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The Poetics of Japanese Verse: Imagery, Structure, Meter
(review)

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BOOK REVIEW

KAWAMOTO KōJI. *THE POETICS OF JAPANESE VERSE: IMAGERY, STRUCTURE, METER.* TRANS. STEPHEN COLLINGTON, KEVIN COLLINS, AND GUSTAV HELDT. FOREWORD BY HARUO SHIRANE. TOKYO: U OF TOKYO P, 2000.

Both probing and accessible, this book presents, under the guise of a *florilegium*, a systematic, argued analysis of first the rhetoric, then the metrics, of Japanese verse.

An introductory section, “Autumn Dusk,” uses a discussion of the recurrence of the poetic phrase *aki no yūgure* to frame an overview of the themes, imagery, and tradition of Japanese verse. It also introduces a universalizing argument that will pervade the following more detailed and technical main sections: all of us can understand and benefit from Japanese poetry because, ultimately, “words work directly on us as words. We can only hope to listen to what they have to tell us with as open a mind as possible.” (44)

The first main section, “The Poetics of the Haiku,” analyzes *haiku* rhetoric in terms of two figures, oxymoron and paradox. It argues that through an awareness of the “similarities and differences” conveyed through these figures a reader can interpret *haiku* images as “embodying typical or symbolic meanings,” and that *haiku* poets have been able to achieve “innovation and variety of expression” by drawing on and revivifying the form’s poetic tradition. (172) The following section, “A Metrics of Sevens and Fives,” responds to the major theories of Japanese verse prosody. Kawamoto’s argument here is complex, but his conclusions relatively simple. Basically, he sees the recitation of Japanese poetry as a matter of fitting a natural oral rhythm of alternating stress and bimoraic feet to written ‘designs’ of

5-7 or 7-5 lines with interpolated 'rests.' Finding flaws and limitations inherent in all existing accounts of how such designs are to be 'performed,' he proposes instead a limited set of simple, latent "verse designs" underlying the actual poems' "verse instances." (285) Delivery then remains to some extent a subjective matter, with such things as interpolation of rests and degree of adherence to bimoraic meter being determined by the particular sensibility of the individual reciter.

Throughout this illustrative introduction and these two separate detailed and sometimes technical analyses, Kawamoto persuasively deploys an arguable theory of poetry's purpose and mode of action. His underlying premise, reticent but omnipresent, is that a poetic form consists of a contrastive system of delimitations and differences that the reader 'fills in' with meaning. Such a system needs to be both flexible enough to sustain a wide variety of realizations and stable enough to be at least implicitly recognizable by its intended reader. Kawamoto applies this premise to both the rhetorical and the metrical structure of the *haiku*. In so doing he fights clear of ascribing any overt teleology or 'rule conspiracy' to the analogies that tend to emerge between meaning structures and sound structures. But he lets it be seen that *haiku*'s rhetoric—its brevity and its tendency to incorporate in each verse one pivotal rhetorical shift—may be in turn strongly conditioned by the metrical designs derived from the Japanese language's moraic phonology and simple pitch-accent structure. The "Poetics" chapter argues that each verse is made up of a "base" section presenting a striking turn of thought or phrase and a "superposed" section that leads the reader towards constructing a meaning for this turn by associating it with, most commonly, some resonant item from the poetic canon. If we seek an analogous bifurcation in the "Metrics" chapter, we will find Kawamoto arguing that each *haiku* verse consists of what might be understood as a 'base' layer of prosodic principles and the established laws of Japanese phonology, plus a flexible 'superposed' layer of rule-governed creativity in which a reader might or might not choose to (for instance) break up the lines into bimoraic metrical feet. It is through the application of this 'superposed layer' that, as with the rhetorical superposed section, a reader produces (and accordingly comprehends) the text as a poem. In particular, the rhetorical turn that articulates base and superposed sections of a *haiku* verse would seem to depend on, even reflect, the flexible disposition of metrical 'rests' allowed by Kawamoto's proposed two-layered prosody.

In any case, what is at work here is a species of double articulation. A poem becomes itself only when read or heard; as an object, and apart from the reader's active understanding, it is only an unfilled pattern. Kawamoto's approach is to show us how, in the case of the *haiku* genre, this pattern itself as doubly articulated in such a way as to guide the reader. In effect, both rhetorically and metrically, any poem is built on a formal base, and articulated through a more flexible superposed element that points the reader towards understanding and delivery. Specifically, the underlying texture of hyperbole and oxymoron that the reader must first sense in order to construct, via an awareness of literary traditions, a poem's meaning fulfills a role analogous to that of the verse designs that likewise underlie, via poetic instances, the diverse expressive possibilities of recitation.

Thus, beneath his three-part explication of the workings of the *haiku* genre, Kawamoto has built an interlocking systematization of poetry's sound and sense, language and expression. In many respects, this system is a realization of linguistic structuralism. Readers who are more at home with Derrida and Barthes than with Jakobson and Riffaterre may find themselves on unfamiliar ground, as might readers who hesitate to support Kawamoto's universalizing affirmation that "there is no basis for thinking that anyone is, for some mysterious reason, incapable of understanding something expressed in a language used by fellow human beings." (43)

Perhaps, then, *The Poetics of Japanese Verse* is best regarded as an instructive application of a systematic aesthetic theory. From this standpoint, Kawamoto's synoptic view of *haiku* rhetoric rings true as a reflection of the power of Japan's dense and unbroken literary tradition, and his synthesizing presentation of *haiku* metrics serves to reveal a rich prosodic microcosm combining principles from several different genres and eras. In sum, his argument leaves the genre's vitality and flexibility revealed, vindicated, and to some extent explained.

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