — more secular and middle class — took its place. A number of the more famous *haiku* are given in an appendix.

Japanese is without stress accent, and as sung or recited as poetry, although not when spoken, has very little quantitative difference of syllables. All syllables are open vowels (in classical Japanese poetry all final nasals are vocalized), there are no true diphthongs, and in the classical language, all consonants are very simple. In terms of sound alone, closest parallels may be Italian, Polynesian, or some Bantu languages. Therefore, the ordinary devices of poetry in English are either impossible (stress accent) or intolerable (regularly repeated rhyme or alliteration). Japanese poets, and probably before them the singers of Japanese folksong, developed a complex and subtle pattern depending mostly on the pitch of the vowels, certain echoes and repetitions which are not the same as rhyme, and a number of peculiar devices of meaning. I know that hitherto Japanese scholars have not paid much attention to vowel pitch, but the singers have. The

importance of this factor of vowel pitch is only now beginning to be realized in the poetry of other languages as well except for Chinese, where it has been used consciously for a long time. Some interesting studies have been done in recent years in French, for instance, on the importance of pitch in both speech and prosody, and on the distinct difference in the use of pitch in the speech of men and women, the latter a phenomenon found also in Japanese.

It should be borne in mind that the Japanese language is almost as rich in homonyms and ordinary double meanings as is Chinese. *Engō*, associated words, or words rising from the same concept, occupy a position somewhere between our similes and metaphors and the products of free association in modern verse. To an outlander, most of the Japanese poetic devices could be classed as *engō*; at least, they shade imperceptibly into pillow words.

The pillow word, *makura kotoba*, is a fixed epithet, similar to the Homeric "rosy-fingered dawn," "Ulysses of many devices," "cow-eyed Hera." Fixed epithets are common in primitive poetry all over the world. Many *makura kotoba* seem to have become attached to certain places, things and conditions at a very early period. Later, extensive dictionaries of them were prepared, and in unskilled hands they easily degenerate into monotony. Even Hitomara uses "vine-covered" for his province of Iwami, seemingly only because "vine-covered" is the pillow word for *iwa*, "rock." By the time of the *Manyōshū* the meaning of some of them had become doubtful. An excellent example is *ashibiki*, the pillow word for *yama*, "mountain," which occurs in a poem of Hitomara's discussed in the notes. No one is really sure that *ashibiki* meant "tiring to the feet." That interpretation simply seemed to later generations a plausible pillow word for "mountain."

In the same poem, the entire opening phrase, "the spreading tail feathers of the pheasant of the mountain tiring to the feet," is a *jōshi*, or preface, and serves to create a setting for the last two lines, "through the long, long night I sleep alone." Very often these prefaces have only an emotional or metaphoric relevance, and introduce into the poem of only thirty-one syllables an element of dissociation much like that found in modern French verse. Hitomara's poem, one of the most famous in Japanese literature, also illustrates the assonance and repetition of vowels, and the intensive repetition, *naga nagashi yo*, "the long, long night," which are all characteristic features of Japanese prosody.

The first poem in Waley's *The Uta* is even more remarkable prosodically. It goes:

*Futari yukedo
Yuki sugi gataki
Aki yama wo
Ikade ka kimi ga
Hitori koge namu.*

Note the pattern of the vowels: the first line, u-a-i-u-e-o, all the Japanese vowels; the second, u-i, u-i, a-a-i; the third, a-i, a-a, o; the fourth, i-a-e, a, i-i, a; the fifth, i-o-i, o-e, a-u, all the vowels again. It is difficult to conceive of greater sophistication in simplicity.

This poem, from the *Manyōshū*, was written by the Princess Ōku in the seventh century. Of course it can be said that this vowel pitch pattern is purely fortuitous, and due to the small number of vowels in Japanese. But I do not know what the word fortuitous means as applied to poetry; presumably the first western hexameter was also fortuitous. It is very easy to demonstrate the melody of such a pattern by assigning definite pitch to each vowel, rising from o to i, and then singing the poem.

The *kake kotoba* or pivot word is a word or part of a word employed in two senses, or, very rarely, in three, one relating to what precedes, the other to what follows. It is a device not unknown to late Latin and it turns up now and then in English humor and frequently in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. The word *matsu*, for example, is often used in the sense of "pine" and "long for" exactly as in the English "pine" and "pine." *Naku* is used in the double sense of "cry" and "without." Thus, "For you I pine of Mount Inaba (if I go away) more steadfast than the ivy covered rock." Or, "Under the waning Autumn moon, the cuckoo cries-outside our honeymoon cottage in the mountains." The poem of Minamoto no Toru in his collection, and the poems of Naniwa are full of possible pivot words and double meanings. It would be impossible to reproduce most pivot words, as pivot words, without barbarism, although, as I recall, Victor Dickins attempted it.

The pivot word shades into the pun, and some Japanese poems have so many puns that they may have two or more quite dissimilar meanings. A good example is the poem of the Stewardess of the Empress Kōka, discussed in the notes.

It would require more than a hundred or so poems to make the history of Japanese classical poetry comprehensible. Briefly, it falls into three periods. The poetry of the *Manyōshū*, compiled in 759 of the Western Era, is characteristically clear, strong and fresh, as might be expected from the first phase of the art. The *Kokinshū*, gathered in 905, in the Heian Period, is a more elegant and subtle collection. Until the reformation of taste in the eighteenth century, it was usually ranked about the *Manyōshū*. *Kokinshū* poetry is more highly stylized and shows the first influences of Buddhist ideas, which are almost totally lacking in the *Manyōshū*. Yet in the *Kokinshū* there is already discernable a certain weakening. The freshness and vigor of the eighth century was going. A definite lassitude and pessimism develops in the poetry of the next period, best represented in the *Shin Kokinshū*. Other characteristics of this, the early Kamakura period, are symbolism, literary reference, and the beginnings of Zenist mysticism. After the middle of the Kamakura epoch, I feel that Japanese *tanka* slowly deteriorated, to be replaced in popularity by *haiku* in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The poems in this collection are mostly from the *Manyōshū*, the *Kokinshū*, and the curious anthology, the *Hyakunin Isshū*, "Single Poems of a Hundred Poets." The latter is a very uneven collection. It contains some of the most mannered poetry of classical Japan, but it also contains some of the best. I used it because it was readily available. There have been many translations of the *Hyakunin Isshū*, there are innumerable Japanese editions of it, and it is also the basis of a very popular card game. A few poems come from elsewhere, and several are reworkings of poems available to me only in Waley's collection.

The *romanji* texts in this volume come from many sources, including, in some cases, my own transliterations. Rather than make any rash conjectures, I have tended to leave them intact as I found them, except where they seemed patently wrong or out of date. After considerable thought, I have eliminated the hyphenation which was once so commonly used in transliterating Japanese. It is never consistent. Readers of Japanese do not need it. For those who want the Japanese text only to try to capture some of the music of the verse, the hyphens are a distraction. I have also vocalized final nasals, that is, written "mu" where modern language has "n", wherever, which is almost always, this is essential to the verse pattern.

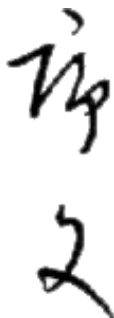
Classical Japanese poetry is read in a slow drone, usually a low falsetto; that is, the voice is kept lower and more resonant than its normal pitch, with equal time and stress on each syllable. This is quite unlike spoken Japanese. Each vowel, including the "u" and final "tsu", is pronounced, more or less as in Italian. Doubled vowels, "ō" and "ū", are pronounced "o-o" and "u-u."

A few of these translations date back many years, one to my adolescence (it happens to be perfectly literal) so there is a certainly amount of inconsistency in degree of literalness. Over the years the relationship to the Japanese poem was always a personal and creative one, and in some cases the mood of the moment led me to develop slightly certain implicits or suppress certain obvious explicits. Hardly ever are there many more syllables in the English poem than in the Japanese original, and in ninety out of a hundred examples the translation is as accurate and brief as I could manage. I have never tried to explain away the poem, to translate the elusive into the obvious, as has bee, unfortunately, so often the case with translators from the Japanese in the past — always of course with the great exception of Arthur Waley.

I wish to acknowledge the aid of a Guggenheim Fellowship, which gave me leisure in 1948-49 to work on this book as well as others of my own. I am also greatly in debt to Katue Kitasono, himself a poet and artist and editor of the magazine *Vou*, who read the book in manuscript and made several valuable suggestions, and who also obtained for me the beautiful calligraphy by Ukai Uchiyama.

Like the *Three Hundred Poems of T'ang* and other Far Eastern anthologies, this "Hundred Poems" contains a few more for good measure and good luck.

KENNETH REXROTH

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized, cursive script that appears to be 'KR' followed by a flourish, and a large, bold number '2' written below it.

□ [distich](#). [dɪs'tɪk.] (*n.*) 1. A unit of verse consisting of two lines, especially as used in Greek and Latin elegiac poetry. 2. A rhyming couplet.

□ [syllabary](#). [sɪl'ə-bɛr-ē.] (*n.*) 1. A list of syllables. 2. A set of written characters for a language, each character representing a syllable.

□ [diphthong](#). [dɪf'thɒŋ, -thɒŋ, dʒɪp'-.] (*n.*) A complex speech sound or glide that begins with one vowel and gradually changes to another vowel within the same syllable, as (oi) in *boil* or (ī) in *fine*.

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