Introduction

THE Meiji Restoration of 1868 swept Japan into the mainstream of world history, introduced new ideas and alien traditions, and demanded reappraisal of accepted values in literature as in every other field. For more than 800 years prior to that great turning point in the national life, two literary classics had been known to every educated Japanese: *Kokinshū* (Collection of Ancient and Modern Times) and *Ise monogatari* (Tales of Ise), the first an imperially commissioned poetic anthology that dates from around 905, the second a tenth-century collection of something over 100 brief stories in which poems are the central elements. *Kokinshū* and *Ise monogatari* were the indispensable literary baggage of noblemen and court ladies in the latter part of the Heian period (794–1185), the inexhaustible lodes mined by generations of earnest medieval commentators, and the bibles of aspiring poets through the ages. When the great "scholars of national learning" (*kokugakusha*) rejected Chinese influence in the Tokugawa period (1600–1868), inaugurating a new era in the study of classical Japanese literature, they too directed their attention primarily to these works, together with an eighth-century poetic anthology, *Man'yōshū* (Collection for Ten Thousand Generations), and a brilliant eleventh-century novel, *Genji monogatari* (The Tale of Genji).

Westerners have come to know *The Tale of Genji* through Arthur Waley's translation. French versions of *Kokinshū* poems and excellent English translations of selected poems from *Man'yōshū* have also been available for some years, and the publication of Robert H. Brower and Earl Miner's *Japanese Court Poetry* has given foreign readers a new understanding and appreciation of the special social contexts, intellectual and emotional values and attitudes, native and Chinese traditions, and poetic techniques that brought forth the poems preserved in the two great anthologies. Through the present translation of *Ise monogatari*, Westerners may become acquainted with a fourth major resource of the classical literary tradition.[1]

One can enjoy *Tales of Ise* without a specialized knowledge of classical Japanese poetry or its social milieu, especially if one has read *The Tale of Genji*, which describes Japanese court society at about the time when *Tales of Ise* assumed its present form, and which shows very clearly the central role assigned to poetry in that society. As a work of literature, however, *Tales of Ise* is less able than *The Tale of Genji* to stand on its own in a foreign environment. Its characters are dim, elusive figures. Its prose passages, remote indeed from *Genji*'s exquisite intricacies, are designed primarily to provide settings for the poems—to serve as black velvet cushions against which the gems can flash and glow. Japanese connoisseurs admire its simple, restrained style, which they find more subtle and sophisticated than elaborate description, but in English the velvet wears thin; the language tends to be flat and banal. And the jewels themselves look a bit dull. *Tales of Ise* has traditionally been esteemed as a handbook for poets, one that demonstrates better than any other the attitudes and occasions that

[1] Notes will be found at the back of the book, beginning on p. 196.

should inspire poetry, and the manner in which poems should be written. Yet these famous verses, the heart of the work, sound distressingly trivial in translation.

The reader may find it useful, therefore, to learn something about the origins of classical Japanese poetry and about its technical complexities, conventions, standards, and self-imposed limitations. This can best be done by consulting Brower and Miner's invaluable study, but minimal guidelines are provided in the following pages, which also deal with questions pertinent to *Tales of Ise* alone—its title, authorship, date, structure, and the like—and with Ariwara Narihira, the great ninth-century poet whose shadow hovers over these pages.

JAPANESE COURT POETRY IN THE NINTH AND TENTH CENTURIES

Tales of Ise is anonymous and of uncertain date, and so are a majority of its poems, but it is probably safe to assume that few, if any, of the poems are more recent than 950, and that most of them were written during the ninth century.[2] The poems coincide roughly in period, therefore, with those in the first imperial anthology of Japanese poetry, *Kokinshū,* or *Collection of Ancient and Modern Times,* in whose title "ancient times" means essentially the early decades of the ninth century. There are, moreover, basic similarities of theme, technique, and tone between the two collections, as well as a partial duplication of content. The kinds of poems considered worthy of an imperial anthology were also the kinds admired by the unknown author or authors of *Ise monogatari,* and they represent the practice and taste of contemporary court society. They were indeed so peculiarly a product of that society that they cannot

be discussed without reference to it. Let us consider, for example, the poetic criteria articulated by Ki no Tsurayuki (884–946), the principal literary critic of his day, whose preface to *Kokinshū* systematized and formalized existing practice. Brower and Miner say of Tsurayuki:

> The central value in Tsurayuki's poetic ideal . . . was a strong sense of decorous elegance which involved an emphasis on style, a proper poetic diction, an accepted range of forms and themes, and virtuosity. A good poem was one that responded to given situations with purity of diction and in ways sanctioned by tradition, but one that also possessed a certain originality of treatment. There was a tendency to view materials, subjects, and decorum as aspects of diction, and attitude, technique, and themes as aspects of tone. Such a distinction, reflected in the Preface to the *Kokinshū* by the terms *kotoba,* "diction," and *kokoro,* "spirit," was to remain throughout the tradition as the central concept of the Japanese poetic.[3]

The phrase "decorous elegance" strikes close to the essence not only of Tsurayuki's poetic, but also of the cultural milieu from which the poetic emerged; the words carry the scent of the hothouse atmosphere in which aristocratic Heian poets breathed and worked. This central quality in Heian culture, which Sir George Sansom has called "the rule of taste,"[4] resulted from the interaction between a conscious emphasis on sobriety, restraint, and formality, and a somewhat naïve and romantic emotionalism and love of nature, reinforced by a haunting sense of the transience of worldly things, and accompanied by a stubborn predilection for the beautiful, the decorative, and the opulent. The leaders of this little band of aesthetes walked the tightrope of sensibility with sure-footed artistry, though their less gifted followers lived in constant danger of a tumble into sentimentality.

The rule of taste governed every aspect of a nobleman's life—the manner in which he performed his official functions, his choice of avocations and amusements, his clothing and domestic arrangements, his social relationships, and his attitude toward nature. The importance of the rule led to anxious deliberation, for the insecure, in such apparently trivial matters as choosing between lavender letter paper and blue, because a false step might expose the offender to mortifying censure. Letter writing was a major preoccupation of the society; by correspondence courtiers and ladies kept in touch with friends and relatives and conducted the amorous intrigues to which much of their leisure was devoted. Paper and handwriting were subjected to highly critical scrutiny. The author of *The Gossamer Years,* a tenth-century court lady's diary, says huffily of a message from an admirer, "The paper was rather unbecoming for such an occasion, I thought, and the handwriting was astonishingly bad. Having heard that he was an accomplished penman, I wondered indeed whether he might not have had someone else write it."[8] The handwriting of a cultivated person was expected to reflect impeccable taste—elegance, sophisticated simplicity, and perfect balance.

Readers of *The Tale of Genji* will recall similar displays of fastidiousness, especially in matters having to do with personal attire. Descriptions and appraisals of court ladies' toilettes also account for much of the bulk of other Heian literary works, including the diary of *Genji*'s author, Murasaki Shikibu. The humiliation of one feckless butterfly, transfixed for posterity by Murasaki's sharp eye, is a famous example. "That day," Murasaki wrote, "all the ladies dressed with the utmost magnificence. One however was guilty of a lapse of taste in the color combination at her wrist, and all the great nobles and other courtiers no-

ticed it when she cleared away the things from the imperial presence.... It was nothing very serious, but one shade looked a bit pale."[6]

Especially important to the content and tone of court poetry was the rule of taste as it applied to the natural world. The lives and interests of the nobility centered on the imperial city of Heian. To be forced to reside in the provinces was to be exiled; long journeys were undertaken with extreme reluctance, attended by timorous (if justified) misgivings about the dangers of the road, and lamented in floods of plaintively nostalgic poems. But the incomparable beauty of Japan's mountains and streams persuaded these city dwellers to build suburban villas and hunting lodges, and to venture on pilgrimages to nearby shrines and temples. No pastime was considered more elegant, and none was more typical of the age, than a brief excursion into the countryside, where, with a few companions, a gentleman sipped wine and composed verses inspired by the ever-changing face of nature. In the capital itself, every aspect of nature could be observed in the landscape gardens of the great mansions, whose lakes, streams, hills, rocks, and plants were designed with infinite pains to suggest well-known scenic places and to appear to advantage at different seasons of the year. There one might watch the nocturnal voyaging of the harvest moon, select a single perfect chrysanthemum to accompany a gift, or, seated alone of a wintry morning, indulge in elegant musings on the resemblance between plum blossoms and snow.

No well-bred person remained unmoved in the presence of nature, and few aristocrats allowed their reactions to pass unrecorded in verse. A nature poem was expected to demonstrate a capacity for close observation, a keen appreciation of beauty, and, most important, a sensitivity to the

poignancy inherent in the relationship between beauty, ephemerality, and the human condition. On viewing a cherry tree in full bloom, someone like Prince Genji, the idealized hero of *The Tale of Genji,* was likely to write of the evanescence of the blossoms, or to reflect that although the tree would bloom again, man's own springtime comes but once. In the cicada's papery husk and the withering plumes of summer grasses, Heian poets recognized the tyranny of time; and nature's more permanent aspects inspired them to melancholy reflections on the brevity of human existence and the uncertainties besetting man's troubled passage through the world.

A courtier responded, then, to the first green of spring, to snowfall, mist, and rain, to the scattering of blossoms. And the tone of the response was the tone of Heian society. Its basis was a love of beauty so sophisticated, so highly refined, that it permitted no careless outpouring of spontaneous feeling. Emotion was conveyed through understatement and veiled allusion, through the subtle, half-spoken evocation of a mood; it was contained within channels of formality and propriety and expressed with decorous elegance.

The cultivated man was expected to display equal taste and sensitivity in his relations with others. He conducted affairs of the heart with delicate solicitude for the lady's feelings, as when Prince Genji, blundering into a relationship with an awkward, red-nosed princess, made himself permanently responsible for her happiness because it was clear that she would never attract another suitor.[7] In other social relationships as well, the requisites were tact, a ready wit, and discernment—the ability to grasp the nuances of a situation and respond appropriately, preferably in verse.

Poetry concerned with human relations reflects these so-

cial requirements, and so does most nature poetry, because natural phenomena are almost invariably presented in terms of their effect on man in a specific situation with social connotations. Heian poems are occasional pieces, instruments of social intercourse, and much of their interest derives from the circumstances of their composition. How well has the poet met the implicit challenge? How skillfully has he shown his mastery of the rule of taste?

Kokinshū and *Tales of Ise* both contain the following poem by Ariwara Narihira (KKS 884, IM 82):

Akanaku ni	Must the moon disappear
Madaki mo tsuki no	In such haste,
Kakururu ka	Leaving us still unsatisfied?
Yama no ha nigete	Would that the mountain rim
Irezu mo aranan.	might flee
	And refuse to receive her.

It is apparent, of course, that Narihira and others have been watching the moon, and that they regret its setting. The ritual of gazing at the moon has the prestige of Chinese precedent, familiar from innumerable poems and paintings, and is thus immediately classifiable as a gentleman's pursuit. The poet also demonstrates the requisite feeling for the impermanence of beauty. But it is the apt response to specific circumstances that makes the poem truly elegant. To appreciate the response, we need the background provided by *Tales of Ise*'s prose context, which reveals that the imperial prince Koretaka, off on a hunting trip with a group of attendants, has spent most of a long spring day under blossoming cherry trees, sipping wine and chanting verses. At the prince's villa, the company has

sat far into the night, gazing at the moon. When at last the moon sinks toward the hills and the prince prepares to retire, Narihira detains him with the poem *Akanaku ni,* a graceful, compressed allegorical expression of sentiments that in another society might be spelled out at tedious length: "Today has been a rare experience. You have allowed us to accompany you to the fields; you have entertained us most graciously at dinner. We shall never forget the cherry blossoms at Nagisa, the poems on the return journey, or the stories this evening as the moon climbed the skies. It is hard indeed that such a day in such company must end. Will you not linger with us a while? Life with its precious moments passes as swiftly as the moon crosses the heavens; let us enjoy it while we may."

In the eyes of Japanese critics, *Akanaku ni* succeeds because it combines grace, sensitivity, and wit in a moving expression of the dominant aesthetic ideal of the age, the blend of elegance and pathos known as *mono no aware.* The same is thought to be true, in varying degree, of the other poems in *Ise monogatari*—all are model responses to social situations, evoking mono no aware, the pathos of life, by means of apt metaphors, elegant diction, and images rich in literary connotations.

The Western reader who knows something of Japanese classical literature may, however, question the claim of a poem like *Akanaku ni* to wit, originality, or genuine emotion. The Heian Japanese very early abandoned the freedom and experimentation of the *Man'yōshū* period and limited themselves to a 31-syllable, 5-line verse form and a rigidly restricted range of topics, techniques, vocabulary, and images. The rules of the game left scant room for what we should regard as creative expression. Tsurayuki and his

colleagues dictated the acceptable themes: love, nature, travel, sorrow, happy events, and a few others. These are, to be sure, universal poetic staples, but nevertheless the list represents a rejection of such topics as poverty, warfare, and the life of the lower classes, which had been exploited in earlier periods but were now stigmatized as vulgar, distressing, and violent.

Similarly, the *Kokinshū* arbiters of taste prescribed a limited range of poetic techniques, which were to grow wearisomely familiar with the passage of time. One of the most important was the pivot word, or *kakekotoba,* so called because the poet used it as a pivot between two series of sounds with "overlapping syntactical and semantic patterns."[8] In a rough English approximation, Goldilocks might have said, after inspecting her bedroom, "I have seen a bearly credible sight."

Another standard technique was the associative word, or *engo,* "a word that has or creates an 'association' with a preceding word or situation, often bringing out an additional dimension of meaning."[9] There is a simple example in *Tales of Ise* (28):

Nadote kaku	Why is it now
Au go katami ni	Impossible for us to meet—
Nariniken	We who were bound together
Mizu morasaji to	Like the strands of a close-woven
Musubishi mono o.	basket
	Impermeable to water.

The engo is *musubishi,* a form of *musubu,* "to bind together," which is homophonous with *musubu,* "to scoop up water with the hands"; the association is with *mizu,* "water," in line 4.

A somewhat less common device, used primarily for formal occasions, was the *makura kotoba* (pillow word), or fixed epithet, normally five syllables long: thus, *chihayaburu,* "mighty," an epithet for "god." New makura kotoba had been created freely in the preceding literary period, but the stock remained virtually stationary during Heian times, and in many cases the original meaning was only vaguely surmised. Such sonorous, majestic words were thought to invest a poem with an aura of dignity and formality.

Similar to the pillow word, but considerably more flexible, was the *jo* (preface), or introductory statement, often untranslatable, which was joined to "the basic 'statement' of the poem . . . by word play, by similarity of sound, or by an implied metaphorical relationship."[10] In the following travel poem from *Tales of Ise* (9), the preface is related to its statement by an identity of sounds (*utsu/utsutsu*). The first two lines serve merely to introduce *utsutsu* ("reality," "one's waking moments") and to furnish an oblique indication of the poet's whereabouts:

Suruga naru	Beside Mount Utsu
Utsu no yamabe no	In Suruga
Utsutsu ni mo	I can see you
Yume ni mo hito ni	Neither waking
Awanu narikeri.	Nor, alas, even in my dreams.

Diction, imagery, allegory, metaphor, and simile offered certain possibilities for freshness and variety, but only about 2,000 words and a prescribed list of images were acceptable, and metaphors tended to conform to predictable patterns. In the poem below (IM 10), the reader knows at once that someone is asking a man to marry a girl:

Miyoshino no	The wild goose that shelters
Tanomu no kari mo	On Miyoshino's fields
Hitaburu ni	Cries that it looks
Kimi ga kata ni zo	In your direction
Yoru to naku naru.	And in no other.

By the end of the classical period, the wild goose had appeared many times in the role of a young girl, and she was a rather tired old bird.

In the ninth century, however, the wild goose was young and the full potentialities of kakekotoba and engo were yet to be tapped. Narihira stands on the threshold of the classical tradition; his moon poem is no mere intellectual exercise sustained by shopworn verbal tricks, no lace curtain mono no aware, but the real thing. And one can say the same, with certain reservations, of other poems in *Tales of Ise*.

But even though some *Ise* poets may have been innovators who helped to shape the classical tradition, are not poems like *Akanaku ni* little more than adaptations of Chinese prototypes? The question raises still others. How did the ninth-century Japanese develop the set of values symbolized by the phrase mono no aware? What accounts for the peculiarly social role of their poetry, and for the importance of that role? How original is even the best Japanese court poetry? Without some notion of the extent of Chinese influence in all these matters, one can neither appraise the poetry in *Tales of Ise* nor properly understand the cultural milieu from which it emerged.

CHINA AND THE JAPANESE POETIC TRADITION

Tales of Ise, like all recorded Japanese literature of its day, is a product of court society, written by and for members

of a tiny elite of perhaps a thousand persons, or about one-tenth of one per cent of the total population. And it owes its place in literary history to a rather peculiar feature of that society—the importance attached to the composition and recitation of the 31-syllable classical verse known as the *waka,* or "Japanese poem." To understand how poetry came to occupy a central position in the cultural life of the Japanese aristocracy, one must look for a moment at the source of Japan's higher civilization, China—and particularly at the great T'ang empire (618–906), upon whose cultural riches the Japanese drew with insatiable ardor and lasting effect during the seventh, eighth, and early ninth centuries.

The Confucian Ideal. Around the beginning of the seventh century, when large-scale Japanese borrowing began, Chinese civilization was already 2,000 years old. Confucius had died a millennium earlier. One great empire, the Han (206 B.C.–A.D. 220), had risen and perished; and a second, the T'ang, was entering its glorious career after the 350-year interlude of political disunity known as the Six Dynasties period (ca. 222–ca. 589), during which barbarian states had occupied the ancient seat of civilization in the north, and the center of Chinese culture had shifted to the south.

During the Han dynasty, there had evolved a concept of government that was basically to affect the development of Chinese literature, and thus of Japanese literature as well. It postulated the necessity of a specially trained and specially selected governing class, and it identified that class with the Confucian literati, who were thought to be the "cultivated men" envisioned in the famous essay known as "The Great Learning."[11] The nature of the education and personal traits desirable in such scholar-bureaucrats was still somewhat nebulous in Han times, but tradition and

the operation of the T'ang civil service examination system had prescribed their essential attributes fairly clearly by the period with which we are concerned.

The ideal product of the T'ang examination system was a man who had devoted years to studying the lessons of the past, as recorded in official histories and the teachings of the philosophers; who applied as an official the knowledge and wisdom thus acquired; and who used his leisure hours to "cultivate his person" for the good of the state. He aspired to skill in calligraphy, for example, because he and his peers felt that handwriting was an index of character—only the serenity and confidence born of uprightness and wisdom could produce brush strokes that combined strength with elegance, and firmness with sensitivity and moderation. He was a good amateur painter, because he hoped to enrich his spirit and discipline his mind by contemplating the mysteries of nature and by mastering the exacting materials, the silk and brush, that permitted no hesitancy, no false starts or erasures. (He did not attempt to become more than an amateur, because he regarded the professional painter as an artisan.) He performed and listened to improving music, which by its purity, restraint, and classic balance promoted qualities of gravity and decorum. Popular music he regarded as subversive of man's higher instincts.

Taste in literature was governed by similar considerations. The T'ang man of letters ignored or attacked works of fiction because he considered them tissues of lies and suspected them of undermining the qualities of sincerity, honor, nobility, and decorum that had to be cultivated, particularly among the ruling elite, if the nation were to be properly ordered. Classical poetry he esteemed as the highest form of literature. There could be no more dignified

and wholesome employment of one's free hours than savoring the poems of past generations and composing what one hoped might be considered worthy successors. To a Confucian gentleman, composing poetry, like painting and playing music, was a form of self-discipline and self-improvement. He did not simply sit down and toss off a lover's lament or an effusion on the beauties of nature. He ordered his thoughts coolly and soberly. He considered the philosophical implications of his theme. Summoning the wraiths of earlier poems on similar topics, he added subtle overtones for the perceptive reader by borrowing a pair of adjectives, a turn of speech, or an allusion. And finally, with due attention to complicated rules of prosody, he produced a few choice lines.

The Confucian value system, in short, assigned to poetry a role that was political, moral, and social; poetry was a useful adjunct to government because it improved the quality of the ruling class. Official sponsorship at the highest level is the basic reason for the predominant place of poetry in the literary traditions of China and Japan. In both countries it was taken for granted that a cultivated man would compose poems; poetry writing was not only an approved but a compulsory avocation.

In Japan, where imported values faced persistent indigenous challenges, and also in China, especially during periods of political turmoil, the moral and political benefits to be derived from versification sometimes were at best perfunctorily recognized. Confucian sponsorship guaranteed poetry respectability and a continuing social role, but did not prevent it from developing along lines that were often notably not Confucian. This was particularly true in China during the Six Dynasties period, whose poetic practice was admired and imitated by Heian courtiers.