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Contemporary Japanese Poetry and Politics: An Overview

This study will examine two different types of poetry that can be broadly classified as "political" in an attempt to reach an understanding of the interaction between politics and poetry in modern Japan. The first sampling of poetry will be taken from the Internet and will be amateur verse belonging to such traditional genres of poetry as *haiku* / *senryū* and *tanka* that can be classified as agitprop poetry. The second more substantive sampling will be taken from "professional" poets and will mainly fall into the *shi* (free verse) category. I will also discuss various literary critics and also thinkers on aesthetics from both Japan and the West to further elucidate the relationship between poetry and politics, to elaborate a broad definition of the political domain appropriate to Japanese verse, and also to investigate the issue of how to read and evaluate poetry as literary art. The study will be divided into five parts: first, the introduction outlining and probing the issues under discussion, next, an examination of Japanese agitprop poetry drawn from the Internet, then a brief interregnum on (literary) theory focusing on two theoreticians, Yoshimoto Takaaki (1924–2012) from Japan and Jonathan Culler (b. 1944) from the West, followed by an investigation of contemporary free verse political poetry, specifically the verse of Minashita Kiryū (b. 1970), Misumi Mizuki (b. 1981), Yotsumoto Yasuhiro (b. 1959), and Arai Takako (b. 1996).

Keywords: Japan, Politics, Poetry, Agitprop, Contemporary, Internet, Theory, Japanese Literature

Introduction

In this study I will examine two different types of poetry that can be broadly classified as "political" in an attempt to reach an understanding of the interaction between politics and poetry in modern Japan. The first sampling of poetry will be taken from the Internet and will be amateur verse belonging to such traditional genres of poetry as *haiku* / *senryū* and *tanka*. The second more substantive sampling will be taken from "professional" poets and will mainly fall into the *shi* (free verse) category.[1] In addition I will discuss various literary critics and also thinkers on aesthetics from both Japan and the West to further elucidate the relationship between poetry and politics, to elaborate a broad definition of the political domain appropriate to Japanese verse, and also to investigate the issue of how to read and evaluate poetry as literary art. Thus, this study will be divided into five parts: first, the introduction outlining and probing the issues under discussion, next, an examination of Japanese agitprop poetry drawn from the Internet, then a brief interregnum on (literary) theory followed by an investigation of contemporary free verse political poetry.

I commence my analysis of politics and poetry with a quotation from Thomas S. Davis' 2016 book, "The Extinct Scene: Late Modernism and Everyday Life." Davis argues (following Adorno) for the primacy of form in determining the connections, such as they are, between literature and politics, or literature and history. The notion (and formal category of) form is fundamental to poetry, as we will see later in the comments by Jonathan Culler. Thus, Davis' comments here are relevant to any understanding of the relationship between literature and politics:

> All of these studies ground modernism historically but do not presume that historical and political pressures arrive in literary texts or artworks in any direct, easily discernible way. The political formalism I advance in my reading follows […] from Theodor W. Adorno's dictum from "Aesthetic Theory": "The unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form." […] What Adorno calls society is not "directly visible" in art, nor is its penetration into artworks "immediate." Instead, historical and social antagonisms appear in aesthetic form in indirect, highly mediated ways. For Adorno, formal complexity does not detach art from its historical conditions of possibility. No work of art, not even those hermetic works of Samuel Beckett and Franz Kafka that Adorno so prized, ever attains pure autonomy or pure separation. The internal dialectics of an artwork disclose for us the contradictions of its historical moment. We might say that Adorno's analysis thaws the frozen dichotomy of immanence (formalism) and transcendence (historicism), putting this static binary opposition into motion. Be-

[1] The term "professional poets" indicates poetry written by professional authors, who may earn a living by writing prose, in addition to their verse production. *Tanka* is a traditional genre of poetry dating back to the beginnings of the Japanese state, generally composed in a 5/7/5/7/7 syllabic format. *Haiku* developed a few centuries later and is usually composed in a 5/7/5/ syllabic format; *senryū* has the same syllabic format as *haiku* and is a later variation on *haiku*. For a brief history of tanka *prosody*, see Konishi (1984: 135-156).

> cause this formalist account is dialectical, it preempts the causal structure of certain types of historicism. […] This is what I take Adorno to mean when he states that the aesthetic dialectic "reflects the real one" of an historical process. Reflection, again, is nothing direct. The contradictions and movements within a work of art encrypt and disclose an historical process in its moment of unfolding. If we read for form in this way, then form emerges as "the enabling condition and the product of reading […]. It becomes both theory's/ideology's/history's shadow and the force that permits the text to emerge as ideology's or theory's interlocutor, rather than as its example." As a rehabilitated category of analysis, and as one that does not necessitate the negation of history or the political, form encrypts the multidirectional, multilayered workings of a world-system. The politically inflected analysis we can derive from Adorno formulates a dialectical relation between art and history. History does not determine art's meaning or content, nor is art sealed off from the outside world.[2]

Davis' point is clear: when scrutinizing the themes of poetic compositions, and relating them to society, history or politics we cannot simply read "literary texts or artworks in any direct, easily discernible way" to discover political elements or criticism. Davis asserts that "historical and social antagonisms appear in aesthetic form in indirect, highly mediated ways," he goes on to specify the "internal dialectics of an artwork" as the source or site for such criticism. As he notes, form emerges as "the enabling condition and the product of reading." The German philosopher Theodore W. Adorno (1903–1969) is clearly a major figure in the attempt to construct an aesthetic of reading based on form that will permit us to understand and judge poetry. Therefore, I will cite passages from two works by Adorno that reflect on the experience of art, literature and poetry, and provide a useful methodology for reading and defining political poetry. First from Adorno's "Aesthetic Theory" („Ästhetische Theorie", 1970) translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor.

> That the experience of artworks is adequate only as living experience is more than a statement about the relation of the observer to the observed, more than a statement about psychological cathexis as a condition of aesthetic perception. Aesthetic experience becomes living experience only by way of its object, in that instant in which artworks themselves become animate under its gaze. [...] Through contemplative immersion the immanent processual quality of the work is set free. By speaking, it becomes something that moves in itself. Whatever in the artifact may be called the unity of its meaning is not static but processual, the enactment of antagonisms that each work necessarily has in itself. Analysis is therefore adequate to the work only if it grasps the relation of its elements to each other processually rather than reducing them analytically to purported fundamental elements. [...] Art is historical exclusively by way of individual works that have taken shape in themselves, not by their external association, not even through the influence that they purportedly exert over each other. This is why art mocks verbal definition. That whereby art's existence is constituted is itself dynamic as an attitude toward

[2] Davis (2016: 31-32).

> objectivity that both withdraws from and takes up a stance toward it and in this stance maintains objectivity transformed.[3]

This quotation is instructive for a number of reasons: it proposes a methodology of reading, namely that, "Analysis is therefore adequate to the work only if it grasps the relation of its elements to each other processually rather than reducing them analytically to purported fundamental elements," and in addition "Art is historical exclusively by way of individual works that have taken shape in themselves, not by their external association." This statement points to a criterion of evaluation, reading the artwork as a process, rather than an objective declaration. The second quotation comes from Adorno's "Notes to Literature" („Noten zur Literatur", 1958), translated by Shierry Weber Nicholsen.

> It is commonly said that a perfect lyric poem must possess totality or universality, must provide the whole within the bounds of the poem and the infinite within the poem's finitude. If that is to be more than a platitude of an aesthetics that is always ready to use the concept of the symbolic as a panacea, it indicates that in every lyric poem the historical relationship of the subject to objectivity, of the individual to society, must have found its precipitate in the medium of a subjective spirit thrown back upon itself. The less the work thematizes the relationship of 'I' and society, the more spontaneously it crystallizes of its own accord in the poem, the more complete this process of precipitation will be […]. You may accuse me of so sublimating the relationship of lyric and society in this definition out of fear of a crude sociologism that there is really nothing left of it; it is precisely what is not social in the lyric poem that is now to become its social aspect.[4]

We can read the word "society" here as including politics within its semantic domain. For Adorno then, "The less the work thematizes the relationship of 'I' and society, the more spontaneously it crystallizes of its own accord in the poem, the more complete this process of precipitation will be," or even more explicitly, "it is precisely what is not social in the lyric poem that is now to become its social aspect." We can interpret this statement as providing a template for verse and its relationship with society and politics; in other words, the poem does not need to explicitly frame its contents as political for it to be a political poem.

Later in the same book Adorno sets out an explicit model of evaluation for the lyric poem that is deeply grounded in society (or politics):

> Hence the highest lyric works are those in which the subject, with no remaining trace of mere matter, sounds forth in language until language itself acquires a voice. The unself-consciousness of the subject submitting itself to language as to something objective, and the immediacy and spontaneity of that subject's expression are one and the same: thus language mediates lyric poetry and society in their innermost core. This is why the lyric reveals itself to be most deeply grounded in society when it does not chime in with society, when it communicates nothing,

[3] Adorno (2013: 241).

[4] Adorno (2019: 63).

> when, instead, the subject whose expression is successful reaches an accord with language itself, with the inherent tendency of language.[5]

Here Adorno argues that: "the lyric reveals itself to be most deeply grounded in society when it does not chime in with society, when it communicates nothing." If this description defines the epitome of a lyric poem that is most deeply implicated in society, including politics, then we have a model to follow in our evaluations of political poetry. Manifestly, the domain of the political has been expanded to include a variety of modes of expression and subjects. Also, in Adorno's formulation there is an element of evaluation, as clearly some poems are more successful than others in communicating their meaning, and, as Adorno states, one of the most important evaluative tools is the role of language in poetry. Thus, through a consideration of these various viewpoints by significant and important figures in literary criticism we can establish a model for reading and evaluation, which in general I will follow in my assessments of the examples of political poetry that make up the subjects of discussion in the following analysis.

Agitprop

The first kind of political verse surveyed here is *agitprop*. First, we need to define *agitprop*, therefore I begin with a quotation from Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) – translated by Stuart Hood from Brecht's „Schriften zur Kunst und Literatur" – the German dramatist who in his own way was the master of agitprop theatre:

> So-called agitprop art, at which people, not always the best people, turned up their noses, was a mine of new artistic methods and modes of expression. From it there emerged magnificent, long-forgotten elements from ages of genuine popular art, boldly modified for new social aims: breathtaking contractions and compressions, beautiful simplifications, in which there was often an astonishing elegance and power and a fearless eye for the complex. Much of it might be primitive, but not in that sense in which the spiritual landscapes of bourgeois art, apparently so subtle, are primitive. It is a mistake to reject a style of representation because of a few unsuccessful compositions – a style which strives, frequently with success, to dig down to the essentials and to make abstraction possible. The sharp eyes of the workers penetrated the surface of naturalistic representations of reality. When the workers in "Driver Henschel" said of spiritual analyses, "We don't want to know all that," they were expressing a desire to receive a more accurate image of the real social forces at work under an immediately visible surface. To cite my own experience, they did not object to the fantastic costumes and the apparently unreal milieu of the "Threepenny Opera." They were not narrow – they hated narrowness (their homes were narrow and cramped).[6]

Brecht provides a demanding definition of *agitprop*: "magnificent, long-forgotten elements from ages of genuine popular art, boldly modified for new social aims: breathtaking contractions and compressions, beautiful simplifications, in which

[5] Ibid., 64.

[6] Brecht (1980: 85).

there was often an astonishing elegance and power and a fearless eye for the complex." This kind of *agitprop* is, it goes without saying, the best that an artist and critic such as Brecht can imagine. A negative example or definition of agitprop is provided by Theodor Adorno in his "Aesthetic Theory":

> An agitprop chorus of the unemployed with the performance directive that it be performed in an "ugly" fashion, may have functioned around 1930 as a certificate of correct political opinion, though it hardly ever testified to progressive consciousness; but it was always uncertain if the artistic stance of growling and raw technique really denounced such things or identified with them. Real denunciation is probably only a capacity of form, which is overlooked by a social aesthetic that believes in themes. What is socially decisive in artworks is the content [Inhalt] that becomes eloquent through the work's formal structures.[7]

Again, Adorno stresses form as the key determinant of aesthetic evaluation, even in the case of *agitprop*. Does the Japanese *agitprop* that we will now examine meet Brecht's high standards, or fall into Adorno's lesser category? Let us consider the case of Japanese poetry as *agitprop*. Where could it be found? A reasonable assumption is that poetry on the Japanese Internet can answer the question of what kind of contemporary political verse can be read as *agitprop*. I came across a Japanese web page under the title of 私が東京を変える ("I will change Tokyo") that is divided into sections, including one titled "poetry."[8] The poetry section of this web page lists poems submitted by what appears to be mostly anonymous contributors. The poems are in response to a call for poetry on the website on the theme of "sensō hō haishi" 戦争法廃止 ("Stop the Law that [permits] Wars"). The reason why I wished to investigate Japanese Internet *agitprop* verse, explicitly political verse, was because of the relative lack of censorship, and the freedom of self-publication meant that these poems were not passed through the thick filter or layer of critics, publishers, and media that, by necessity, select and cull published verse volumes in Japan. By this means it is possible to contrast unfiltered *agitprop* verse, as it were, with filtered published political poetry.[9]

On the "I will change Tokyo" webpage, the Japanese phrase "sensō hō haishi" refers in general to a group of laws submitted by the Japanese government in 2015 and passed into law by the Diet that permit the Japanese Self-Defense Forces to use lethal force, loosens the definition of war zones to which Japanese military can potentially be sent and permits the Japanese military to come to the aid of its allies if they come under enemy attack. It is most likely that the phrase

[7] Adorno (2013: 313).

[8] My thanks to Professor Andreas Regelsberger for informing me about the website.

[9] I should also state at the outset that the Japanese Internet contains home pages of virtually all Japanese poets, famous or unfamous, irrespective of poetic genre, and their home pages are literally covered in poetry. So one can find all varieties and modes of Japanese poetry on the Internet, including excellent verse by elite quasi "professional" poets, and verse by amateurs, some excellent, and some not. In this sense, my selection of this webpage is not meant to represent Japanese Internet poetry, amateur or professional.

"laws relating to wars" on the poetry website refers to this legislation. The website called for poems relating to this issue, and subsequently some 1,197 poems were received. What kind of poems were they? The announcement calling for poetry specifically mentioned the traditional genres of *tanka*, *haiku* and *senryū*; it did not mention *shi* (*vers libre*: although some free verses were submitted in the comments). According to the website, the person who is moderating this site is Yamaguchi Azusa (b. 1964), who is a poet and failed independent candidate for local office. Also, the website lists as a prominent supporter the lawyer Utsunomiya Kenji (b. 1946) who was a failed independent candidate for the 2012 and 2014 Tokyo gubernatorial elections.[10]

I picked at random some 150 poems from the 1,197 poems for examination, and skimming through these short verses, it is hard to find any that could be described as poems in the conventional sense; and if a few appear as poetry then it is poetry mostly lacking in literary or aesthetic merit, according to the evaluative criteria outlined above by Brecht and Adorno. These works may be described more properly as *agitprop*, and consequently fall into the lesser category of *agitprop* described by Adorno. My presumption parallels that of the critics cited hitherto; specifically, for art to move readers to action, if only the action of thought or reflection, then the art must have redeeming aesthetic features sufficient to move readers. Later I will expand upon my reasoning, and examine samples of such art using examples drawn from one or two leading contemporary Japanese poets, and also discuss the nature of artistic representation, using as a model Yoshimoto Takaaki's celebrated 1965 book "Gengo ni Totte Bi to wa Nanika" ("What is Beauty in Respect of Language?") and Jonathan Culler's influential book "Theory of the Lyric," published in 2015.

The site has the following sentence written introducing these poems: 国民運動と野党の選挙協力を融合し国民連合政府の樹立で戦争法の廃止を！"Let us abolish the law that [permits] wars by establishing a people's coalition government combining popular movements and cooperation with opposition parties during elections!" This sentence explicitly states that the purpose of the site is political, designed to bring about a change of government through elections. As the moderators of the site are both failed anti-government candidates in elections, the political intent is transparent: to create support for their opposition movement. Given that virtually all political websites advocate political activities, this might seem to be an exercise in the obvious. However, this particular site uses poetry as agitprop to gain support for its political purposes, presumably because some of the organizers are poets. So I will first examine this poetry as propaganda, not from the perspective of its political stance (I am not Japanese, so, in general, do not take a position on legislation before the Diet unless it specifically

[10] All references to the webpage poetry arise from the following pages and URL (accessed June 2018): http://watashiga.org/tokyo/4-57577 私が東京を変える戦争法廃止！575 （通算五次募集）（11・19）(1197)（最終).

impinges upon my political interests as a foreigner), but rather from an aesthetic perspective to ascertain whether the poetry can appeal to the disinterested observer. I have already stated above my conclusion that these verses do not constitute very effective agitprop, in terms of the evaluative criteria of Brecht and Adorno, but I need to prove my case by an examination of selected poems from the website. Although they are not to be counted as belonging to the best political Japanese poetry written in recent years, I have first tried to select examples of the most effective and aesthetically pleasing verses on this website for translation, 11 such poems follow:

日常に非日常がしのびよる　(恵子)

Nichijō ni
Hinichijō ga
Shinobiyoru

Into the everyday
The non-everyday
Skulks
(by Keiko)

This poem is quite skillful, and is the best of the poems that I could find on the website. The changes in legislation designed to alter the balance of the postwar political settlement in Japan are small and piecemeal, carefully calibrated not to disturb the public consciousness, which has been traditionally anti-war. The sense of something sinister creeping into the body politic is here succinctly articulated. The contrast of the paired phrases “nichijō” with “hiinichijō” creates a verbal echo that adds to the effectiveness of the verse.

格差付け徴兵制がお待ちかね (へらずぐち誤字脱字)

Kakusa zuke
Chōheisei ga
Omachikane

Making the poor poorer:
Impatient for
Conscription to be introduced
(by Herazuguchi Gojidatsuji)

The idea here is that as legislation is passed allowing part-time and insecure employment to increase, thus it becomes easier to gain support from the poor to get a job by introducing compulsory conscription.

The two poems above are both *haiku* or *senryū* (the metrical scheme is the same); the following poem is an attempt at a *tanka*, but does not follow the traditional syllable pattern.

平和主義立憲主義民主主義否定の政治はファシズムへの道(山男)

Heiwashugi
Rikkenshugi
Minshushugi
Hitei no seiji wa
Fashizumu e no michi

Peace
Constitutional government
Democracy
Politics opposing this
Leads to fascism
(by Yamaotoko)

The following poems are all *tanka*.

民主主義守れと叫ぶ若者に明日の日本の希望を見つつ(山男)

Minshushugi
Mamore to sakebu
Wakamono ni
Asu no Nihon no
Kibō o mitsutsu

The young
Crying out
Protect democracy!
In the Japan of tomorrow
I detect hope
(by Yamaotoko)

トリチウム水のごとく知らぬ間にどこでも入り込む被曝の危険　(あさお)

Torichiumu
Mizu no gotoku
Shiranu ma ni
Dokodemo irikomu
Hibaku no kiken

Like water
Unknowingly
Tritium
Creeps in everywhere:
The danger of exposure to radiation
(by Asao)

Much verse in contemporary Japan has been composed on the theme of opposing nuclear power, especially since the nuclear meltdown in March 2011. This straight-forward verse falls easily into that category, and demonstrates that the definition of

politics is not confined to a single issue even though the poetry on this website principally concentrates on the legislation permitting the Self-Defense forces to engage in military activities.

隊員の命も夢も弄び愚かな宰相違憲の法律（Rollienne)

Taiin no
Inochi mo yume mo
Moteasobi
Orokana Saishō
Iken no hōritsu

Playing with the
Lives and dreams
Of soldiers
Our stupid PM
Passing laws against the Constitution
(by Rollienne)

This verse refers specifically to the legislation permitting the deployment of Japanese troops overseas in potentially life-threatening situations.

戦後なれ二度の過ち起こさずと平和を願う人々多き(そらはじめ)

Sengo nare
Nido no ayamachi
Okosazu to
Heiwa wo negau
Hitobito ooki

It is the postwar era but
Many people
Still yearn for peace
And for
Our mistakes not to be repeated
(by Sora hajime)

This poem highlights the failure of the postwar settlement to bring lasting peace to the world, and the danger of Japan becoming embroiled in warlike activities.

青き星地球におけよ人類の醜き戦二度と起こさじ (そらはじめ)

Aoki hoshi
Chikyū ni oke yo
Jinrui no
Minikuki ikusa
Nido to okosaji

We live on a blue planet
The Earth
Never should there be
Ugly wars
Among humankind!
(by Sora Hajime)

戦争は人も文化も経済も破壊尽くして憎しみの坩堝(勝夫)

Sensō wa
Hito mo bunka mo
Keizai mo
Hakai tsukushite
Nikushimi no rutsubo

War
Destroys
Human culture
And the economy
Creates a crucible of hatred
(by Katsuo)

新聞もテレビも報じぬ不条理を暴くチラシは濡れてにじんで(くに)

Shinbun mo
Terebi mo hōjinu
Fujōri o
Abaku chirashi wa
nurete nijinde

The monstrosities
That neither TV nor
Newspapers make public
But are exposed by fliers
Get wet and smudged
(by Kuni)

楽しみも民主主義あればこそ訴へどネオンの街は月が見えざり(堺川利豊彦)

Tanoshimi mo
Minshushugi areba koso
Uttaedo
Neon no machi wa
Tsuki ga miezari

Though I plead for
The joy that
Only democracy can bring
The neon lights of the city
Blot out the stars
(by Sakaikawari Toyohiko)

This rather sophisticated poem, written in traditional diction, and rhythm, is intriguing as it appears to be a protest against the increasing growth and modernization of Japanese cities, which means that is a protest against the process of modernization itself. However, this is the very same process that introduced the beginnings of democracy to Japan in the late 19th century.

After reading these verses, we recall the words of Theodor Adorno on *agitprop* that fails to succeed in aesthetic terms: "An agitprop chorus of the unemployed with the performance directive that it be performed in an 'ugly' fashion, may have functioned […] as a certificate of correct political opinion, though it hardly ever testified to progressive consciousness; but it was always uncertain if the artistic stance of growling and raw technique really denounced such things or identified with them." There is a little growling in the verses selected (on the other hand, in much of the poetry on the website, growling is everywhere) but certainly correct political opinion, although the critical political stance is clear. Bertolt Brecht's admonitions for powerful *agitprop*, namely, "breathtaking contractions and compressions, beautiful simplifications, in which there was often an astonishing elegance and power and a fearless eye for the complex" do appear in part in some of the poems selected, especially in the first *senryū* by Keiko, but are generally absent from most of the verse translated above. Thus, we can conclude that these poems are blunt to the level of prose declaration, and clearly lack skill as artistic constructions, following the criteria established by Brecht and Adorno. Yet some troping is effective, and the messages are clearly conveyed. I should also note that most, if not all, of the names of the poets are literary sobriquets. For example, the last name refers to the famous anarchist and author Sakai Toshihiko (1871–1933). "Kuni" is a common name shared by both sexes, but it can also mean "country" in the sense of the nation of Japan. "Herazuguchi Gojidatsuji" is a wonderful confection meaning something like: "Endless, mistaken and misshapen written words coming out of a mouth." We may also note that the coalescence of political verse on particular issues such as the laws highlighted by the website above (although some verse on other political subjects also appears on the same website) is but one example of how topical political themes are the major avenue by which poetry constructs responses to political ideas.

Brief Interregnum on Theory

I propose a brief pause at this point in my study to examine one or two theoretical issues that inevitably arise when discussing poetry and politics. I have chosen two theoreticians, Yoshimoto Takaaki (1924–2012) from Japan and Jonathan Culler (b. 1944) from the West, to utilize in my examination of these theoretical issues. Yoshimoto Takaaki is equally famous as a poet and wrote many books on literary theory (among other topics) as well as a famous study on Karl Marx. Yoshimoto wrote two works on Marx in 1964, the year before "What is Beauty in Respect of Language?" appeared. The first was "Marukusu kikō" ("Travels in Marx"), and the second was "Marukusu den" ("A Marx Biography"). These two works were combined into a single volume in 1966, two years later. In 2006, the volume was republished as an ebook. I will not discuss Yoshimoto's view of Marx in any detail here, other than to observe that Marx is very much a key figure in the development of Yoshimoto's own thinking on the economy, culture and society. Yoshimoto's interpretation of Marx differs from his contemporaries in the 1960s, especially in relation to views held at that time by thinkers in the (then) Soviet Union.[11] What is relevant here is the connection, if any, between Marx and modern Japanese poetry. Two quotations from Yoshimoto's book will help to clarify this issue:

> But when I was unable to properly write poetry [as a young man], I immersed myself in Marx. When I was able to write poetry properly, I stopped reading Marx. Unless I believe in the reality of consciousness, in the same sense as trees and rocks exist, I can't write poetry. Marx taught me that consciousness is only consciousness, and this is anti-poetry, it stands poetry on its head […] My understanding of Marx when I was young – the contradiction between anti-poetry and poetry – I don't think has changed much now [when I am much older]. […] Now I believe that the phrase "contradiction between anti-poetry and poetry" is simply replaced in Marx by the contradiction between the concepts of the imaginary (law and the state) and the non-imaginary (civil society, nature).[12]

This quotation does not necessarily illuminate much about Yoshimoto's own poetry; rather, it emphasizes his interpretation of Marx's fundamental conceptual schema. In Yoshimoto's "Shinteki genshōron josetsu" ("An Introduction to Mental Imaginaries", 1971), Yoshimoto further refined his reading of Marx, applying his analytic categories to linguistics and psychology, in short, to human consciousness. In this volume Yoshimoto defines meaning as: "The meaning of language is the sum total of all the relations inherent in the linguistic structures which are seen as referents to consciousness"; and value as: "We can describe the sum total of relations inherent in linguistic structures seen from the self-expression of consciousness as value."[13] Although Yoshimoto relies on Marx for the fundamental notions of meaning and value, in these quotations, we can see how he can construe consciousness

[11] See Noonan (2012: 6-8). Also, see Morton (2003: chap. 3).

[12] Yoshimoto (2012: 9-10).

[13] Quoted Takahashi (1996: 99).

as anti-poetry, how it can stand poetry on its head. Yoshimoto denotes consciousness as an imaginary accessible only through language, which opens up language as the concrete ground from which poetry is born. This implicitly disconnects or denies any direct discursive link between poetry and political rhetoric. The second quotation from "Karl Marx" that follows reinforces this point:

> As a whole, because true philosophies (思想) include the dimensional differences in the bases that they stand upon, it is nothing but a farce for one philosophy to dismiss another based on philosophical reasons. Because for a philosophy to dismiss another is nothing but a universal human principle in the same way as passions dismiss other passions, it is not (the same) thing as a truth dismissing a non-truth. Let alone a fiction of progress dismissing a fiction of anti-progress, which is an absurdity. (For example, the poet Arthur Rimbaud and the thinker Karl Marx coexist inside me without any incongruity, but the poet Rimbaud, with his lonely, bitter abusive language, would never stop ridiculing Marx simply because Marx is a human being. Marx would condemn Rimbaud using concepts like production and communication that Rimbaud would never have given a thought to simply because Rimbaud is one of those stupid daydreamers called poets. It is nonsense to ask which philosophy or way of thinking is true. However, today, Japanese political poets are trying to do just that. As long as you forcibly persist with that nonsense, you, too, cannot avoid being ridiculed by the truth of philosophy).[14]

Yoshimoto takes up the absurdity of political poetry, by which he means verse such as I have quoted from the "I will change Tokyo" website. Yoshimoto here defines poetry as belonging to a different domain from politics, or, to quote his own words, the two domains are bound together in: "the dimensional differences in the bases that they stand upon." Therefore, to argue a political case in poetry in the same way as one would argue that one economic policy is better than the other is not valid; it can only be argued in the domain of political discourse. This is not to say that poetry cannot make political points or that it cannot link with the political domain. I will discuss this issue shortly and illustrate how this is possible. Yoshimoto's own verse did at times hint at the politico-social sphere; however, his verse did not explicitly advocate political change. Such arguments he reserved for his numerous political speeches (in fiery prose, it goes without saying) as the leading spokesman in the postwar era for the New Left in Japan. During the 1960s and 1970s, Yoshimoto targeted poets who abandoned aesthetics for politics in their verse. He wrote many articles and books criticizing this kind of verse, focusing in particular upon wartime poets writing pro-government propaganda.[15]

I will next examine a theoretician from the West on poetry and politics. Jonathan Culler's 2015 book "Theory of the Lyric" has been well received by critics as it seeks to redefine lyric verse in such a way as to rewrite the contemporary hermeneutic that applies to reading poetry. Culler criticizes contemporary historicist readings of poetry in the following way:

[14] Yoshimoto (2012: 148-149).

[15] See Morton (2003: chap. 3).

> Distinguished by its mode of enunciation, where the poet speaks *in propria persona*, lyric becomes the subjective form, with drama and epic as alternately the objective and the mixed forms, […]. This conception of the lyric, as representation of subjective experience, while widely disseminated and influential, no longer has great currency in the academic world. It has been replaced by a variant which treats the lyric not as mimesis of the experience of the poet but as a representation of the action of a fictional speaker: in this account, the lyric is spoken by a persona, whose situation and motivation one needs to reconstruct. This has become the dominant model in the pedagogy of the lyric in the Anglo-American world, if not elsewhere. Students are asked, when confronting a poem, to work out who is speaking, in what circumstances, to what end, and to chart the drama of attitudes that the poem captures. In effect, the dramatic monologue, which puts on stage a character speaking to a defined audience or to him- or herself, has been made the model for lyric, which becomes the fictional imitation or representation of a real-world speech act.[16]

Culler's model of the lyric, although diverse, claims a space for the lyric as an event, often a voice speaking, or as he puts it an "epideictic" (formal, rhetorical) mode of expression. This does not mean that poetry cannot deal with political subjects but as the quote above states, as lyric is a "mimesis of the experience of the poet," it cannot therefore be read as "a representation of the action of a fictional speaker." This means it is fundamentally different from a prose dramatization of a political event. As Culler later argues:

> The indeterminacy of meaning in poetry provides an experience of freedom and a release from the compulsion to signify. With its apparently gratuitous chiming and rhyming, its supplemental metrical organization and uses of lineation […] lyric language works against instrumental reason, prosaic efficiency, and communicative transparency, quite independently of the thematic content of particular lyrics. […] Hegel argues that once prose has taken dominion of the world, and "the mere accuracy of the prosaic way of putting things has become the ordinary rule," to lyric falls the task of transforming "the prosaic consciousness's ordinary mode of expression into a poetic one," working "out of the mind's habitual abstractness into a concrete liveliness" and creating estrangement from the prosaic perception of the world. Lyric's sonorous structures, as they acquire a formal solidity, convey a feeling, Robert Kaufman argues, that we can glimpse alternatives to the concepts that have structured our world. Readers' encounters with anomalous verbal combinations, along with the kinetic effects of rhythm, offer a challenge to homogenized experience. Song has always ministered to pleasure more than industry, and often has been a form of resistance to the political organization of life; and as the written version of song, lyric operates in the same fashion, but with greater verbal artistry and precision.[17]

Culler's argument sees lyric poetry as occupying a different kind of space from political rhetoric or argument: this does not mean that poetry cannot have political connotations or meanings, but, as Yoshimoto notes, because of "the dimensional differences," poetry and prose operate in different ways, and to confuse

[16] Culler (2015: 2).

[17] Ibid., 304-305.

the differences between highly-charged and argumentative political prose, and poetry touching on politics, leads to (in the case of certain Japanese poets) "nonsense." Culler elaborates on these observations by citing Theodor Adorno's essay "On Lyric Poetry and Society" where he explains:

> [Adorno] embraces the claim of his collaborator Max Horkheimer that "art, since it became autonomous, has preserved the utopia that evaporated from religion, insofar as art constitutes a resistance to the economic system," and that "an element of resistance is inherent in the most aloof art." In its aloofness, the lyric is nonetheless "always the subjective expression of a social antagonism;" the greatness of works of art lies in their power "to give voice to what ideology conceals." Historical relations and social antagonisms are the more effectively constellated when the poem does not make the relation between self and society an explicit theme and this relation is allowed to crystalize "involuntarily" within the poem.[18]

If we reread the poems I have culled from the Japanese webpage, then we can see that very few even attempt to permit any involuntary relation between self and society; they mostly reproduce the raw rhetoric of political posters or graffiti as *agitprop*, that is as propaganda that does not fall into the evaluative category of the best such examples of *agitprop* outlined by Brecht, and therefore fail the test of poetic art. Culler maintains that: "For Adorno the oppositional or utopian force of lyric emerges above all in its language, as the evacuation of or resistance to a language of commerce and alienation."[19] Can we find contemporary Japanese poetry that through its linguistic structures, and, (quoting Culler) its "anomalous verbal combinations, along with the kinetic effects of rhythm, [can] offer a challenge to homogenized experience"? I believe we can, and so I turn to the poetry of well-known established Japanese poets.

Contemporary Political Poetry in Japan

As noted above, nowadays, political poetry in Japan is generally topic based, reactions or responses to events that naturally invite political nuance. One topic of interest which will be mentioned below is poverty in contemporary Japan, and the rise of the working poor. The critic Azuma Hiroki (b. 1971) has argued that concern with the growth of the working poor, the "precariat," began to emerge in earnest as a theme in Japanese literature after 2009.[20] This topic was taken up by the media at large, including literary journals, which explains why a special issue on the subject of "Puroretaria bungaku to purekariato bungaku no aida" ("Between Proletarian literature and the literature of the Precariat") was published by Shibundō in the venerable literary journal "Kokubungaku: kaishaku to kanshō" ("Japanese Literature: Interpretation and Commentaries") in April

[18] Ibid., 331.

[19] Ibid., 331-332.

[20] Azuma (2018: 18-19). See also Iwata-Weickgenannt / Rosenbaum (2015).

2010.[21] So, it is no surprise that the topic of the working poor appears in a discussion between the poet Tsujii Takashi (1927–2013) and the critic Miura Masashi (b. 1946) in the July 2009 issue of "Gendaishi techō" ("Contemporary Poetry Handbook") journal. In the course of this discussion, both writers make some interesting observations about the role of poetry, for example, Miura asserts: "The question of why society that is created by human beings oppresses human beings does not belong to the domain of business management but to that of poets."[22] Tsujii describes the nature of political engagement in the present era: "I feel that the belief that Marxism or the Emperor system should be overthrown is already passé."[23] These remarks remind Japanese readers that Tsujii's real name is Tsutsumi Seiji, the older of two brothers who controlled the Seibu or *Saison* group, one of the largest and richest conglomerates in corporate Japanese history (and thus creates a context for Miura's comment about "business management"). Tsujii was awarded a prize for his fiction in 2006 that had links to the Imperial family, and tells Miura in the discussion that he more or less regretted accepting this, which prompts Miura to say: "Logically, following your remarks, the issue of the Emperor system and Marxism reappears. Because both the Emperor system and Marxism are paradoxically forced back into discussion."[24] That there are differences of opinion on these matters held by Japanese is not unusual, but this discussion reveals a sharp disagreement between the poet (and erstwhile businessman) and the critic on politics and literature.

I will henceforth analyse a few poems from a small group of well-known contemporary poets that can be read as political in the way that Culler advocates, and some of which touch on the themes raised in the discussion between Tsujii and Miura.[25] Minashita Kiryū (nom de plume) was born in Kanagawa Prefecture in 1970 and was educated at Waseda University in Tokyo. Her first book of poetry "Onsoku Heiwa" ("Sonic Peace") was published in 2005 and the following year was awarded the Nakahara Chūya Poetry Prize. Her second book of poetry "Zekkyō" ("Border Z") was published in 2008 and was awarded the Bansui Poetry Prize. She has edited various volumes relating to women and society, and also writ-

[21] Interestingly, the articles all focused on fiction and non-fiction; poetry was totally ignored. See Kokubungaku: kaishaku to kanshō (2010).

[22] Gendaishi techō (2009: 30).

[23] Ibid., 31.

[24] Ibid., 32.

[25] I should mention that there are many postwar Japanese poets who wrote political verse critical of society in the 1950s and 1960s including such famous authors as Kusano Shinpei (1903–1988), Ishigaki Rin (1920–2004), Ibaragi Noriko (1926–2006) and the feminist poet Itō Hiromi (b. 1955) but this was in the context of the fierce debates over national sovereignty and the future direction of Japan at a time when the nation had just regained its autonomy after the Allied occupation of the country ended in 1952.

ten a volume of essays on the problems facing contemporary Japanese youth. Minashita lectures under her real name in sociology at various universities in Tokyo.[26]

As a younger poet, Minashita deals with the issues that confront her generation, which are significantly different from those faced by previous Japanese generations. A member of Generation X, Minashita's adolescent years took for granted the Internet, mobile phones and digital devices – the first generation of Japanese to do so. Minashita's youth was also marked by the greatest era of economic stability and prosperity that Japan has ever known. At one time, Japan was the second biggest economy in the world, and some Japanese held out hope of overtaking the US as number one. As an adult Japanese, Minashita has experienced "the lost decade" (now almost two decades) where the Japanese economy fell into a long-term stagnation and a number of concomitant problems arose as a result of the deflationary economy. Minashita's writings on Japanese society deal with the problems of contemporary youth which include no full-time employment, only a series of part-time jobs, and also a large increase in the numbers of homeless in the streets of Japan's cities, and, further, increasing ethnic tensions between the majority of the Japanese population and various Asian minorities who constitute much of the work force of Japan's modern cities. Her poetry reflects this atmosphere of social dislocation, which permeates the same streets where the shops display the marvels of Japan's modern consumer society and especially its electronic and digital products. So, in her poetry the jargon of digital technobabble sits incongruously alongside the demotic dialects of modern Japanese speech. Some of her poems seem to be narratives of video games played simultaneously in the imagination and across the variegated and contested borders of the modern world. Her frequent practice of pairing recondite Chinese characters (often technical scientific words) with phonetic readings in Japanese of English words is an illustration of her technique of defamiliarization. This is clearly revealed in the following parodic poem entitled "Merii-San no shitsuji" ("Mary Had a Little Butler") from "Border Z". I should mention here that the characteristic Tokyo lisp pronounces "hitsuji" (sheep or lamb) as "shitsuji" (butler):

> Mary's little butler
> Who has mastered the Queen's English
> Holds a teapot with the temperature carefully measured
> And today too
> Waits for Mary to come home
>
> Mary had a little butler
> A little butler
> A little butler

[26] Morton (2017: 7-8).

Mary who is of the post punk-rock generation
And grew up in the post Thatcher era
Today too does not return home

Mary had a little butler
A little butler
A little butler

On the wall
There is a picture of Mary
When she was William
Wearing Albert's collar

The TV below
Shows images of the Gaza Strip after a bombing
Shows images of 1000 euro youths
Shows images of Chinese returning home for the Moon Festival
Shows images of farmers breaking up MacDonalds
Shows images of people marching under the gay banner
And shows images of Mary
Wearing a Vivienne Westwood dress
Holding up her middle finger in the street

Mary had a little butler
A little butler
A little butler

Mary had a little butler
A little butler
A little butler[27]

The repeated refrain "Mary Had a Little Butler" is a parody of "Mary Had a Little Lamb," an English language nursery rhyme of early nineteenth-century American origin. The rhyme is often sung in a melody that is known to generations of children in several countries. The poem also parodies or, better put, draws upon a movie titled "Albert Nobbs" a 2011 British-Irish drama film directed by Rodrigo García and starring Glenn Close. The screenplay, by Close, John Banville, and Gabriella Prekop, is based on a 1927 novella "The Singular Life of Albert Nobbs" by the Irish novelist George Moore (1852–1933). Therefore, one can characterize this poem, without much difficulty, as a work based on, indeed imbedded in contemporary media. The work links several political protests to the struggle for recognition by gay people, dramatized in the movie by the character of Albert Nobbs: a woman living as a man in Edwardian England, and in that sense is a political poem. In Minashita's collection "Border Z" there are several poems that at-

[27] Ibid., 26-27.

tempt to imitate the narrative and visual interface of computer games; another effort to capture the contemporary *zeitgeist* experienced especially by young Japanese.

Misumi Mizuki (b. 1981) is another poet who has made a big impact on the contemporary poetry scene, with most of her verse collections having won major literary prizes. The poet was born in Kagoshima on the island of Kyūshū, and graduated from Tokyo Zōkei University, winning another prize for her graduation thesis. She also writes novels, essays and makes movies, as well as establishing her own band, which has released two albums. In her relatively short life, Misumi has suffered from chronic illness, a particularly debilitating form of *lupus*, a disease of the immune system. Yet, judging by her reading of her own poetry on YouTube (something that many poets do also), she does not allow it to impede her artistic endeavors. To date, she has had nine collections of poetry published, together with a volume of selected poems. I have chosen for translation "Watashi wo teihen to shite" ("Making Me Into the Baseline"), a poem from her first book "Oubaakiru" ("Overkill", 2004), which subsequently became very famous, especially the first line.

Making me into the baseline.
Countless women pass over me
Sometimes they stop
My outline gets distorted,
I start to decay.
What a lovely sky.
A sky bluer than I have ever seen
My tears evaporate,
Turn into clouds,
And turn into acid rain that dissolves us
From start to finish
Everything is consistent
I start to decay.
I turn to pulp
Start to stink
Become your compost
You put me on the baseline
You grow
And quietly I raise a hand towards the sun
My arm crumbles[28]

Many commentators have cited this poem as a powerful work of art, heralding the arrival of a brilliant new talent onto the contemporary poetry scene. If we unpack this seemingly simple poem, then we find a number of disturbing implications. The word "teihen" or baseline refers to the base of a triangle, but also metaphorically refers to those at the bottom of the social scale, the poorest segments of society. Thus, the figure being trampled over is slowly being erased, only able to gaze up at the blue sky. The image of women walking over the

[28] Misumi (2014: 8).

baseline suggests the poor literally being trampled upon, and, the poem implies, those doing the trampling are hardly aware of it. Even more disturbing is the suggestion that those trampling on the baseline are using the baseline to feed upon: using the poor vampirically as fertilizers for their own growth. The poem was published in 2004, when the problem of contemporary youth having no full-time employment, only a series of part-time jobs, began to be registered on the public awareness; this awareness also triggered the public realization of a large increase in the numbers of homeless in the streets. We can see how this poem resonates with the rise of interest in the precariat, which gained prominence in the media from 2009, as argued by Azuma Hiroki.

The contemporary poet Yotsumoto Yasuhiro (b. 1959), resident in Germany for over 20 years, often composes verses critical of the Japanese government but his poetry too, like that of Ishigaki, personalizes these critiques into characters, with many faces and facets, so that the speaking voices in his fierce lyrics are not always consonant with a single speaker. Take, for instance, his poem "Omotenashi" ("Hospitality") from his 2017 book "Tanchō ni bota bota to, Gasatsu de sobō ni" ("Dripping Monotonously, and Roughly, Violently"). I have extracted and translated several stanzas from this long 25 stanza poem.

O • mo • t e • na • shi (Ho • spit • al • ity)

I am a monochrome immigration officer.
People coming from the far ends of the Earth
I know are all demons: I protect the honour of this island.

.....

I am a nationalist suffering from ulcerative colitis.
While constantly chanting how beautiful Japan is, how
beautiful Japan is, the stink from the jakes is the fragrance of a rose.

I am another Emperor.
Not a symbol. Because I have real substance
I can play the slot machines like this.

.....

I am Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, I am paranoid.
In the end I am nothing more than your fickle tweet.
With one click you intend to overwrite me, don't you?

.....

I am the unfaithful Mrs Watanabe.
With the careless words of the head of the Bank of Japan shares collapse people
[go into
voluntary bankruptcy.
Individual capital to the value of 1400 trillion yen ends up in the gullets of the
[vultures.

I am a common garden variety of homeless person.
Every time I blink I take a tomographic photograph of
The unending flow of the fine people, smart phones in hand.

.....
I am an anorexic poet. Born into a world of gluttony
As soon as I eat I spew out
Words or vomit?

I am a symmetrical barber.
In front of the mirror with razor in hand
I await the alarm signaling noon.

I have an infinite variety of faces
But in reality they are all just me
Standing motionless in the middle of a Karaoke room covered with mirrors

I am waiting for your arrival.[29]

This long, complex poem may appear rather obscure but for residents of Japan it is easy to decode. First, the word "omotenashi" is the official slogan for the – now postponed – but held in 2021 Olympic games to be held in Tokyo. Thus, the poem has numerous references to the preparations for the Olympics. The first stanza is spoken from the perspective of an immigration officer and ridicules his jingoistic xenophobia. The poem then goes on to castigate elements of the Japanese state, finally in stanza 9, the Prime Minister himself speaks. That this stanza directly refers to PM Abe is clear from the mention of his chronic illness and his 2013 book titled "Utsukushii kuni e" ("Towards Beautiful Japan"). The sarcasm in the last line of this stanza repeats the motif that underneath the propaganda praising Japan, a much uglier reality can be found.

Article 9 refers to the "peace clause" of the Japanese constitution that forbids Japan from possessing military forces. As is well-known, this clause has been neutered over the decades since the war, nevertheless, PM Abe wished to further loosen the interpretation through legislation to permit expansion of the military. "Mrs Watanabe" is the fictional being invoked by the media to represent the average Japanese housewife, here portrayed as a victim of the Bank of Japan's financial mismanagement. Other stanzas are more transparent and less directly political. The last stanza of the poem, translated above, is a more complex gesturing to what the narrator clearly sees as the false notion of a fixed Japanese identity – in the poem the narrator's identity is many-faceted – and this is a theme that the expatriate poet Yotsumoto has often pursued in his verse.

In the same book, he reproduces the preface to the Japanese constitution in English below a poem titled "Nihon koku kenpō-zenbun" ("The Constitution of Japan-Preface") in Japanese spoken by a woman covered in tattoos and a man. The unnamed woman and man in their spoken declarations appear to embody

[29] Morton (2017: 63-67). For the original, see Yotsumoto (2017: 8-13).

the lofty ideals expressed in the preface to the constitution.[30] Here we find another ironic contrast between the ideal and the real, and one that is explicitly political, although the monologues by the two unnamed protagonists or narrators are not political at all. The technique embodies in part Jonathan Culler's admonition that when the poem does not make the relation between self and society an explicit theme then this relation is allowed to crystalize "involuntarily" within the poem. The critical admonitions found in Adorno, where he writes, "in every lyric poem the historical relationship of the subject to objectivity, of the individual to society, must have found its precipitate in the medium of a subjective spirit thrown back upon itself" also are made concrete in this poem. In this volume by Yotsumoto "Dripping Monotonously, and Roughly, Violently," there are many more political poems. Perhaps the most political is the long poem "Gendai to shijin" ("The Modern and the Poet"), the longest poem in the book consisting of 15 sections each containing several stanzas, covering 28 pages in the book. This poem is too long to investigate in any detail but suffice it to say that it is a work that examines much of the recent history of Japan, including the 2011 earthquake and the explosion of political poetry that followed.

The next poet I will investigate is Arai Takako (b. 1966), and in particular her 2013 volume of verse "Betto to shokki" ("Beds and Looms"), a linguistic tour de force: a book of poetry ostensibly centered on a group of female factory workers and their labors on the looms, written in the distinctive Kiryū Japanese dialect, which is quite difficult for people not from that region to understand. The poems are mostly character-based and ostensibly tell the stories of a number of these workers, especially one called "Yai-chan" or Yai, who appears prominently in the title poem. Yai is a lively, promiscuous single mother of a young baby who brings her boyfriends to work for sex on a bed in a back room, but she is also the most skilled loom-worker, the only one of the female workers who can weave high quality cloth to be sold to the local Buddhist temple.[31] The poetry is mostly narrated in the distinctive Kiryū dialect, although Carol Hayes and Rina Kikuchi have characterized the language used here as an "imagined dialect," and uses much musical repetition to establish a strong lyric rhythm to the verse.[32] It exposes the poverty of these weavers' existence, although the poverty and powerlessness are also contrasted with the women's inherent strength and sensuality. The motif of female workers weaving cloth in a factory echoes an earlier famous book by Hosoi Wakizō (1897–1925) entitled "Jokōaishi" ("The Sad History of Women Workers"), published as a reportage non-fiction book in 1925, which was widely read and at the time created a national focus on the lives of poor women from the north working in industrial mills. We should also

[30] Ibid., 42-45.

[31] Arai (2013: 12-19).

[32] Arai (2019: 87).

note that "Beds and Looms" does not only include historicizing poetry on women in weaving, but also post-3/11 poetry.

I will translate some extracts from Arai's poem "Garapagosu" ("Galapagos") from "Beds and Looms" in order to tease out the political implications, and hopefully, make some of the linguistic Terpsichore transparent:

A buoyant economy is just table talk!
A fairy tale! Get the stock market
Going!,
Make a joke out of it!
I'm sick of it
All black and all Uniqlo

It's ruined! Eros
Is everywhere Thanatos
Get going!
Make it more exotic!
Mobile phones are plentiful!
Microsoft is bestial

— You weren't allowed to wear what you want
You could only wear "National dress",
Long before the earthquake
We
Were terrified of the tsunami known as the recession
.....
Inside the womb of grotesque globalism
We are about to sink
We salarymen
Copped the Lehman shock
We covet nothing
We communicate nothing
We don't do nothing anymore, no more sex
Women men sperm/neutrons
No longer reproduce unisex
.....
Who gives a damn about the roof over the nuclear reactor
Seawalls sedition cabinet secretaries
Unbelievabule
Incredibule
Tepco
Donning Uniqlo
Defending against
Tsunami
.....[33]

[33] Arai (2013: 114-117). For a complete English translation of this poem, see Arai (2019: 44-45). This volume contains selected translations from various books by Arai.

This poem, like Yotsumoto's verse cited earlier, is fairly transparent in meaning for residents of Japan who have experienced the last 30 years of Japanese history; but perhaps not so transparent to outsiders. The poem refers to the worldwide stock market crash of 2008 triggered by the collapse of the Lehman Brothers global financial firm. In Japan this brought an end to the bubble economy, which began to break down in the early 1990s, heralding the arrival of an era of falling economic growth known as the lost decade or decades in which national GDP fell by about a third. This era of increasing poverty and economic instability is often associated in Japan with globalism. Japanese firms such as the clothing retailer Uniqlo took advantage of globalism to become successful overseas, after becoming prominent in the domestic market by meeting the demand for cheap clothing brought about by the economic slump. These economic woes are linked in the poem to the calamitous earthquake and tsunami of March 2011, which led to a nuclear meltdown after the tsunami breached the seawalls off the coast where the nuclear reactor is located.[34] The bare facts of this anti-capitalist broadside that Arai has created do not do justice to the linguistic complexity of the poem, which is full of absurd puns and ridiculous rhymes; the same as virtually all poems in the collection. Thus, the poem is quite playful despite the subject matter, and the amusing musical elements balance the harsh sentiments expressed in this decidedly political verse.

Brief Concluding Note

The poems examined here by well-known contemporary poets stand in stark contrast to the verses translated and analyzed from the website "I will change Tokyo." The main differences do not lie in the subject matter – PM Abe is a target on the website and also from the pens of the "professional" poets. The differences arise out of the way the verses are constructed; with humour and wit on the part of the professionals but with no humour whatever from the amateurs (just vulgar abuse); nor do the amateurs attempt any complex wordplay. Indirection and subtlety are also absent from the pens of the amateurs. We are here reminded of Brecht's definition of an ideal example of agitprop art: "magnificent, long-forgotten elements from ages of genuine popular art, boldly modified for new social aims: breathtaking contractions and compressions, beautiful simplifications, in which there was often an astonishing elegance and power and a fearless eye for the complex." This kind of *agitprop* is the best that an artist and critic such as Brecht can imagine. The kind of *agitprop* seen on the website is a literal version of "agitation and propaganda," to work from the roots of the Russian origins of this word: in other words, political propaganda. That it does not meet, or only rarely meets the high standards for *agitprop* outlined by such critics as Brecht and Adorno is something that may be regretted but, on the other hand, it

[34] See chapters 8-9 on poetry produced by the March 2011 Fukushima disaster in Morton (2020).

is clear that the professionals are doing something quite different. The professional poets' verse does not easily fall into the category of *agitprop*, rather it is political poetry that works from a different aesthetic template. We should also note the very local context of the webpage that is transparently linked for the most part to ongoing contemporary political issues, and perhaps equally connected to the various political programs of the two web hosts who are actively involved in local Tokyo politics.

To quote Culler once again, his reading of lyric argues that the "anomalous verbal combinations, along with the kinetic effects of rhythm, [can] offer a challenge to homogenized experience," and thus create a much more powerful and aesthetically satisfying mode of political verse. There is no doubt that this is what Minashita, Mizuki, Yotsumoto and Arai are doing in their poetry. I could cite many more contemporary Japanese poets who are treading the same path in their attempts to link their lyric verse to society, and many of these authors are just as well known and as equally successful as the poets cited above. The issue arises whether this is the primary task of their poetic endeavors. I would argue, when their work is seen in its totality, that this is not the case. These poets compose poetry on many topics; for example, Yotsumoto has written a highly-praised collection of verse that focuses on domestic themes, specifically, the relationship between the narrator / persona and his wife. Arai Takako writes poetry on a variety of themes, and this is typical of contemporary Japanese poetry.[35] I suppose I am making the case that *agitprop*, when it is verse on the Japanese Internet, is quite different in its aims and objectives from contemporary lyric, even when the ostensible content is quite similar, as in the case of political poetry. Undoubtedly, on occasion, these categories collide, but, as we have seen here, this is not that common an event.

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