

JAPANESE LITERATURE – 20th Century

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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 Taishō 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.

Part I : POETRY

The Place of Poetry in Twentieth-Century Japan

By the turn of the 20th century, the mainstream of Japanese literature underwent a shift from poetry, which had been the dominant literary genre for many centuries, to prose fiction. The Westernization agenda of the Meiji regime encouraged the adaptation of exemplary Western literary and artistic products. Poetry was no exception, insofar as its centuries-old traditional verse was regarded by the literary vanguard as outmoded and antiquated. And so the work of the British Romantics and French Symbolists, which greatly appealed to a new generation of so-called 'literary youth,' began to circulate. The role of translation here cannot be overemphasized, and the careers of many Meiji writers and poets were inspired by published translations of admired Western works.

Notwithstanding the ascendancy of fiction in Japan at the outset of the 20th century, its poetry— even the earliest verses dating back to the 7th century—was by no means eclipsed. Indeed, the range of poetic production would continue to expand, underscoring the strong affinity that Japanese have long had for poetry and lyrical expression. In line with the Meiji modernization agenda, verse forms that broke with the traditional poetic styles and conventions began to appear. Derived from Western models— Wordsworth was especially admired— this new-style '*shintaiishi*' poetry appealed to those won over by the promise of a new, Western-inspired poetic modernity.

Yet the appeal of the traditional forms— the 17-syllable *haiku* and the 31-syllable *tanka*— remained strong. Pioneering poets such as Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902), Yosano Akiko (1878-1942), and Ishikawa Takuboku (1886-1912) set about repurposing these forms as modern genres capable of expressing contemporary concerns and themes while maintaining the time-tested vehicle of five- and seven-syllable lyrical lines. (See the essay on 19th-century poetry for coverage of the above poets.)

With the Taishō period, which ushered in a host of innovations in the arts and culture, a new modernist poetry, which sought a definitive break with traditionalism and encouraged bold experimentation, emerged on the scene. Of note are Kitahara Hakushū (1885-1942), Hagiwara Sakutarō (1886-1942), and Miyazawa Kenji (1896-1933). It was Hagiwara whose 1917 collection of new-style (*shintaiishi*) verse, *Howling at the Moon*, was widely regarded as a watershed moment in the history of modern Japanese poetry. Miyazawa, for his part, is an especially esteemed figure— Buddhist devotee, ardent social activist, author of admired youth-oriented fables and folktales, and beloved possessor of *kodomo no kokoro*— a childlike spirit and pure soul.

The Postwar Scene

Pre-war poetry thrived in the open and innovative cultural milieu of the Taishō years. But the rise of militarism in the 1930s put a damper on creative expression, in poetry as elsewhere. Japan's radical transformation in the wake of the Pacific War— the loss of empire and national sovereignty, and a profound sense of dislocation and desolation— served to inspire, paradoxically, a new creative impulse. For instance, a circle of poets centering on Tamura Ryūichi (1923-98) assumed the name *Arechi* (wasteland), acknowledging T. S. Eliot's poetic masterpiece and underscoring the theme of desolation and vacuity that marked the postwar scene in the Fifties. Among the most popular and prolific poets of the postwar era is Tanikawa Shuntarō. With well over sixty collections of verse to his credit— most notably, *Two Billion Light years of Solitude* (1952)—Tanikawa is also known as translator of Charles Schulz's *Peanuts*.

Women Poets in the Vanguard

In line with Japan's resurgence as of the Sixties, poets went on to explore new avenues of expression. And as a reflection of movements for social change and calls for gender equality, women poets— as did their counterparts in the realm of fiction— assumed prominence. Among the most noteworthy is Ishigaki Rin (1920-2004), a Tokyo bank teller for over forty years who— incongruously, perhaps— emerged as a poet of unusually creative gifts. Younger poets such as Isaka Yôko (1949-) and Tawara Machi (1962-) achieved wide acclaim. Tawara, a high-school teacher turned poet, published a collection of contemporary *tanka*— *Salad Anniversary* (1987)— that sold millions of copies.

Poetry and the People

The members of Japan's poetic elite are widely read and admired, but their work is in a sense insignificant compared to the production of verse by ordinary citizens in cities and towns across the nation. Poetry on the local scene is alive and well—countless groups, clubs, organized readings, and the like. And there is an astonishing array of internet-based blogs and networks— everything from traditional haiku and *tanka*, to linked verse, to prose poetry and edgy, 'post-modern' verse, to rap and poetry slams.

In short, Japan's reputation as a land of poetry most certainly has a basis in fact. Then again, such a claim can be made about any nation, any people, insofar as poetic expression is a universally human capacity— and need.

What follows is a sampler of 20th-century verse by representative poets.

Prewar poets

Kitahara Hakushû (1885-1942)

The Kiss (1911)

A woman of rich aroma approaches
Her body rubs hot against me
At that instant the lilies beside me
Flushed red, glittering
Dragonflies ceased their movement
The wind stopped
I recoiled in fear
Her palms, wet with perspiration,
Suddenly and forcefully lifted me up
And kissed me
Painful, cruel, longed-for, as a
Grasshopper leaps
At the hot evening sun (Based on Rimer & Gessel, *Modern Japanese Literature*, Vol 1, p 298)

Hagiwara Sakutarô (1886-1942)

Sickly Face at the Bottom of the Ground (1917)

At the bottom of the ground a face emerges—
a lonely invalid's face emerging
in the dark at the bottom of the ground
Soft vernal grass stalks beginning to flare,
a rat's nest beginning to flare,
and entangled with the nest
countless hairs begin to tremble
From the lonely sickly ground,
roots of thin blue bamboo begin to grow,
begin to grow,

looking pathetic, blurred,
truly, truly pathetic (Based on Rimer&Gessel, Vol 1, pp 586-87)

Miyazawa Kenji(1896-1933)

Undaunted by the Rain(1933)

Undaunted by the rain, by the wind
By snow or summer heat
Stout of body and without greed
Never angry, always smiling
Content with my portion of rice and bean paste
And with no concern for myself
Content to look, listen, and try to understand
To live in the shadow of pines in a thatched hut
If to the east a child is sick, I will go and nurse him
If to the west a mother is exhausted, I will care for her
If to the south someone is dying, I will go and say:
Fear not
If to the north people are quarreling, I will go and say:
Stop this nonsense
Content to be known as a person of no account
Incapable of inflicting pain on others—
This is all that I desire (Based on Rimer&Gessel, pp 592-93)

Postwar and contemporary poets

Ishigaki Rin(1920-2004)

Life (1968)

To live we must eat— rice, veggies
meat, air, light, water, parents,
sisters and brothers, teachers,
money, and hearts, too
I pat my full stomach
wipe my lips
survey my kitchen littered
with carrot tops, chicken bones,
Daddy's intestines
Pushing fifty, my eyes for the first time
overflow with a wild beast's tears (Based on Rimer&Gessel, Vol 2, pp 416-17)

Tamura Ryûichi(1923-98)

4000 Days and Nights(1954)

For a single poem to be born we must kill
We must kill many things
We must murder, assassinate, and poison those we love. . .

Remember: just because we craved the terror
of a stray dog that sees what our eyes cannot see,

hears what our ears cannot hear,
we poisoned the imagination of 4000 nights
and the cold memories of 4000 days

To give birth to a single poem
we must kill those we care for—
Only then can we revive the dead
This must be our chosen path (Based on Rimer&Gessel, Vol 2, pp 435-36)

TanikawaShuntarô(1931-)

Growth(1952)

Three years old: I had no past
Five years old: My past went as far as yesterday
Seven years old: My past went as far as topknots
Eleven years old: My past went as far as dinosaurs
Fourteen years old: My past was what the textbook said it was
Sixteen years old: Frightened, I stared at the infinity of my past
Eighteen years old: I did not know what time was

(Based on Rimer&Gessel, Vol 2, pp 437-38)

IsakaYôko(1949-)

Fingers(1979)

When I was little my father
Extended his index finger and I grasped it
With my five hot fingers and walked,
Letting the landscape of the days go past—
His finger possessing slightly more speed

Men tangle me up slowly, and
In the hollow of my palm, heat builds up
And exudes moisture
I bend my five fingers so they do not overlap
I size them up by the degree of heat and moisture
With the passing years, my fingertips
Have become bone dry (Based on Rimer&Gessel, Vol 2, p 733)

TawaraMachi(1962-)

Four tanka

At breakfast	I remember your hand
The coffee on my table	Your back
Smells so,so good—	Your breathing—
What's all this about a life	White socks left
With room only for love?	Where you took them off
Changing trains	Fireworks, fireworks—
As if folding up	Watching them together,
An umbrella—	One of us sees only the flash
Making my way back	The other,

To my hometown

Only the darkness

(Based on Rimer & Gessel, Vol 2, pp 747-49)

Conclusion

Poetry in 20th-century Japan amply reflects the nation's dramatic, traumatic, and remarkable modern history. A distinguishing feature is the survival and persistence of classical poetic forms and lyrical sentiment. Haiku, tanka, and linked-verse renga continue to thrive— among Japanese poets of every description and around the world. Indeed, haiku poetry must be regarded as one of Japan's great cultural exports.

One could argue that poetry and the 'poetic moment' have given way to the immediacy and image-centered world that increasingly dominates our lives. Yet the vibrancy and sheer output of poetic production in Japan is evidence to the contrary.

What is it, then, that we look for in the poetry of Japan (or elsewhere)— be it the explicitly modern verse or the unapologetically traditional? Some of us are drawn to the beauty of a scene from nature. Or the strange, unforeseen encounter. Or the calming, reflective moment. Or the stark, shocking image. Perhaps all of these. What is it, then, about the language of poetry that moves us?

As we attempt to make sense of the 21st century, how do we relate to the world of poetry? Do we relate to it at all? The electronic media and networking modalities have opened up a new universe of poetic expression. This is a good thing, although some might disagree. On the societal level, the phenomenal increase of Japan's aging population, together with the isolation of many who live anonymous and lonely lives, have inspired a return to 'poetic roots' and to the pleasure of composing verse in the company of kindred spirits— be they together in a physical space or as part of a virtual, on-line community.

Poetry can most certainly be therapeutic— a means to an end. But it is perhaps more crucially understood as an intrinsic good, a life-affirming necessity.

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Discussion Questions and Topics

What questions are raised by the notion of old, traditional forms— such as haiku and tanka— serving as vehicles of modern poetic expression? What, in short, are we to understand by the term 'modern poetry'?

Give thought to the manner in which poetry expresses personal voice, social and ethical concerns, and a sensitivity to human relations and spiritual longings, in comparison with works of prose fiction. Is this a complementary relationship? Should we necessarily prefer one over the other?

What themes and concerns can you identify in the modern Japanese poetry introduced here— and available in great abundance elsewhere? How significant is gender here, and the role that poetry can play to advance a feminist agenda?

Given the centrality of language and linguistic qualities to producing the 'poetic effect,' does the fact of reading poetry in translation constitute a handicap to one's appreciation? Given that even the best possible translation is still only that— a simulation, an approximation— must a poem be read in the original in order to truly 'get it'?

Images *



Hagiwara Sakutarô



Miyazawa Kenji

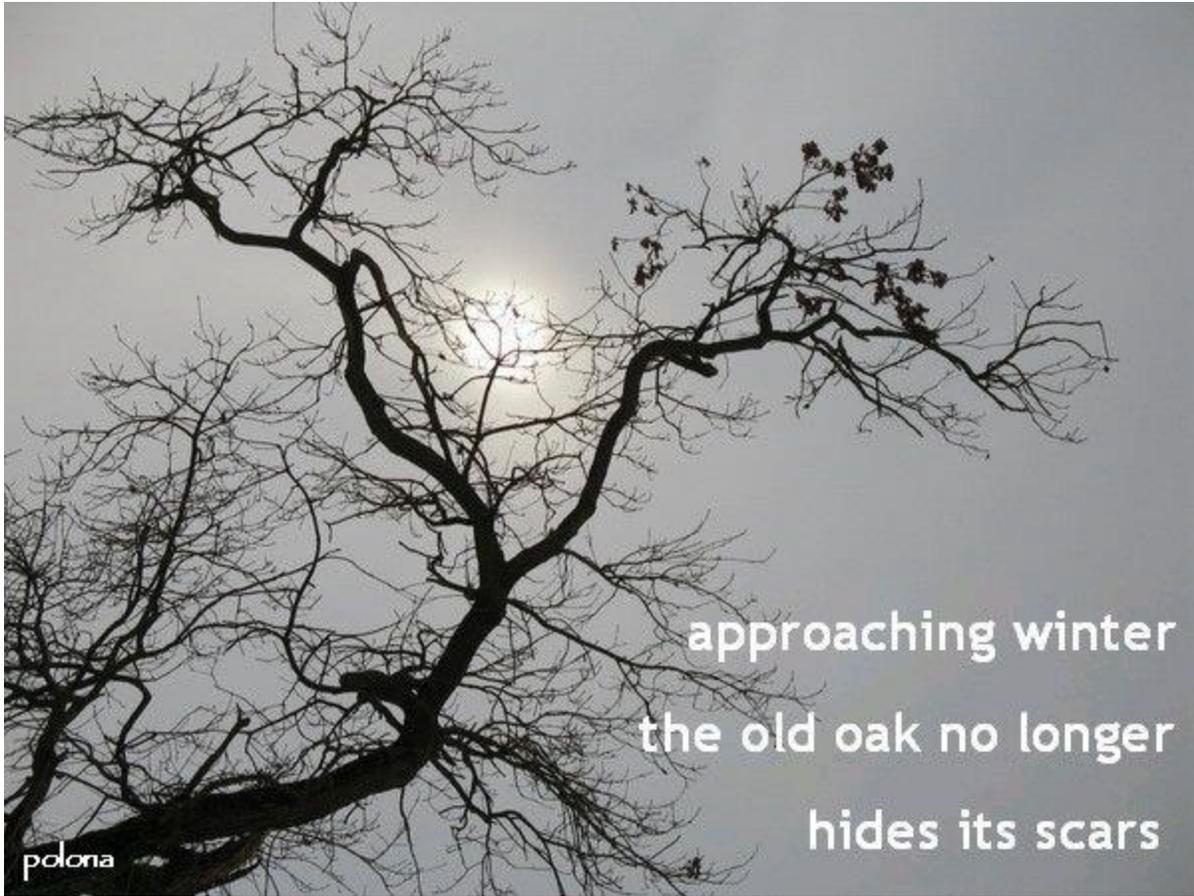


Tamura Ryûichi



YOSHIKI MIURA PHOTO

TawaraMachi(Source: Japan Times, Inc.)



No caption needed(Source: Pinterest)

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Part II : DRAMA

The Place of Drama in Twentieth-Century Japan

The late-Meiji scene

The Meiji period witnessed the transition from long-established theatrical practices and repertoires to a modern, Western-inspired drama. (See article on nineteenth-century drama.) In particular, the widespread popularity of kabuki drama and puppet theater (*bunraku*) during the Tokugawa period continued to exert its influence well into the modern era. Indeed, the iconic status of kabuki endures in the twenty-first century.

The late-Meiji period witnessed the rise of two important transitional genres of theatrical performance—*shimpa* and *shingeki* ('new style,' 'new theater'). These hybrid genres incorporated aspects of kabuki performance and recently-imported Western modes of acting and playwriting. What emerged was an array of competing troupes that gradually led to an increasingly sophisticated modern drama. One important development, which originated with writers seeking a broader readership, was the advent of a standardized vernacular form of Japanese. Achieving currency by the late-Meiji period, this linguistic breakthrough allowed for a more compelling and realistic mode of performance that employed colloquial speech and centered on contemporary settings and situations.

The Taishō scene and Osanai Kaoru

As with other domains of Japanese arts and culture, however, the emergence of distinctively Japanese modern drama that was freed from traditional performance modes and no longer merely imitative of Western theatrical models had to await the Taishō period (1912-26). A key figure here is Osanai Kaoru (1881-1928), founder in 1909 of an important *shingeki* troupe, the Free Theater group. Having come under the influence of Western drama during an extended stay in Europe (1912-13), Osanai set about staging translated versions of modern Western plays by Ibsen, Chekhov, and Hauptmann, among others. One drawback, though, was that Osanai's troupe of actors had been trained in kabuki performance and found it difficult to adopt Western acting techniques.

Osanai achieved greater success with his next theatrical company—the Tsukiji Little Theater (*Tsukiji shōgekijō*), founded in 1924. By this time, translated Western plays had achieved widespread currency, and audiences were more receptive to 'Western style' performance.

The privileging of translated Western drama, however, inevitably stifled the emergence of modern plays by Japanese playwrights. Following Osanai's untimely death in 1928, the burden of establishing a viable Japanese modern drama fell to individuals such as Hijikata Yoshi (1898-1959) and Kishida Kunio (1890-1954). It was Kishida who can be said to have established the aesthetic and performative standards for a modern Japanese theater that could stand on its own.

Taishō popular culture and political activism

A key context for the emergence of pre-war Japanese theater was the burgeoning popular culture of the Taishō-era, with its new performance media and thriving market for consumer goods and leisure activities. Moving pictures developed in tandem with modern theater, and their synergy of acting styles and stage sets recalls the mutual reinforcement of kabuki and *bunraku* during the Tokugawa period.

What is more, the free-wheeling, hedonistic subculture of Taishō 'modern boys' and 'modern girls' (*mobo*, *moga*), who were powerfully drawn to chic style, fashion, and spectacle, gave rise to new 'performance spaces'—bars, coffee houses, dance halls, and jazz clubs. In other words, modern theater had a vibrant counterpart in the performative world of pre-war Japanese popular culture, where histrionics, sensuality, and display were all the rage.

Furthermore, the burgeoning political activism of the Taishō and early Shōwa (1915-35) fostered a wide range of literary and dramatic production that promoted the left-wing agenda that appealed to young writers and intellectuals. A key figure is Kubo Sakae (1901-57), whose plays openly proclaimed their Marxist credo.

Pre-war 'new kabuki'

Notwithstanding these new, often radical theatrical experiments, the fact remains that kabuki, which was for a time eclipsed by the juggernaut of Meiji Westernization, proved remarkably resilient. As with other traditional genres (poetic, musical, artistic) that succeeded in adapting modern elements, the so-called 'new kabuki' (*shin kabuki*) thrived in the prewar years. For instance, the playwright Okamoto Kidō (1872-1932) composed nearly two hundred kabuki plays, which managed to incorporate contemporary themes and staging.

Another noteworthy 'traditionalist' figure is the *shimpa* playwright Mayama Seika (1878-1948). His best known play, *Genroku Chūshingura* (1935), is a modern kabuki version of the great Tokugawa-period vendetta tale of the *Forty-Seven Loyal Retainers*. Mayama's play inspired the celebrated film adaptation (1941-42) by the great director Mizoguchi Kenji. Aside from its artistic merit, Mizoguchi's film, playing upon themes of nationalism, martial honor, and self-sacrifice, served to propagandize Japan's wartime efforts.

As the tide of war turned and the 'dark valley' of austerity and draconian militarism took hold, popular entertainments and self-indulgence went into steep decline— as did the Japanese empire and its earnest performance of invincibility and spiritual purity.

Postwar Drama

The incalculable material and intangible costs of Japan's defeat were in effect mitigated by the newfound freedom and individualism fostered by the American Occupation and the egalitarian postwar Constitution of 1947. Liberated from the stranglehold of the military and its oppressive dogma, writers, artists, and playwrights set about forging new, unprecedented outlets for their creative energies in a collective quest for a new identity.

Postwar Japanese drama reflects the nation's full integration into the global theatrical scene and the emergence of diverse audiences whose tastes range across the spectrum. At one end of this spectrum is avant-garde theater, which established itself in Japan in the 1960s and 70s.

Avant-garde theater

Reflecting the influence of Western trends, yet distinctively Japanese in its performance style, Japanese avant-garde theater took hold in the 1960s. Known by the name '*angura*,' a derivative of the English 'underground,' this movement generated an eclectic theatrical repertoire that mixed traditional elements (for instance, Greek drama and Noh theater), the work of Samuel Beckett, wartime references, and the fractured identities of modern life. The key figures here are Betsuyaku Minoru (1937-) and Terayama Shūji (1935-83). Betsuyaku, a prolific and award-winning playwright, is credited with having produced the first *angura* play, 'The Elephant' (1962). Terayama is known for having favored a revolutionary theater that would challenge the received notion of 'drama' and, by extension, our very perception of self and society. Terayama experimented with plays conducted in total darkness, plays using nude actors, and an overall propensity for outrageous histrionics. What is more, he fostered impromptu, 'pop-up' productions in local neighborhoods, in an attempt to break out of the conventional notion of theatrical space and staging.

A related development is the wild, primordial dance form called *butō*, founded in the late 1950s by Hijikata Tatsumi (1928-86). A hybrid performance art, *butō* is known for the iconic look of its performers— shaven heads, bodies painted white— and for its unique choreography of body contortion and intertwining. Having gained a world-wide fan base, *butō* ranks as a legitimate Japanese cultural export.

Traditional theater

At the other end of the theatrical spectrum, traditional performance has retained its privileged place in modern and contemporary Japan. Thanks to generous government support, there is a tripartite National Theater (*Kokuritsu gekijō*), based in Tokyo, that stages performances of Japan's three 'classical' dramas— Noh, kabuki, and puppet theater (*bunraku*). Live performances are augmented by regular broadcasts of these plays on NHK, the national television network. Appealing to younger audiences is a challenge, though, which has inspired many *anime* and other pop-cultural variants of the traditional genres.

Understandably, opinion is divided as to the sustainability of 'pure' traditional performance in the face of the onslaught of new media and the increasingly competitive entertainment market. One sign of the endurance of tradition concerns the centuries-old schools of Noh theater, which can be traced to the fourteenth century. Several of the major schools— Kanze, Hōshō, and Kita— maintain theaters in both Tokyo and Kyoto and continue to stage performances, essentially unchanged since the early Tokugawa period, on a regular basis.

Authors as playwrights

Harkening back to Meiji authors who established themselves as leading playwrights— most notably, Tsubouchi Shōyō and Mori Ōgai— several post-war authors achieved considerable renown for their dramatic productions. Yukio Mishima (1925-70), among modern Japan's most celebrated novelists, produced a number of 'neo-traditional' plays in the 1950s. In addition to modern plays in the kabuki style, Mishima composed plays based on Noh drama, which incorporate classical themes and narrative with modern staging and dialogue. One such play, 'Lady Aoi,' is a contemporary re-enactment of a famous chapter from the classic *Tale of Genji*.

It bears noting that Mishima had a famously histrionic persona, and he featured himself in several dramatic roles— for instance, the 1966 film version of his short story, 'Patriotism' (1961), which concludes with the protagonist's agonizing ritual disembowelment (*seppuku*). This was in effect a rehearsal for the author's real-life *seppuku*, 'performed' in November, 1970 for a private audience of devoted followers— and a stunned nation.

The author Abe Kōbō (1924-93), known for existential novels such as *Woman in the Dunes*, enjoyed a long and distinguished career as playwright (1954-79) and head of his own theater company— the Abe Studio, which he founded in 1971. Abe adapted several of his own fictional works into plays— for instance, 'The Man Who Turned Into a Stick' (1957). Other plays— such as 'Friends' (1967)— deal with the question of 'home' and our debatable claim to a fixed abode and a secure identity given the deracinated, alienating quality of the modern condition.

Takarazuka

Among the most distinctive and recognizable forms of twentieth-century Japanese drama is the Takarazuka theater. Founded in 1913, and named for the town— near Osaka— where it originated, Takarazuka has, since its inception, been an all-female theater. As such, it can be regarded as a 'reverse-gendered' variant of kabuki. And its popularity has extended well beyond Japan.

Takarazuka productions are known for their lavish staging and distinctive acting styles and roles— again, echoing the kabuki model. The repertoire is impressively varied— musical reviews, adaptations of Western drama, Japanese classics (*Tale of Genji*, *Tales of Heike*), and folk tales, in addition to original drama and stage spectacles.

Entry into the Takarazuka troupe is highly competitive and involves a long and disciplined training regimen. Gender questions and concerns invariably arise with respect to Takarazuka— in particular, regarding the lesbian appeal of the all-female troupe. There is no question, though, as to the profound influence of Takarazuka on Japanese popular culture— *anime* and *manga*, in particular.

Conclusion

The diversity of Japanese drama in the twentieth century— and well into the twenty-first— is remarkable, ranging from the classical and traditional to the innovative and experimental, and its place in the larger constellation of world drama is secure. Moreover, Japanese performing arts have increasingly intersected and interacted with those of China, Korea, and Taiwan. One could easily make a case for an integrated East-Asian performative community.

Yet there are troubling signs. An aging— and increasingly isolated— population faces problems with access to live performance. A marginalized rural population is not well served, although efforts have been made to establish local acting troupes and amateur theatricals that take advantage of community centers, school auditoriums, and other facilities. Younger people may prefer social networking and gaming to more conventional performance venues. Indeed, the very notion of ‘drama’ and ‘performance’ has undergone profound shifts in recent years.

As noted above, the government has invested in performing arts at the national level, and the public media and major funding organizations— notably, NHK and the Japan Foundation— continue to broadcast dramatic productions, both traditional and contemporary, and to sponsor performances both in Japan and abroad.

One can only hope that the arts in Japan— performative and otherwise— which have played such a key role in the nation’s cultural history, will continue to thrive and to delight audiences world-wide.

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Discussion Questions and Topics

How best to compare pre-war and post-war drama in Japan? What themes and issues are shared? How to gauge the differences?

Considering the traditional/ avant-garde spectrum, what most appeals to you? How would you express your preferences vis a vis performing arts— Japanese or otherwise?

What significance do you attribute to the resilience of traditional Japanese drama— nō, kabuki, bunraku— in the modern day? Do you feel that without the 'artificial life support' of governmental and foundation funding, these 'outmoded' genres would disappear? Would that trouble you?

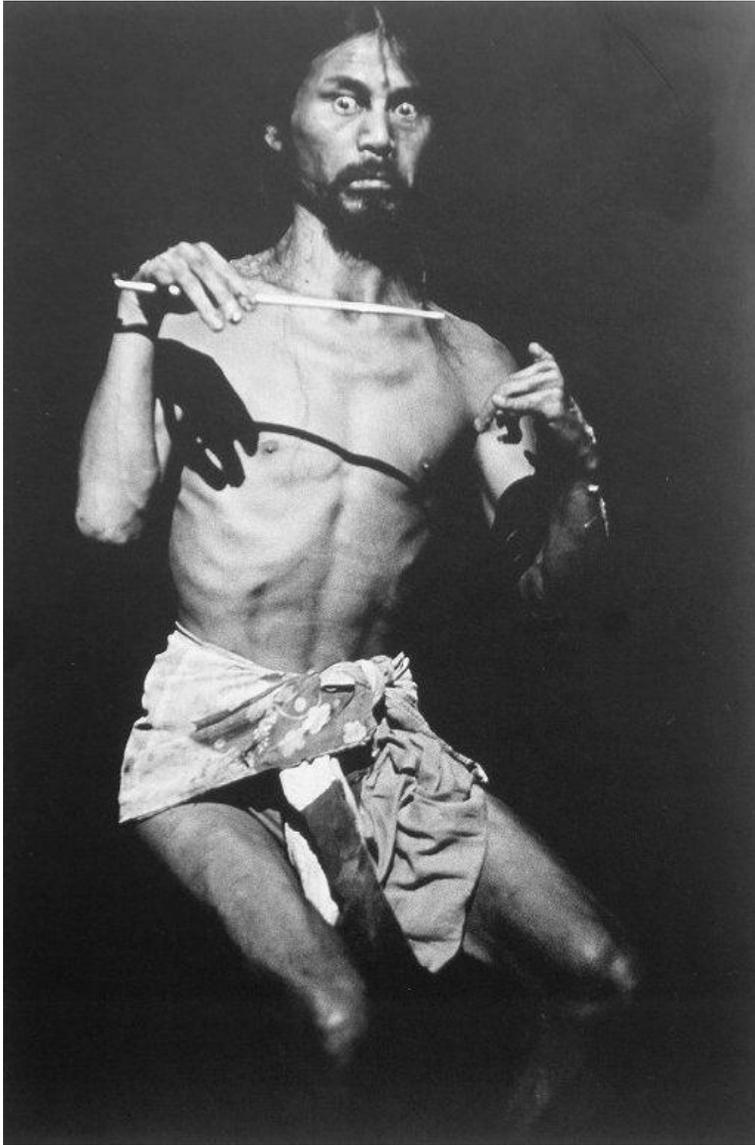
What is your attitude toward live performance? Are you a theater-goer yourself? Must we experience live performance in order to truly appreciate it?

Images



Osanai Kaoru at the Tsukiji Little Theater

(Source: Wikimedia Commons)



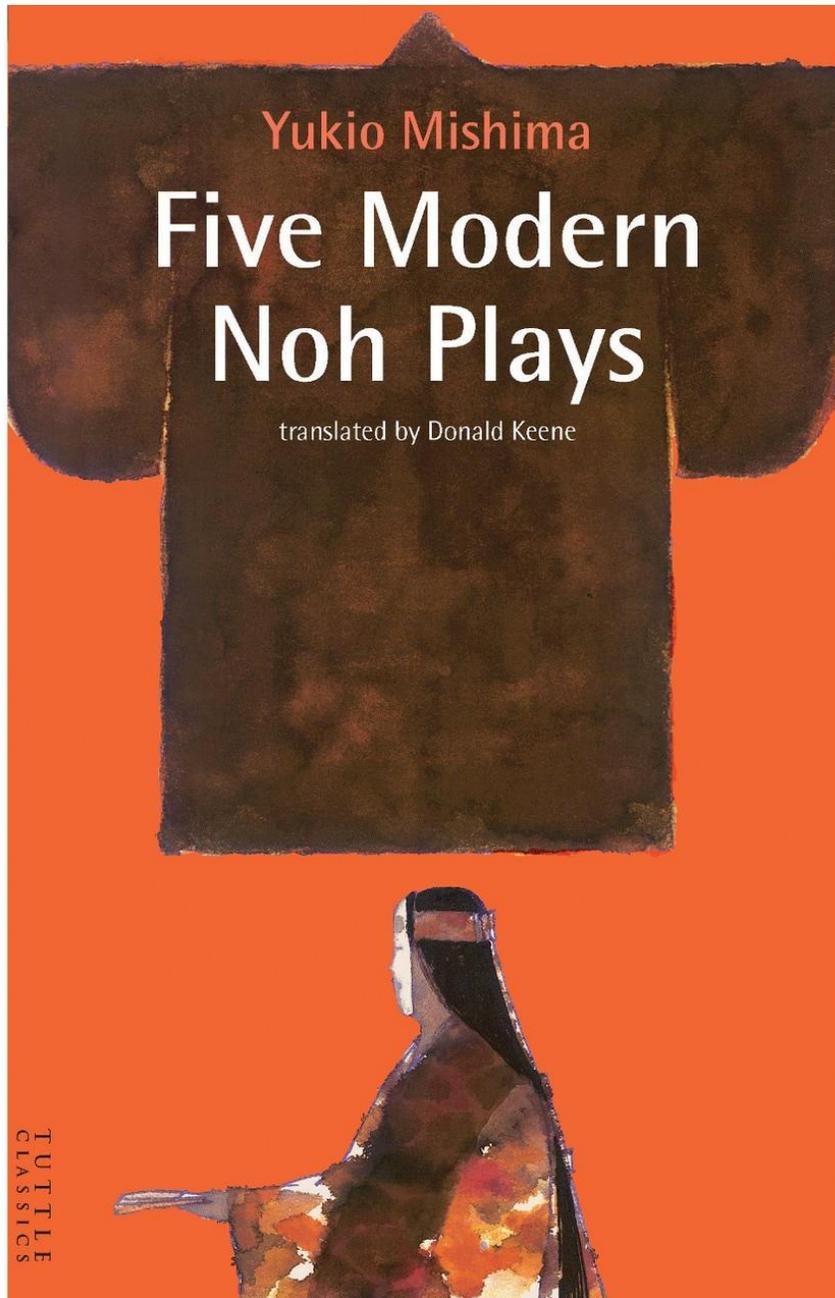
Hijikata Tatsumi, in Butoh performance

(Source: Pinterest)



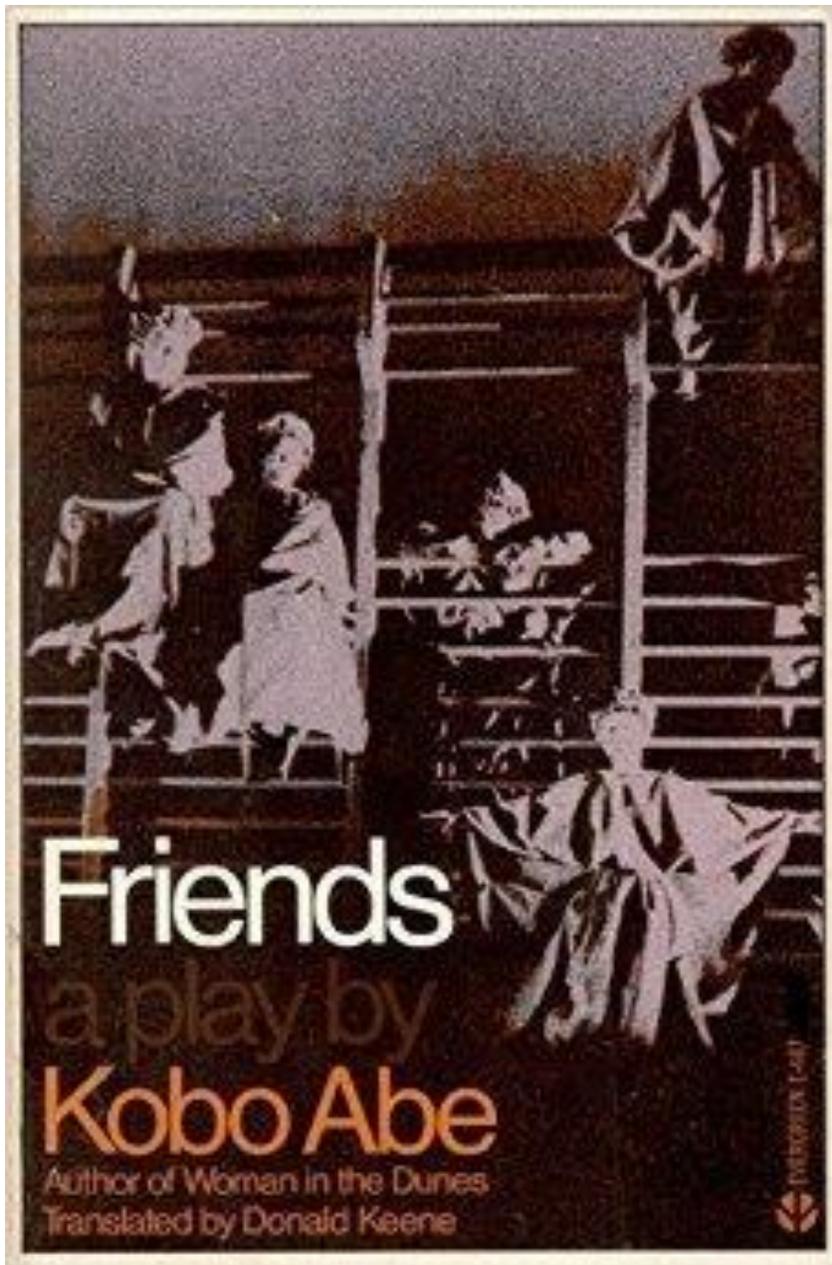
Outdoor performance of Butoh

(Source: Pinterest)



Translation of Mishima Yukio's modern Noh plays

(Source: Tuttle Publishing)



Abe Kôbô's 1967 play, *Friends* (Source: Goodreads)



Takarazuka 'traditional' performance (Source: Japan Times)



Takarazuka 'Western-style' extravaganza (Source: Japan Times)

Part III : FICTION

The Rise of Fiction in Late-Meiji Japan

A key literary development of the late Meiji period was the emergence of prose fiction (*shōsetsu*) as the preëminent literary genre, essentially displacing poetry. Initially emulating exemplary Western models— notably the fiction of Britain, France, Germany, and Russia— writers developed a new, standardized literary language that enabled their work to reach a broad audience. A first generation of modern Japanese fiction writers— spearheaded by pioneering figures such as Mori Ōgai, Natsume Sōseki, and Shimazaki Tôson— produced works that centered on plot, character development, and the challenges of modern urban life and social interaction. The protagonists were typically ineffectual men whose pained interiority and confusion came to dominate the narrative. Other more popular genres of fiction emerged as well— romances, mysteries, even science fiction— and in the process a number of distinct readerships developed. Overall, writers published initially in serialized periodical form, which meant that the rapidly-expanding print media made it possible for their work to gain a broad national readership.

The Taishō Era and Pre-war Fiction

Taishō(1912-26) fiction would be built upon the accomplishments of Meiji authors. A so-called 'pure literature' centering on fiction with clear autobiographical elements and a strong confessional voice appealed to some readers, but an expanding array of literary options would be available as well. A younger generation of fiction writers would give voice to Japan's increasingly urban society— with Tokyo as its virtually obligatory site— and to the burgeoning consumer economy and a new spirit of freedom and self-indulgence that marked the Taishō social scene. A Hollywood-inspired youth culture, symbolized by fashionable *moga* and *mobo*— stylish 'modern girls' and 'modern boys.'— provided a strong contrast to the draconian state-sponsored moralism and political correctness. Leisure pursuits, hedonism, and erotic display figured prominently in the fiction of the day. Themes such as desire, madness, and the irreducible subjectivity of human experience loomed large in the work of writers such as Tanizaki Jun'ichirō (1886-1965) and Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1892-1927). The latter is known as author of *Rashōmon*, the story that inspired the award-winning film by Kurosawa. Overall, Taishō readers were challenged with having to figure out the credibility of unreliable narrators, competing claims to truth, and nettling questions about our capacity to comprehend the world, those around us, and— most pointedly— our own selves.

For his part, the writer Nagai Kafū (1879-1959), a native of Tokyo who lamented the city's transformation into an ersatz Western-style capital, sought to counter the dystopian fiction that told of urban alienation and melancholy. Kafū produced a fictional world that nostalgically evoked early-Meiji Tokyo— its geisha, artisans, and ordinary folk, together with the city's labyrinth of quaint side streets and byways. A noteworthy example is *The River Sumida* (1909), a bittersweet tale of personal longing and familial responsibility set in the neighborhoods of 'old Tokyo,' adjacent to the river that runs through it.

An elite literary group, the White Birch Society (*Shirakaba-ha*), fostered fiction that promoted a socially-progressive humanist agenda. Its leading figure, Shiga Naoya (1883-1971), is known for fiction— short stories, chiefly— seen as expressing the author's deepest interiority, with a minimum of artifice. Stories such as 'At Kinosaki' (*Kinosaki nite*, 1917) have been praised for their lyrical and spiritual depth— prose haiku, in effect. This distinctive category of personal fiction became known as 'I-novel' (*shishōsetsu*). It has remained a prominent— if somewhat nebulous— Japanese literary genre.

Japan's liberal political climate of the Twenties gave rise to a so-called proletarian literary movement, which espoused a range of Marxist and socialist fiction that reflected the Russian and Soviet political scene. With the 1930s, though, a new militarist regime would curtail leftist expression and impose strict censorship in the lead-up to hostilities on the Asian mainland. Japan's leaders resurrected the nationalist discourse of uniqueness and cultural superiority, known as *kokutai*, and silenced the more 'individualist' and politically-subversive writers and intellectuals. This would be the finale of Japan's imperialist venture.

Postwar Fiction and Japan's Literary Renaissance

The Pacific War and the cataclysmic end to Japan's imperial adventure yielded a rich literary harvest in the postwar period, notwithstanding the vast destruction and dislocation that marked the outset of the American Occupation (1945-52). A genre of war literature (*sensō bungaku*) centering on fiction that reflected upon the horrors of war and the burden of defeat and survival. The work of Ōoka Shōhei (1909-88) is especially noteworthy— in particular, his moving novel, *Fires on the Plain* (1951). A subgenre of 'atomic literature' (*genbaku bungaku*) would seek to make sense of the unimaginable. Here, the novel *Black Rain* (1966) by Ibuse Masuji (1898-1984) deserves mention. The film adaptations of these two works are widely admired.

Postwar writers, with their newfound freedom of expression facilitated by the Occupation authorities, produced a broad range of fiction set in the late Forties and early Fifties. Reflecting the dislocation and privation of the postwar years, this work evokes both the desperate circumstances of ordinary people and the renewed hope of a better life that was enshrined in the nation's new constitution, promulgated in 1947. In particular, the novels and stories of Dazai Osamu (1909-48), Yasuoka Shōtarō (1920-2013), and Kojima Nobuo (1915-2006) are representative of this transitional period. Their work is marked by the distinctive personal signature associated with the 'I-novel' (*shishōsetsu*) genre. Representative of the darkly comic treatment of postwar privation and the struggle to survive is Yasuoka's *Prized Possessions* (1952). The story tells of a father's obsession to raise rabbits for the fur market, and his gradual transformation into a pathetic human rabbit.

Postwar Literary Landmarks

Following the Occupation, Japan went on to achieve a stable political and economic footing. With the Fifties and Sixties, the postwar climate of freedom and individualism helped inspire a renaissance of the arts, visual media, and culture. In the realm of fiction, Abe Kōbō (1924-93) wrote brilliantly of Japan's rootless, alienating urban jungle in a number of novels, the best-known being *Woman in the Dunes* (1962). The 1964 film adaptation by Teshigahara is a classic of Japanese cinema. Shōno Junzō (1921-2009) wrote of the troubling undercurrents of postwar domesticity that marked the urban middle-class nuclear family. Tanizaki, among modern Japan's greatest fiction writers, re-emerged on the postwar scene and produced some of his most memorable work— *The Makioka Sisters* (1948), *The Bridge of Dreams* (1959), and *The Diary of a Mad Old Man* (1961), among others.

Kawabata and Mishima

Arguably the two most prominent postwar novelists are Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972) and Mishima Yukio (1925-70). Kawabata's 'traditionalist' novels— *Snow Country* (1947) and *Sound of the Mountain* (1954), among others— constitute a lyrical elegy for a lost Japan. His brilliant evocation of Japan's 'beauty and sadness' earned him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1968— the first for a Japanese author. For his part, Mishima earned a reputation for striking works of fiction that mixed nihilism, Buddhism, and a critique of the vacuity of postwar Japan. Novels such as *Confessions of a Mask* and *Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, which achieved an international readership, established Mishima as Japan's best-known writer. Yet he would become better known as a political reactionary and leader of a cultish paramilitary organization. Decrying the emptiness of 'post-imperial' Japan, and positioning himself as a latter-day samurai savior of a troubled nation, Mishima ended his life in an astonishing ritual suicide in November, 1970.

Historical Fiction

Historical fiction (*rekishi shōsetsu*) looms large as a genre that explores Japan's modern circumstance from the perspective of its legendary and historical past. Here the fiction of Inoue Yasushi (1907-91), Endō Shūsaku (1923-96), and Shiba Ryōtarō (1923-96)— inspired by the pioneering work of Ōgai, Akutagawa, and Tanizaki— stands out. Inoue's work is noteworthy for its focus on the broad sweep of Asian history— the Silk Road, in particular, and Japan's embrace of Buddhism, which was painstakingly introduced from China and Korea. His acclaimed novel *The Roof Tile of Tempyō* (1975) brilliantly captures this key development in Japan's early history. Endō is best known for his fictional exploration of Japan's century-long encounter with Christianity in the 16th and 17th century. Himself a Christian, Endō

questioned— through masterful novels such as *Silence* (1966)— the quality of faith of Japan's Christian converts and the horrendous martyrdom that many experienced at the hands of samurai overlords. Shiba, among modern Japan's most prolific— and enduringly popular— authors, was especially fascinated with the transition from Tokugawa feudalism to the Meiji era and Japan's emergence as a modern nation. His monumental, multi-volume *Clouds Above the Hill* (1972) is the finest literary depiction of Japan's war with Russia (1904-05).

In contrast with these more 'serious' writers, there emerged in the prewar period a popular genre of period fiction (*jidai shōsetsu*) that featured, among others, the exploits of legendary samurai warriors. Here the best-selling novels of Yoshikawa Eiji (1892-1962)— for instance, *Miyamoto Musashi* (1935), based on the legendary accounts of Japan's iconic swordsman— deserve mention. The market for such accounts of legendary figures has expanded dramatically, owing to adaptations for *manga*, *anime*, and other popular media.

The Sixties and Beyond

With the Sixties, which witnessed the dawn of Japan's social and economic renaissance, a group of women writers emerged on the literary stage. This in part reflected— and in turn reinforced— a new discourse of women's rights and the advent of women's participation on the political and cultural scene. Of particular note are ground-breaking authors such as Enchi Fumiko (1905-86) and Kōno Taeko. Through moving novels such as *The Waiting Years* (1957) and *Masks* (1958), Enchi probed the circumstance of women subjected to male power and privilege. Kōno is known for her unsettling depiction of female sexuality and psychological complexity in stories such as *Toddler Hunting* (1961). Overall, the challenge posed by the growing cohort of *joryū sakka*— women authors— to traditional gender roles and norms did much to transform the long-accepted male dominance in the literary realm. Henceforth women would assume a prominent place in Japanese literature and the arts.

Japanese Literature in the Late 20th Century

Japan's 'miraculous' economic expansionism of the 1970s coincided with the emergence of fictional and other writing that had arguably lost its distinctive 'Japanese' qualities of subtlety, sensitivity, and lyrical depth. Indeed, the language itself and the themes that inspired writers had undergone changes that brought writers in line with their counterparts in the developed world. In short, a globalization trend— more obvious in the domain of popular culture and mass media— was set in motion, and it has dramatically accelerated in recent years.

One author concerned about Japan's insular identity in the late 20th century is Ōe Kenzaburō (1935-). Ōe emerged on the literary scene in the Sixties as spokesperson for a new generation of postwar Japanese youth, through his groundbreaking novel, *A Personal Matter* (1964). He would go on to explore the qualities of Japanese national character and its mythic roots while spearheading Japan's anti-nuclear movement. Ōe's deeply principled and morally-centered fiction earned for him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1994— Japan's second awardee.

The late-20th century literary scene was notably diverse. Women writers such as Tsushima Yūko (1947-2016) and Yoshimoto Banana (1964-) have been at the vanguard of Japanese fiction, and they were no longer demeaningly categorized as 'woman writers.' Yoshimoto's best-selling novel, *Kitchen* (1988), explores the complexity of 'non-traditional' families and the journey of self-discovery. Younger writers such as Kanehara Hitomi (1983-) have ventured into the once-taboo zone of drug use, body modification, and deviant youth subculture; her 2003 novel *Snakes and Earrings* is representative of this new wave.

The Murakami Phenomenon

Arguably the best-known and most widely-admired Japanese writer is Murakami Haruki (1949-), whose work has been translated into some fifty languages. Murakami's novels— most notably, *A Wild Sheep Chase* (1989), *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (1997), and *Kafka on the Shore* (2005)— have become part

and parcel of 'world literature,' and the author's extraordinary capacity to merge reality and fantasy, dream and drudgery, past and present has been widely discussed and studied.

Murakami's work is typically branded as 'postmodern'— a curiously elusive term that conjures up the 'whatever-ness' of life and the fluid, happenstance quality of our existence. But the fact remains that the man is a brilliant storyteller, and the casual and candid voice of his first-person *boku* protagonist resonates powerfully with his readers. Murakami is all but guaranteed to be awarded a Nobel Prize, and many of his fans are indignant about the delay. His day shall come.

Conclusion

Given Japan's modern history, its literature— fiction and otherwise— understandably reduces to a pre-war versus post-war binary divide. This of course belies the complex trajectory of the nation's 20th-century history, which began with vestiges of the Tokugawa past and ended with the pervasive and globalized media-scape with which we are all familiar.

The concerns of writers, the themes that inspired them, the very language at their disposal— these have shifted dramatically. One index of this change is the steadily increasing prominence of Japan's women writers, who are now at the very pinnacle of the nation's literary edifice.

One cannot overstate the influence of the visual and graphic media— television, film, the internet, and the image- and consumer-centered popular culture. Japanese literature in the 21st century has a 'local' audience, to be sure, but its ties to global entertainment and marketing are most evident.

What is more, social networking, blogging, texting, and tweeting have opened up literary expression to new avenues, centering on a powerful graphic element. How, then, to conceive of 'fiction' in such a context? The demise of the 'literary novel' has been widely noted by critics and pundits in the West. How Japanese writers choose to express themselves through fictional narrative is an open question, subject to diverse points of view. One can hardly imagine what the shape of this literature will be when the 21st century draws to a close.

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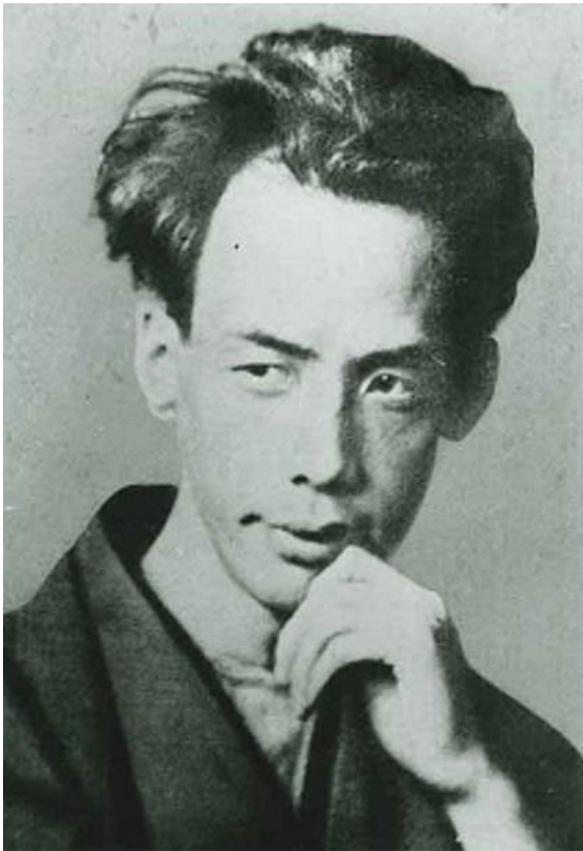
Discussion Questions and Topics

What is 'traditional' about 20th-century Japanese fiction? How to distinguish this from the modernization that has presumably encroached upon the 'bastion' of traditionalism? In what sense can 'traditionalism' be seen as a strategy of combatting the forces of modernity— isolation, insulation, and anxiety?

What can be said in favor of— and against— the pre-war (imperial) and post-war binary of 20th-century Japanese fiction? Can Japan's modern fiction be read without regard to its contexts and instead be appreciated entirely on its own?

How are we to assess the impact of new media and social networking on fiction writing— in Japan and elsewhere? Would you favor the work of 'serious' writers as a bulwark against what can be seen as the adulterating impact of the new media?

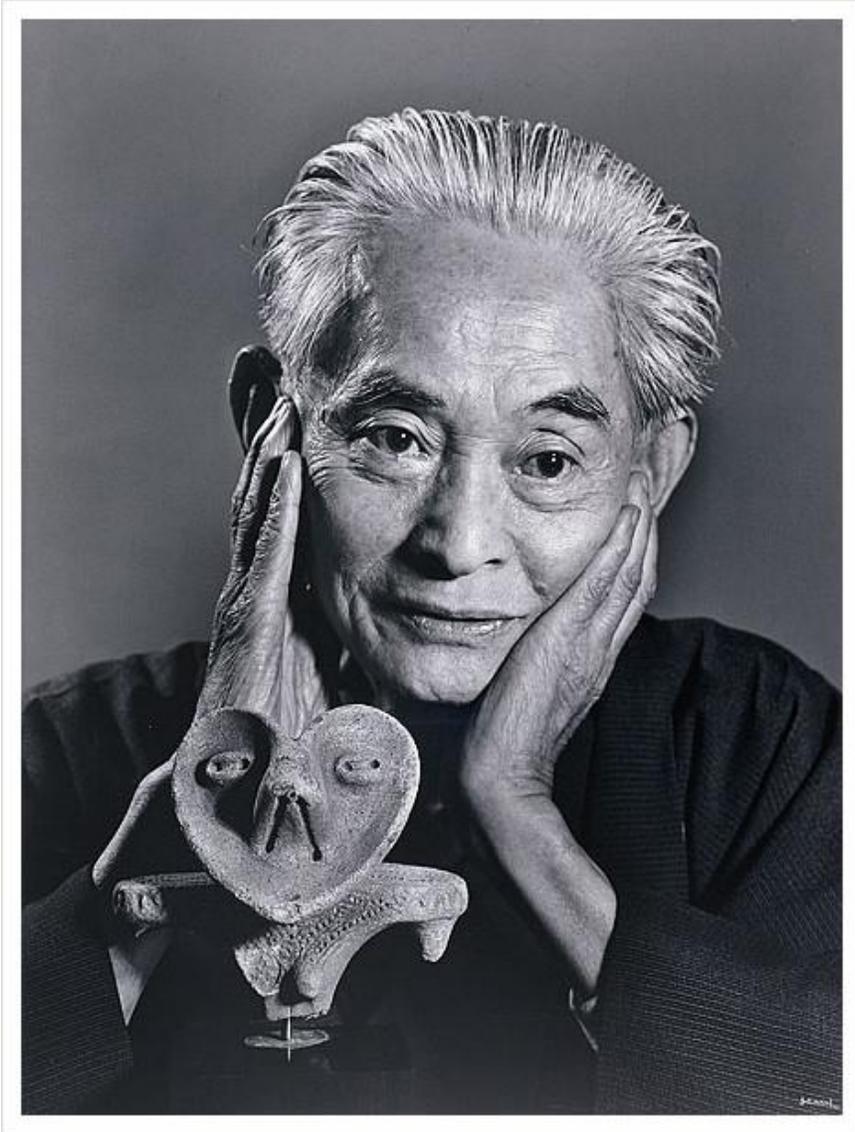
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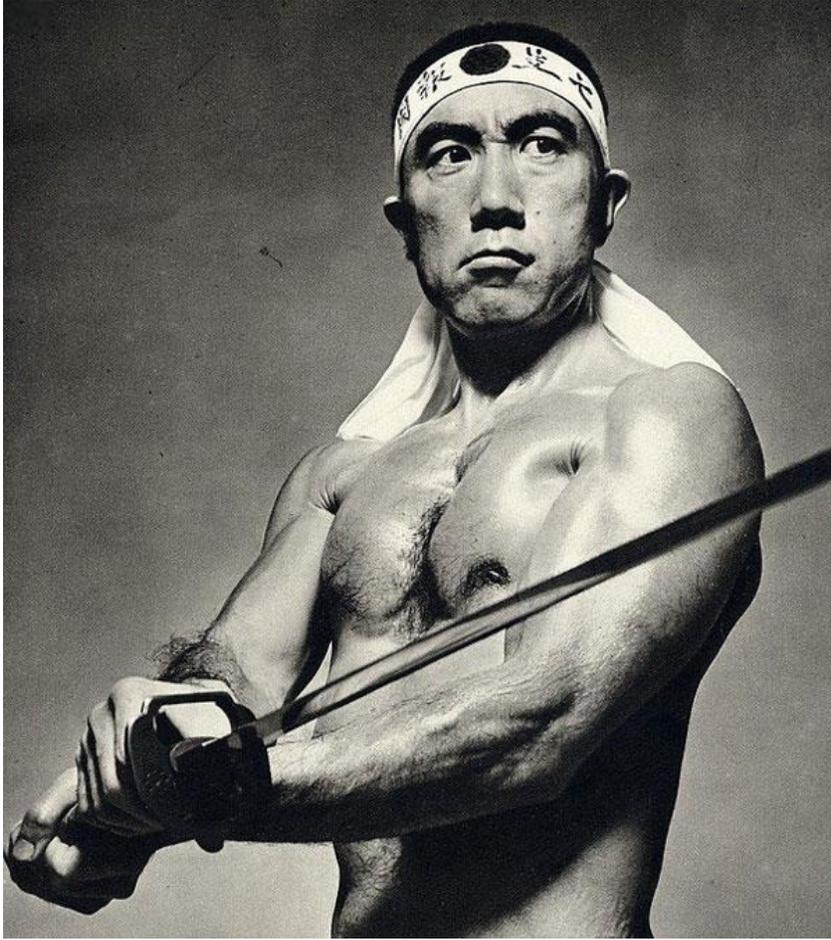
Akutagawa Ryûnosuke (1892-1927)



Tanizaki Jun'ichirô (1886-1965)



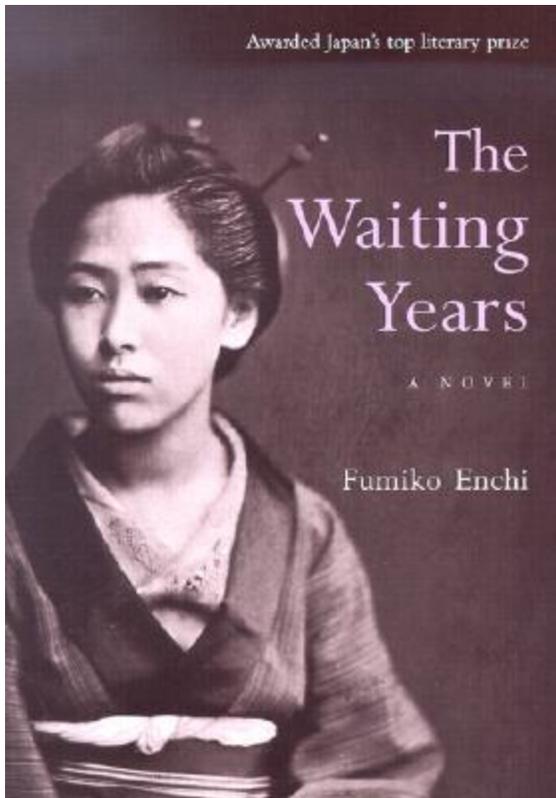
Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972) (Source: Pinterest)



Mishima Yukio (1925-1970) (Source: Open Culture)



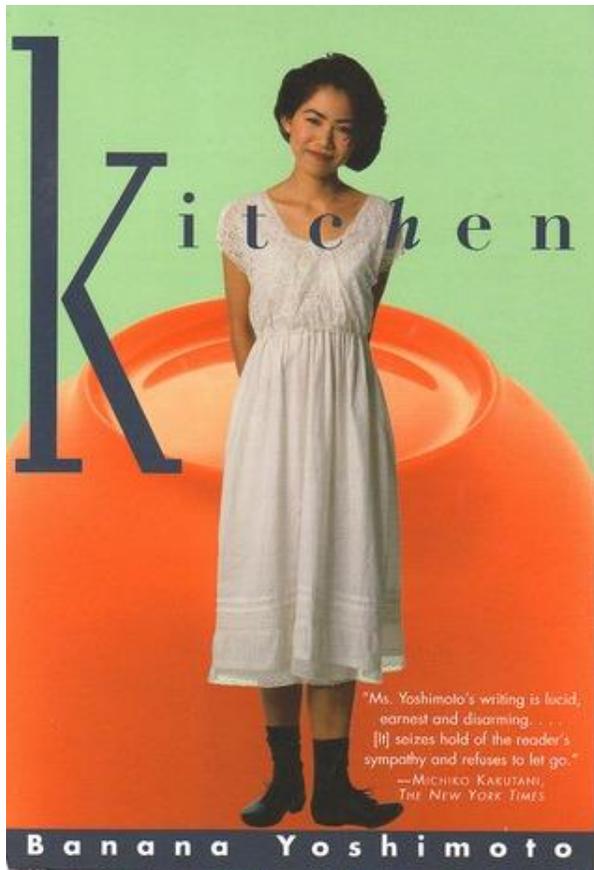
Abe Kôbô (1924-1986)



Enchi Fumiko (1905-1986), as depicted on the cover of one of her finest novels (Source: Goodreads)



Ôe Kenzaburô (1935-), being interviewed in Germany, in 2008



Yoshimoto Banana (1964-), as depicted on the cover cover of her best-known novel (Source: Goodreads)



Murakami Haruki (1949-) (Source: New York Times)

* Unless otherwise noted, all images are sourced from Wikimedia Commons

Part IV : AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The Place of Autobiography in Twentieth-Century Japan

Western autobiography— ranging from the work of Saint Augustine to Benjamin Franklin, Rousseau, Thoreau, and others— was introduced to Japan late in the Meiji period. These works circulated within the *bundan* literary community, and considerable attention was paid to crafting personal narratives that expressed one's inner self and the quality of one's social relationships. Yet with few exceptions— the Fukuzawa Yukichi autobiography, most notably— there was little evident interest in the Western genre of comprehensive, exhaustive autobiography. Japanese writers favored shorter, more episodic accounts of one's life and times. Confessional narrative played a key role, largely owing to the Naturalist coterie (1906-10) and its credo of authentic personal expression. This in turn led to the so-called I-novel (*shishōsetsu*) genre, whose claim to pure, unmediated expression free of artifice achieved currency in the Taishō period. The genre, which has generated much debate among literary scholars, remains a hallmark of modern Japanese literature, having essentially displacing 'standard' autobiography.

In short, the most productive vehicles for modern Japanese autobiographical literature have been in the form of episodic reminiscence and autobiographical fiction. The Japanese reader has come to understand that one's most authentic voice is channeled not through an actuarial recounting of the facts and data of one's life, but rather through subjective and suggestive narrative artistry. On the other hand, there has long been a demand for biographical accounts of prominent figures in the political, economic, and cultural spheres. In fact, a number of *bundan* authors who were reluctant to produce their own autobiography took on biographical projects at the behest of major publishing houses.

On the Stages of Twentieth-Century Japanese Autobiography

Pre-war accounts

Late-Meiji and Taishō writers favored accounts of one's childhood and youth, typically expressing nostalgic longing for a world on the cusp of being transformed by urban development, mechanization, and social dislocation. Noteworthy in this regard is Naka Kansuke's *The Silver Spoon* (Gin no saji, 1913). Naka, a protégé of Natsume Sōseki, produced a fascinating record of his upbringing, told in the voice of the experiencing child as opposed to the reminiscing adult. As the narrator relates in his introduction, these memories were triggered by a small silver spoon:

In the drawer of the bookcase in my study, which is full of all sorts of worthless objects, I've kept a tiny box since I was a child. Made of cork wood and adorned with a peony print on each corner, the box may have been an imported snuff box. Although not particularly attractive, the soft, smooth texture of its polished wood has made it one of my prized possessions.

The box is packed full with cowry shells, camellia seeds, and assorted objects that were the playthings of my infancy and childhood. Of these objects, the one most dear to me is a small, oddly-shaped silver spoon. From time to time I'd take the spoon out of the box, carefully wipe away the tarnish, and simply gaze at it, losing all sense of time. . .

Based on *The Silver Spoon*, pp 25-26

As for expansive, Western-style autobiography, it is interesting to note that this literary vehicle appealed to political radicals and leftists. For instance, figures such as Kawakami Hajime (1879-1946) and Ōsugi Sakae (1885-1923) produced major autobiographies that served to promote their political agenda. Ōsugi, incidentally, was influenced by the autobiography of the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin. Of note as well are the autobiographical accounts of radical Japanese women, some of whom were arrested— and executed— by the authorities. Mikiso Hane has compiled a landmark collection of their writings, which challenge the stereotype of compliant Japanese womanhood.

Postwar accounts of the war

The Pacific war, which resulted in the cataclysmic demise of Japan's empire, gave rise to a remarkable production of autobiographical accounts that looked back on one's experiences— both on the front lines and in the homeland— and critiqued the militarism and blind chauvinism that propelled the war effort. Such candor was of course impossible during wartime, on account of the repressive military regime.

Autobiographical accounts of wartime experience were the work of both literary people and 'ordinary' citizens caught up in the conflict in different ways. Among the former, Ôoka Shôhei (1909-88) was sent to the Philippines in 1944, where he experienced the disintegration of the Japanese forces in the face of the American onslaught. Taken captive in January 1945, Ôoka subsequently wrote of his harrowing experiences in a celebrated war memoir. Consider the following episode, which recounts, with a certain philosophical detachment, one's failed suicide attempt in the face of a totally hopeless situation:

I do not intend to belabor the question of why I failed to kill myself. The psychology of a suicide is of minimal interest, and the psychology of the man who fails in his attempt is of less interest still. . . . What actually determines the outcome is in most cases an entirely extraneous, accidental factor. My having survived owes itself to the fact that the hand grenade I carried, which would dispatch me to the hereafter, turned out to be a dud. . . . I had to smile. The irony of fate that refused to grant me a quick and easy death seemed somehow funny to me. (Based on *Taken Captive*, p 26)

A dramatically different perspective is presented by Sakai Saburô, whose autobiography recounts his exploits as Japan's most celebrated pilot and fighter ace— albeit on the losing side.

Complementing the many written accounts of the war is an equally impressive body of oral narratives by a broad spectrum of Japanese. One important sub-category concerns the recollections of those who survived the atomic bombings. A collection of such accounts, compiled by Haruko and Theodore Cook and reminiscent of the celebrated oral histories of Studs Terkel (*The Good War*, for instance), provides what can be considered a composite portrayal of the Japanese wartime experience.

Postwar fictional autobiography

The Occupation period (1945-52) witnessed an outpouring of fictional autobiography that variously recounts, through personal testimony and literary artifice, both the postwar privation and dislocation, and the nation's gradual recovery and regeneration.

Several autobiographical novels by Dazai Osamu (1909-48)— *Setting Sun* (1947) and *No Longer Human* (1948)— speak to the spiritual vacuum of Japan's postwar circumstance and the loss of the old imperial order and its patriarchal center. Yasuoka Shôtarô (1920-2013), for his part, crafted a darkly comic vision of the postwar dystopia through a series of autobiographical tales centering on a pathetically dysfunctional family— in particular, the figure of his hapless, delusional father. A representative account is *A View by the Sea*, which tells of his mother's dying days in a mental institution and his awkward attempts to connect with an inept father.

The career of Mishima Yukio (1925-70), among modern Japan's most celebrated— and enigmatic— literary figures, was launched by an unprecedented autobiographical exposé of the author's sexual awakening. Entitled *Confessions of a Mask* (1949), the novel reveals the protagonist's complex and conflicted interiority through a series of homoerotic encounters recalled with dramatic intensity. What follows is the first of these memories:

My earliest memory— I was around four at the time— has haunted me with a strangely vivid image. . . . It is of a young man who was approaching us, with ruddy cheeks and shining eyes and wearing a dirty roll of cloth around his head as a sweatband. . . . He was a night-soil man, a ladler of excrement, dressed as a common laborer with close-fitting cotton trousers. I found myself choked by desire, thinking that I wanted to *be* him. . . . An inexpressible adoration for those trousers was born in me, for reasons I could not understand. (Based on *Confessions of a Mask*, pp 7-9)

A very different perspective on one's childhood and youth is provided by Kita Morio (1927-2011) in his beautifully evocative autobiographical novel, *Ghosts* (Yûrei, 1954). The son of one of Japan's preëminent modern poets, Saitô Mokichi, Kita captures the exquisite sensitivity of his younger self through his masterful use of lyrical prose. *Ghosts*— an homage to those departed souls whom he recalls— begins with the following reflection upon what makes us human:

Why this desire to relate what we recall of the past? Because, just as any race has its mythology, so an individual bears within him his own private myths— myths that gradually fade, finally disappearing into the depths of time. And yet things leave their traces, and are a constant preoccupation of the deeper reaches of the mind, lasting until that time when all our actions cease.

And suddenly one day this normally unconscious activity may open up for us and become an awakening of sorts— much like a silkworm, as it slowly consumes a mulberry leaf for no reason it can comprehend, becomes aware of the faint sound of its own mastication. So it raises its head, unsure, fearful almost as it gazes around its small world, experiencing itself as something— whatever that something might be. (Based on *Ghosts*, pp 1-2)

In bears noting that several writers did opt for the more comprehensive, Western-style autobiographic account of their upbringing. Tanizaki Jun'ichirô's *Childhood Years* and Yoshikawa Eiji's *Fragments of a Past* present fascinating and engaging accounts of their respective families and boyhood friends, while serving as valuable documentary sources on life and times in late-Meiji Tokyo and Yokohama.

Family chronicles

An important category of twentieth-century Japanese autobiographical writing is the family chronicle, which broadens the scope beyond the individual subject to encompass one's family and social sphere. Important examples include *Chronicle of My Mother* (1982) by Inoue Yasushi, a renowned author of historical fiction. This deeply moving work recounts his mother's mental decline and eventual death as experienced by her children and grandchildren over a period of ten years. Kita Morio, whose childhood memoir is noted above, published the multi-volume *House of Nire* (1984), which relates the rise and gradual decline of three generations of a family-run psychiatric clinic. Ôe Kenzaburô departs from his elite literary persona in *A Healing Family* (1996), which tells of parental devotion to their brain-damaged son, Hikari, and a father's promotion of Hikari's remarkable career in musical composition. And finally, Inoue Hisashi can be credited with producing a composite family autobiography in the form of numerous personal essays and reminiscences that recount, in a voice at once comical and poignant, the pratfalls and antics of his youth and the challenges of being a father to his three daughters.

Women writers and their autobiographical collages

A number of women writers turned to personal narratives centering on family, acquaintances, and career. For some, the accumulated volume of such narratives amounts to a sequential, composite autobiography. For example, Kôda Aya (1906-90) embarked on her distinguished literary career on the strength of a series of remembrances of her father, the celebrated author Kôda Rohan (1867-1947). Aya's personal writings offer a trenchant and sensitive account of a father-daughter relationship that witnessed the vicissitudes of Japan's imperial and wartime history.

For her part, Uno Chiyo (1897-1996) wrote widely of herself as a liberated modern woman— a so-called *moga*— and of her many romantic encounters and escapades. Mukôda Kuniko (1929-81), representing the next generation of Japanese women, wrote numerous personal accounts of herself as a daughter, professional writer, and keen observer of the social scene. The penchant for publishing collections of literary personalia marks as well the work of Mure Yôko (1954-), representing the next generation of Japanese women writers. Mure's savvy, occasionally sassy narrator delights in her pithy, stylish observations and personal revelations.

A recent autobiography entitled *Will Not Forget Both Laughter and Tears* (2013) is the work of Mitani Tomoko (1945-), an 'ordinary housewife' who took it upon herself to write about her world in appealingly down-to-earth language.

Other voices

An important category of autobiographical literature is the recent work of expatriate Japanese who reflect on their bifurcated identity in Japanese and/ or their adopted language. For instance, Kyoko Mori (1957-) has written numerous works of autobiographical fiction in English— most notably, *Polite Lies: On Being a Woman Caught Between Cultures* (1997)— that recount her dual heritage and the circumstances of her rejection of her Japanese 'self' in favor of the freedom she gained in the American Midwest.

A far larger category— two complementary categories, actually— consists, on one hand, of the personal writings by foreigners— *gaijin*— reflecting on their experiences living and travelling in Japan. On the other hand, there are numerous accounts by Japanese reflecting on their 'expat' experience, be it in the U.S., Brazil, Germany, China, or elsewhere. Such writing can be traced back to the late Tokugawa era, when foreigners were allowed into the country, and when Japanese were once again able to leave their homeland and experience the larger world. Of particular interest is a fascinating anthology, edited by George and Carlson, of expat reminiscence by a range of Western writers.

Conclusion

Twentieth-century Japanese autobiography offers a kaleidoscope of forms and voices, ranging from the 'standard' comprehensive account of one's life to the assorted personal episodes and reflections that collectively yield a composite profile. The proportion of 'standard' autobiography appears to have increased since the postwar era, but the predilection for the personal essay and for autobiographical fiction remains strong. The border separating the 'genuine' and 'factual' from the fictive and fanciful remains obscure at best.

Autobiographical expression in the age of electronic and social media— in Japan and elsewhere— has been radically transformed, and narrative itself has given way to (or been augmented by) images and graphic display. One can imagine autobiography presented as a pastiche of tweets and blog postings, a graphic narrative mixing image and text, or simply a sequence of images and graphic display. The possibilities are limitless, and the status of exclusively literary self-representation is anything but clear.

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Tanizaki Jun'ichirô, *Childhood Years: A Memoir* (Kodansha International, 1988)

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Questions and Issues

How would you explain the difference between biography and autobiography? What are the benefits and drawbacks of each? Do these genres appeal to you equally?

What are the pros and cons of the 'standard,' full-length autobiography versus the episodic, 'fragmentary' approach to personal narrative favored by many Japanese writers?

Childhood and youth reminiscence is a hallmark of Japanese autobiography— and arguably of autobiographical writing more generally. What do you find moving about such reminiscence? How would you approach writing an account of your own upbringing?

What 'life lessons' can you glean from the autobiographical passages presented above? Is there anything distinctively Japanese about the quality of self-reflection expressed here, or does it reflect universal concerns and understandings?

Images

THE SILVER SPOON

KANSUKE NAKA

MEMOIR OF A BOYHOOD IN JAPAN

銀の匙



TRANSLATED FROM THE JAPANESE BY HIROAKI SATO

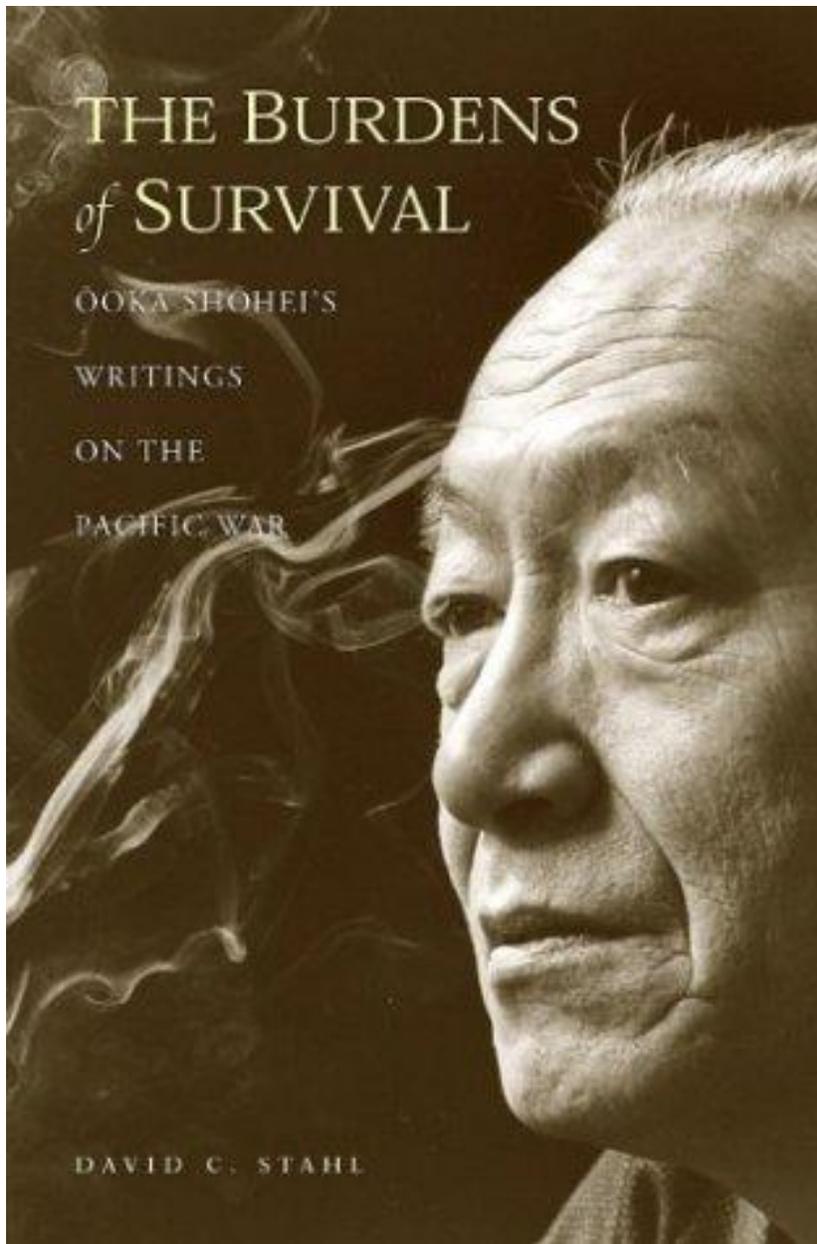
(Source: Goodreads)

THE
AUTOBIOGRAPHY
OF
**ŌSUGI
SAKAE**



TRANSLATED WITH AN
INTRODUCTION BY
BYRON K. MARSHALL

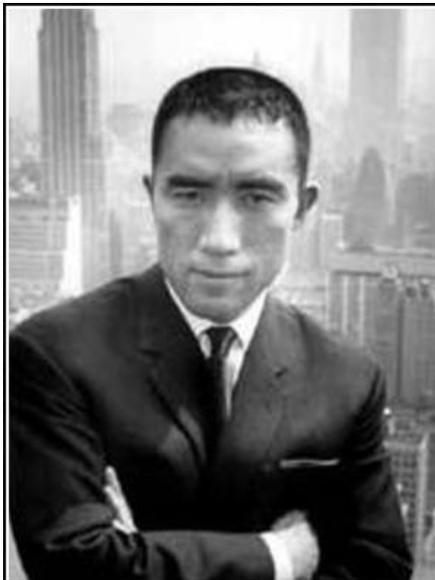
(Source: Goodreads)



Scholarly study of Ôoka Shōhei's writings on the Pacific War (Source: Abe Books)



Yasuoka Shôtarô (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

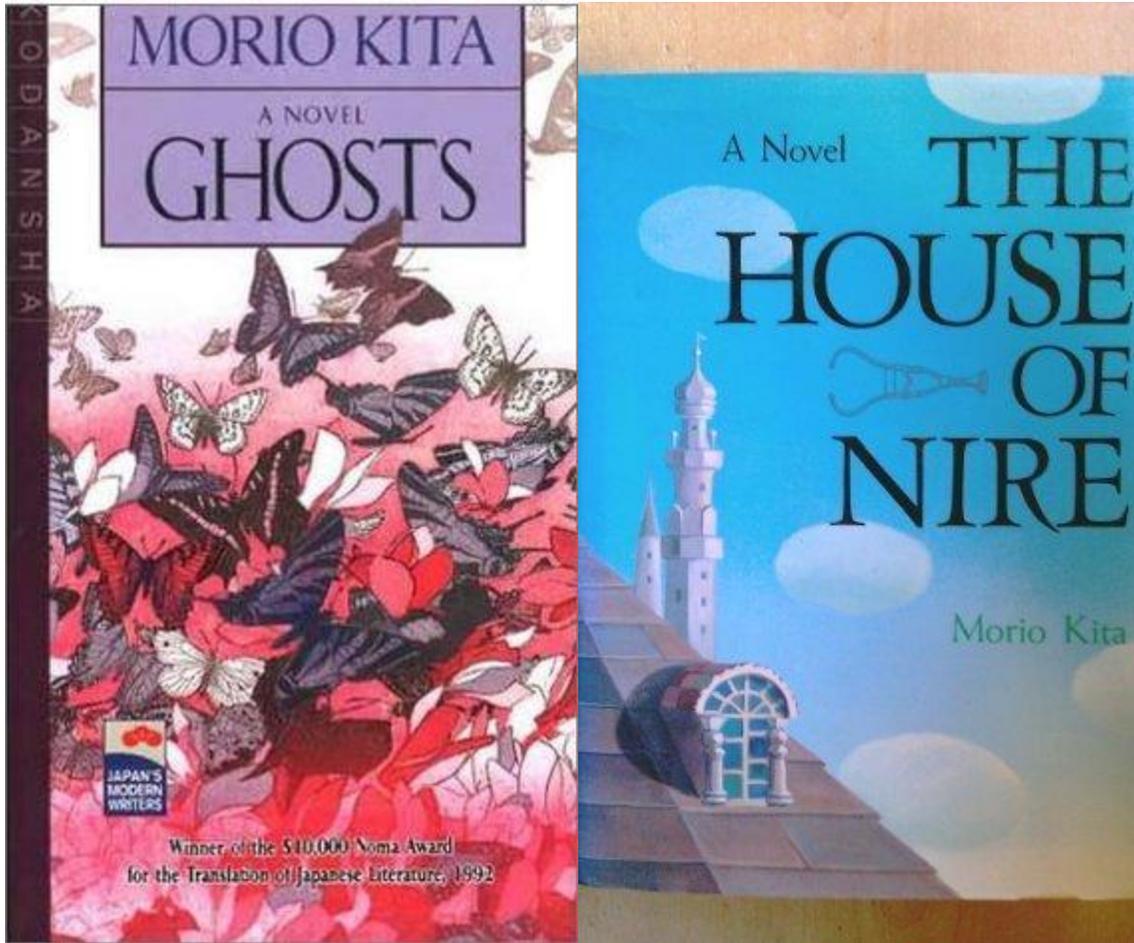


Perfect purity is possible if you turn
your life into a line of poetry written
with a splash of blood.

— *Yukio Mishima* —

AZ QUOTES

Mishima Yukio: the photo and the aphorism (Source: AZ Quotes)

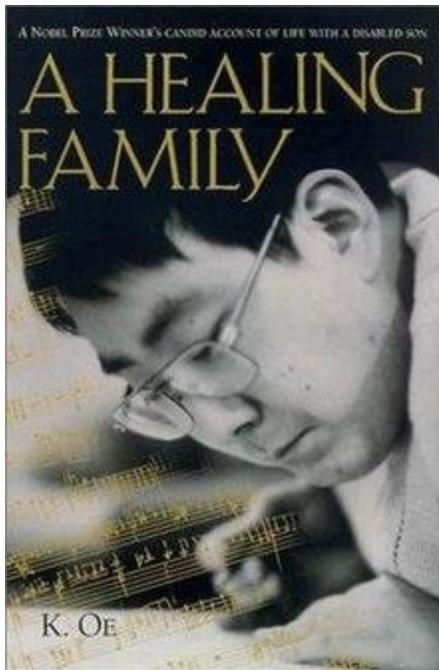


Kita Morio, *Ghosts*(Goodreads)

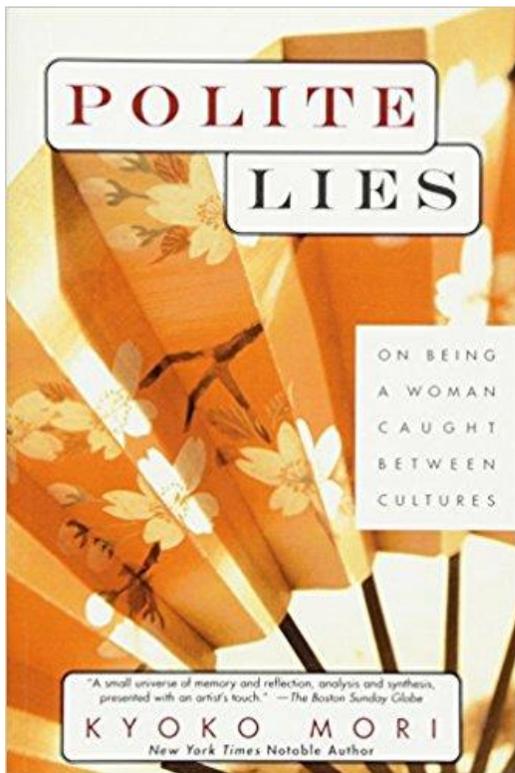
Kita Morio, *The House of Nire*(Abe Books)



Inoue Yasushi (Source: nowherestay.blogspot)



Ôe Hikari (Wikipedia) Ôe Kenzaburô, author of *A Healing Family* (Japan Times)



Kyoko Mori's memoir (Amazon)



Kyoko Mori's photograph (Harvard Review)

Part V : ESSAY

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 Shōnagon 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

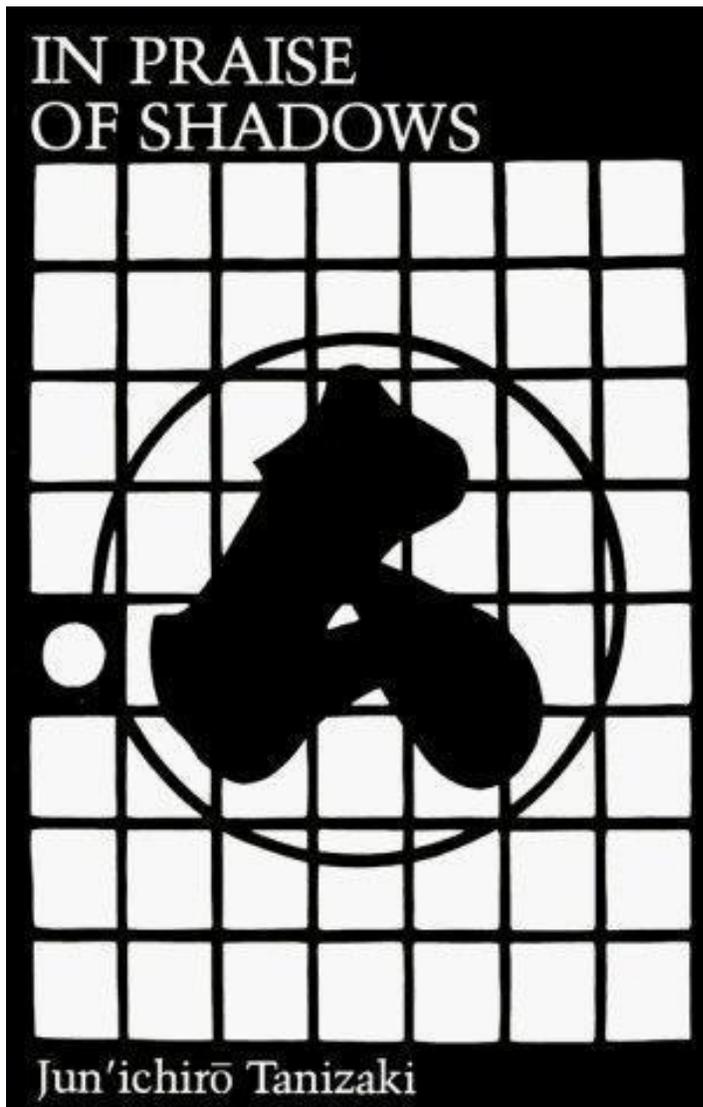
What do you regard as especially appealing about the essay form? What are its drawbacks?

Which of the Japanese examples presented above did you particularly like? Which did you dislike? What factors are involved here?

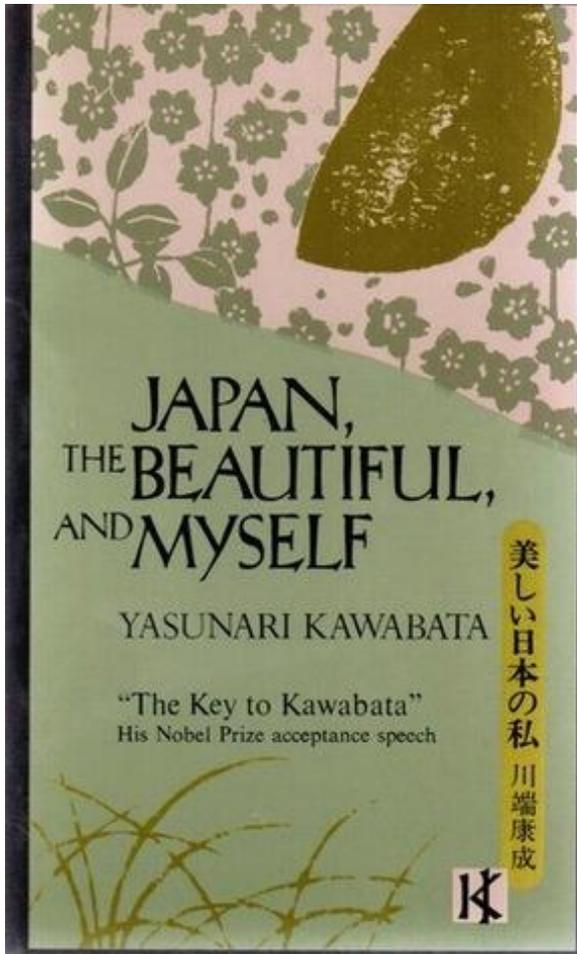
In what sense can the Kawabata and Ôe essays be said to represent a fundamental binary quality of Japan and its people?

What do you consider the most productive and valuable aspect of essay writing? How would you define its borders and its essential qualities?

Images



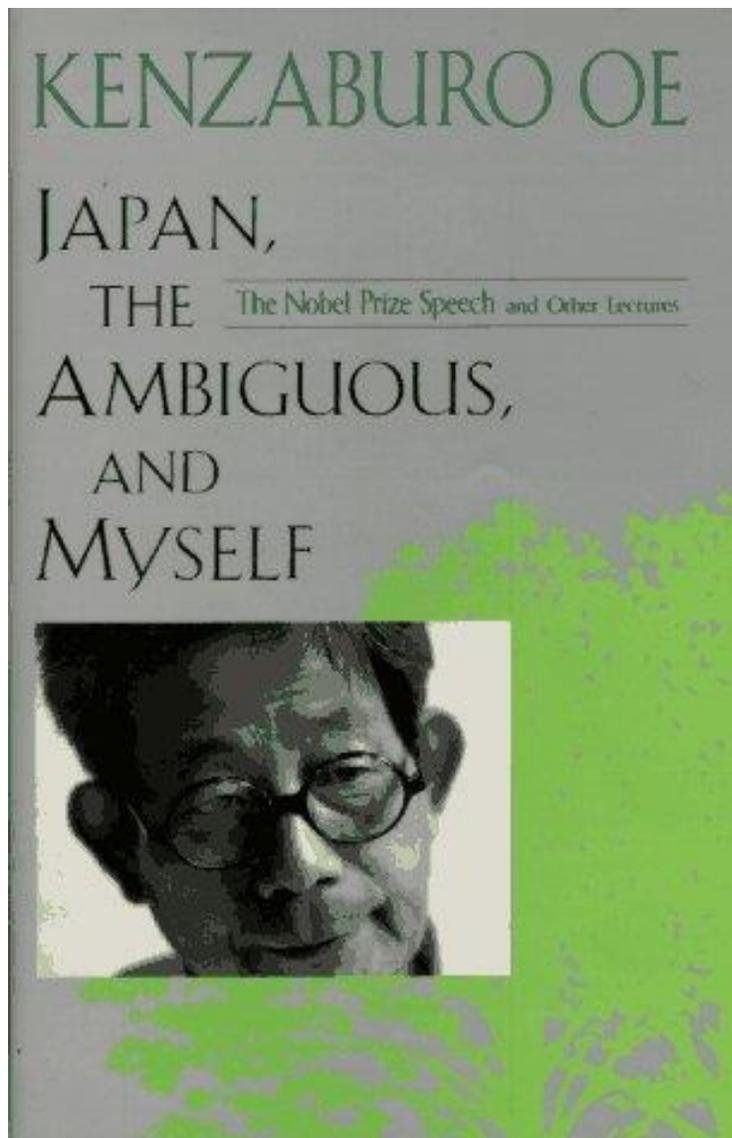
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Ôe Kenzaburô, Nobel Prize speech/ essay (Source: Goodreads)