

Introduction

Murmured Conversations is an annotated translation of *Sasamegoto* (1463–1464), one of the most important poetic treatises of the medieval period in Japan, and considered the most representative in its thoroughgoing construction of poetry as a way to attain, and signify through language, the mental liberation (*satori*) that is the goal of Buddhist practice. In one sense, this argument is a clear reflection on its author, Shinkei (1406–1475). Shinkei was a Tendai cleric with the rank of Provisional Major Bishop (*Gondaisōzu*) and headed his own temple, the Jūjūshin'in, in Kyoto's Higashiyama hills. He is best known today as one of the most brilliant poets of *renga* (linked poetry), as an equally distinctive voice in the classic *waka* form, and as the poet who, in his critical writings, formulated the principles of *renga* as a serious art in the Muromachi period (1392–1568).¹ *Sasamegoto* is the major work in this critical enterprise. That it is also a representative work in the larger cultural history is due to its articulation of *renga*, and poetry in general, as an existential praxis, a Way.

The idea that the practice of the arts, or of any skill for that matter, constitutes a Way (*michi*) is a defining characteristic of medieval Japanese cultural history. The term refers to the existence of guidelines and standards to follow, as embodied by the works and teachings of past and present masters. In this sense, the Way is akin to an academy or college without walls, a virtual institution of learning constituted by various circles of students, teachers, and an archive of circulating texts defining its history, traditions, and models. However, what is distinctive about the medieval notion of praxis is that it is everywhere—and inevitably—informed by what used to be called “the wisdom of the East,” mainly Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, philosophies that teach self-cultivation in harmony with a larger whole, be it the way of Heaven, of the cosmic Tao, or of immanent Suchness. This

means that the skill of doing and making is also the *embodied* endeavor to overcome the small, narrow, and constricted self by means of an unflagging discipline aiming to release the large and generous self. Hence the Way is an existential praxis whose goal is not technical competence per se, beyond competence, there is a consummate praxis that is also, paradoxically, identified with the realm of freedom, of a “self-less,” intuitive spontaneity equal to, because in harmony with, the universe. *Sasamegoto* lays out a renga—or, more broadly, an *uta no michi* (Way of Poetry) by inscribing a history, a set of models, and principles of authentic practice for its own time. But its distinctive character lies in its author’s conviction that poetic praxis is equally the conduct of a life lived purely and a pedagogy of the mind aimed at liberating the Buddha-nature in oneself, the one being a manifestation of the other.

Most of the renga handbooks that proliferated during the Muromachi period were concerned with defining its poetic vocabulary and techniques, or with explaining the complex body of rules and procedures governing linked verse sessions. In brief, they were principally practical guides to composition. *Sasamegoto* is a distinctive exception in the comprehensiveness of its approach and its deep-probing inquiry into the mental foundations of the poetic process. The comprehensiveness also reflects the fact that the treatise is conceived within the background of the whole classical waka tradition. One of Shinkei’s aims was apparently to locate renga firmly within the mainstream of Japanese poetic development, instead of being perceived merely as an anomalous genre, with no vital link to the great past. By tradition, Shinkei meant, of course, courtly literature in general—the Heian narratives and the successive imperial waka anthologies, as well as the *Man’yōshū*. More specifically, however, he had in mind the works of Fujiwara Teika and the other poets of the *Shinkokinshū* period. Not only did they represent for him the apogee of waka’s history, he rightly saw that their techniques of syntactic fragmentation and elliptical ambiguity were particularly relevant for a genre like renga, because of the brevity of each successive verse unit, and the formal separation between them, which required a subtle rather than obvious connection to be poetic at all.

Poetic appeal, what Shinkei loosely calls *en*, is in a sense what *Sasamegoto* is all about. By the time the treatise appeared, the long 100-verse form of renga had been on the scene for some two centuries and a half, since the beginning of the Kamakura period (1185–1333). By late Kamakura, the formal structural requirements of the genre—that is, the integrity of the single

fourteen- or seventeen-syllable verse, and the resulting firm separation between contiguous verses, had already been perfected in the work of commoner renga masters like Zen'a and his disciples Junkaku and Shinshō. In the Nambokuchō period (1336–92), Nijō Yoshimoto (1320–88) compiled the first official renga anthology, the *Tsukubashū* (1356–57), in collaboration with the most famous renga master of the time, Zen'a's successor, Gusai. And in 1372, he consolidated existing practices and rules for composing the 100-verse sequence into a definitive canon called *Renga shinshiki* (The New Renga Code). In Shinkei's view, the "ancient" period of Gusai and Yoshimoto marked renga's first flowering, a valuable precedent well worth close study and emulation. He valued the work of the old renga masters for their firm and intelligent handling of *tsukeai*, the link between verses, and Gusai in particular for the added dimension of spiritual profundity in his poetry.

Constituted of a clear and strong poetic diction, a resonant tension in the link between verses, and a degree of poetic inwardness in feeling and content, the serious renga style espoused by Gusai and Yoshimoto failed to hold the field in the forty or so years following their deaths. In the first few decades of the Muromachi period, that is to say, well into Shinkei's own time, the overall quality of renga suffered a marked decline. Various reasons have been advanced for this. One is the popularity of the style of Gusai's disciple Shūa, which was characterized by verbal and technical ingenuity, arrestingly witty conceptions, and an almost total lack of poetic overtones. Such a style predictably made a strong impression on linked-verse enthusiasts then and later; it became a model for imitation by practitioners who had neither Shūa's wit nor his talent. In short, renga reverted back to its basic and primitive nature as an amusing game of words, in which the object is to surpass the preceding verse in cleverness rather than to relate to its integral meaning. Another reason that has been advanced for the decline of serious renga was the growing commercialism in linked-verse milieus throughout the country. The increasing demand to learn renga even among the lower, uneducated classes gave rise to professional *rengashi* (teachers of linked verse), itinerant "monks" who taught renga for a livelihood without necessarily possessing any particular learning or poetic training themselves. Somewhat like professional gamblers, they also pitted their skills at versification against those of amateurs at popular renga matches, in which money was at stake and victory was apparently won on the basis of the ingenuity of the link and the quantity of verses one could produce in a single session. But all this was an inevitable consequence of renga's sheer popularity. The

most logical reason for the form's decline during the so-called middle period must simply be the absence of any poets of real stature who could steer it back to the course set for it by Yoshimoto and Gusai.

This was the state of the art when Sōzei, Shinkei, and the other poets later dubbed the *renga shichibiken* (seven sages of renga) appeared on the scene and in the ensuing five or so decades in their various ways provided the leadership and focus that had been wanting. *Sasamegoto*, Shinkei's extensive formulation of the "True Way" (*makoto no michi*) of renga is the major contribution to this enterprise. As stated earlier, part of his procedure was to distinguish a tradition for the art in the shape of the *Shinkokinshū* period in waka and the *Tsukubashū* in renga. The fact that he invariably illustrates his points by quoting from the poetry of these two periods serves, among other things, to make this evident.

Another, and without doubt the most central, aspect of Shinkei's approach is its thoroughgoing emphasis on *kokoro*. Such an emphasis on *kokoro*, understood in its primary sense of "meaning," "feeling," or significance, manifests Shinkei's strong reaction to the current and opposite tendency to view renga as a game of words, or *kotoba*, a competition of wits that did not necessarily have to signify anything. This is nothing more than the fundamental nature of all linked poetry, be it renga or the haikai of the Edo period (1600–1868), and the basis of its overwhelming popularity. The renga or haikai verse is at base a playful and liberating exercise in verbal self-assertion. The *maeku* is in every instance a riddle, question, or problem propounded by another; success in confronting the other with a solution gives pleasure, and failure frustration. The view of renga as a verbal exercise is a natural consequence of the fact that it is in a sense an artificial speech, a "foreign" language with a lexicon adopted from the vocabulary of classical literature and a grammar of sequencing evolved from the practice of the ancient Kamakura-Nambokuchō masters. In the popular understanding, the ability to "speak" the language fluently and fast was the whole point; the object was to demonstrate one's knowledge and skill in summoning the words that correspond to or are associated with those in the preceding verse, and to derive some personal satisfaction thereby.

It is this peculiar tendency to regard verbal dexterity, articulateness per se, as the aim of renga practice that moved Shinkei to deal in *Sasamegoto* with the fundamental question of what constitutes poetry, what endows language with the charismatic appeal or attractiveness that he calls *en*, his general term for poetic beauty. Predictably, perhaps, his answer was that

words should signify something beyond themselves; they must be expressive. And the something they must express is nothing more or less than the mind of the poet himself. In other words, *Sasamegoto* places man, the human being himself, in the center of the poetic nexus, not his craft or skill with words. The poet is first and foremost a person striving to know himself and the world around him, and only secondarily an artisan of language. In this second sense of “mind” or “spirit,” *kokoro* does not refer, however, to the individual subjectivity as such. It is rather the inner process of contemplating the self and the universe from a distance, as it were, the discipline of meditation (*shikan*, *zen*) whose effect is the liberation of the ego from subjectivity. Although poetic (or Buddhist) training (*shugyō*) necessarily consists on the first level of learning how to wield the special language of renga with skill and intelligence, its ultimate aim is to arrive at this disinterested mental state that is the only true source of great poetry, the mind-ground (*shinji*) achieved through meditation, the Buddha mind.

In Shinkei’s distinctive poetics, moreover, mental detachment is not to be confused with a state of dry or cynical indifference. On the contrary, it is through the process of disengagement from the small, ego-centered self that an individual is able to realize fully the pathos and yet the marvel of his own existence, and, by extension, that of every person, as the site of a network of temporal and hence mutable circumstances that is at once real and empty at the same time. From this perspective, a poetic sensibility is equivalent to the state of heightened receptivity, a kind of inward spaciousness, that enables an authentic poetry, including the meaningful dialogue requisite in renga as a collective genre. *Sasamegoto*’s ideal renga discourse is not an exercise in self-assertiveness but a moving conversation about universal human experience and the underlying truths of existence.

This is not to say that a renga sequence should sound like a philosophical discourse. The type of poetry that *Sasamegoto* defines in so many words is what in modern criticism would be described as symbolic, the genre that Robert Brower and Earl Miner in *Japanese Court Poetry* have identified as “descriptive symbolism” in the work of the *Shinkokinshū* poets. Shinkei calls it *yūgen*, *ushin*, *taketakaki tei*, and so on, but all these styles have in common that the poet’s subjectivity is wholly absent from the poem, and that the imagery is but a device to reveal, to render palpable, the true face of the Real (*jissō*) as understood in a Mahayana Buddhist sense.

The foregoing account aims simply to provide a general literary-historical and conceptual background for reading *Sasamegoto*; a closer analytical

presentation of its content will be found in the commentaries I have written for each section, which are in turn based on the annotation, without which much of the treatise is unintelligible.

Sasamegoto is in two parts. The first was written in the fifth month of Kanshō 4 (1463), when Shinkei was on religious retreat in Hachiōji Shrine in his home village in Kii Province (Wakayama Prefecture), praying for the resolution of the battles for succession to the headship of the Hatakeyama daimyō clan, who had become his temple's principal patrons. The second part, conceived as a supplement to the first, was undertaken a year later, in the fifth month of Kanshō 5 (1464), when the wished-for resolution had come to pass, the victorious Hatakeyama Masanaga was appointed Deputy Shogun, and Shinkei was back in his temple in the capital. In the Prologue, the work claims to be no more than a trivial, inconsequential conversation between two amateur poetry enthusiasts. However, it quickly proves to be a wide-ranging dialogue between a visiting master who is an authority on renga and waka, and a local renga amateur, who frequently represents the common, ignorant, and misguided view, but is desirous of learning the True Way. The colophon quoted below from one of the common-edition texts explains the origins of the work; marked by a self-deprecation that is a convention in such colophons, it is believed to have been appended by Shinkei at a later date, when someone requested a copy of the two parts or volumes.

Around the first ten days of the fifth month in the fourth year of Kanshō [1463], while I was on a religious retreat at the collective shrine in Ta'i Village, Kishū, certain renga enthusiasts importuned me so strongly for a book of instructions that it was difficult to refuse. The task was so hurried, and the writing so deficient, that these two volumes deserve only to be cast into the fire after an initial glance. However, although they are in dire need of corrections, I am presenting the manuscript drafts as requested. (*RH*, p. 23)

Part One is Shinkei's basic, introductory teaching; here he deals with renga's history and tradition and simultaneously delivers a scathing critique of the state of the art in his day, defines the stylistic qualities of superior poetry in both renga and waka; analyzes the nature of linking or *tsukeai* from a structural viewpoint; and illustrates a number of bad poetic practices. In all this, his main concern, however, is to define the Way of Poetry as essentially a process of spiritual cultivation; in Shinkei's critical discourse, most literary questions have a tendency to return to the main issue of the nature of poetic sensibility, and that in turn to the Buddhist philosophy of mind.

Part Two may be said to be the innermost or esoteric section of the treatise; some of the questions raised in Part One are taken up again for re-examination, the central principles of the Way are stated and confronted directly, and their grounding in Buddhist intellectual philosophy manifestly revealed. As will be evident to the careful reader, Buddhism is present here not only as the conceptual ground but as a method of exposition. I refer to the fact that Shinkei frequently resorts to citation and anecdotal example from Buddhist scripture, in addition to Chinese secular classics such as the Confucian *Analects* (*Lunyu*, J. *Rongo*), Japanese Buddhist works, especially Mujū's *Collection of Sand and Pebbles* (*Shasekishū*), and a variety of poetic anthologies and critical works. In the Notes, these eclectic sources have been identified whenever possible and whole long passages from them translated in order to lay out the discursive context of the quotation in the original source and hence clarify the nature of Shinkei's creative appropriation of it in *Sasamegoto*. Attention to the sources reveals the breadth of Shinkei's learning, certainly, but also the nature of the treatise as a virtual mosaic of quotations, a radically intertextual piece of writing, whose bearing is not infrequently unintelligible without tracking the reference and its usage in various other discourses.

In many places, the style of exposition in *Sasamegoto* may be characterized as *renga*-like. One is confronted with a series of quotations and indirect references without an explicit explanation of the connections among them or between the main argument and the example. More radically, Shinkei's discourse is *Zen*-like in the way it occasionally concludes a section by rejecting the absolute validity of the dichotomy implicit in both the question posed by the interlocutor and his reply to it. Section 49 on the Close Link and the Distant Link, for instance, while clearly upholding the superiority of the Distant over the Close, ends by warning against an attitude of partiality for either one. This is consistent with the mutually defining concepts of mutability (or contingency) and impartiality that ground, yet also self-deconstruct, his argument. It is one with the grand finale of the treatise, its sweeping declaration, after all the discriminations so painstakingly argued, that "The true Way of Poetry is akin to the Great Void; it wants in nothing and is in nothing superfluous." It is for all these reasons that I have felt it necessary to append a commentary after each section (except for the Prologue).

For the longest time, I hesitated to include the collection of fifty verse pairs illustrating the Ten Styles at the end of Part One; it is not supported by any accompanying exposition and is believed to have been appended at a

later date. However, mindful of the necessity for fidelity to my source text, and the potential that some graduate student might find it useful as a source for the complex problem of the Ten Styles concept, I eventually included it as well, and so the translation is complete.² The text used for the translation is edited and annotated by Kidō Saizō in *Rengaronshū Haironshū*, *NKBT* 66 (1961). It belongs to the manuscript-draft or common-edition line of *Sasamegoto* texts that were in popular circulation in the Muromachi period, and of which some seventeen copies have been preserved. For comparative purposes, I have also consulted the version edited by Ijichi Tetsuo in *Rengaronshū Haironshū Nogakuronshū*, *NKBZ* 51 (1973). It belongs to the variant or revised-edition line stemming from a revised manuscript believed to have been written by Shinkei himself while in the Kanto during the Ōnin War. Only two copies of this later version exist, evidence that it did not circulate as widely as the original edition. Its major feature is a generally better organization of material; discussions of a given topic, located in two or three places in the manuscript-draft line, are here gathered in one place. This said, however, the editing is not necessarily an unqualified improvement; the transfer and amalgamation into one of two or three sections answering to separate (though related) questions in the original has resulted in diffusing the original thrust and specific significance of certain passages. I have therefore decided to base the translation on the earlier version in the interest of clarity, and of preserving the initial, random shape of Shinkei's discourse as he responded to a request for a book of instruction from the local amateurs in his home village. This text retains a kind of immediacy; the writing has the feel of a conversation (despite—or perhaps precisely because of—the abbreviation of the interlocutor's part), which at times rises to the eloquence of a sermon and at other times reads like the outline of a lecture to be elaborated orally. The translation follows the numbering of the sections in the Kidō edition; similarly, aside from a few minor modifications, I have for convenience adopted the titles Kidō provides for each section.