Japanese literature has been greatly informed by several fundamental aesthetic terms. Terms such as *aware*, *yûgen*, and *sabi* have been a central focus of writers from the Heian period on. There is really nothing parallel to these terms in western literature, not only in content but in function and importance. It is simply impossible to have a significant grasp of pre-modern Japanese literature without understanding the basic character of these terms. In this chapter we will take an initial look at the term *aware*, which became a central poetic term in the latter part of the Heian period.

Perhaps the simplest definition of *aware* is "melancholy at the transience of beauty." But such a definition hardly touches the aesthetic and psychological complexity involved. In order to enter into the subtlety of *aware* it is helpful to focus on the tensions that animate the term.

Originally, *aware* indicated the spontaneous outburst of emotion, whether happy or sad. Indeed, the term apparently derives from the combination of two interjections, *a* and *hare*. During the late Heian period, however, this term took on a narrower but more nuanced meaning. While some commentators have suggested that the intensity of *aware* was toned down during this period, it is at times presented as "piercing," as in the phrase "*mi ni shimiru,*" penetrating my flesh. Thus it is perhaps more accurate to say that the surprise and intensity of emotion found in exclamation was joined by the subdued and elegant atmosphere found in the court society. *Aware*, then, combines intensity with cultured calm.

This steadied intensity of emotion is primarily sorrowful in tone. But the sadness involved differs from sadness as we normally conceive of it. Our culture, especially of late, has tended to emphasize a dichotomy between happiness and sadness, with the former having positive value and the later something we try to avoid. But *aware* involves different dichotomies. One is between sensitivity and insensitivity. A cultivated person, one with *kokoro* ("heart"), is sensitive to the nature of life; that is the ideal, and it leads to having *aware*. Another dichotomy is between tranquility and being disturbed or upset. While *aware* involves deep sensitivity and intense emotion, it also is fundamentally tranquil.

The sorrow involved in *aware* arises primarily from the realization of transience. The "feeling of impermanence" (*mujō-kan*) has been a central part of Japanese aesthetic and religious perception from before the Heian era. The importance in Buddhism of the recognition of the ephemeral character of reality can be seen in the fact that it is one of the Three Characteristics of
Existence (the others being nonself and suffering). Impermanence has been presented in Buddhism in two basic ways: nothing lasts forever, all things will pass away; all things undergo constant, radical change every moment. In Japanese literature, however, it is the former view that predominates, the realization that, in the words of the American Buddhist poet Kenneth Rexroth, reality is made of "fugitive compounds of nature all doomed to pass away and go out."

In some parts of the Buddhist tradition, the vision of impermanence has led to detachment, a withdrawal from any emotional involvement in the fugitive compounds of nature. But Japanese literature combines the realization of impermanence with an affirmation of the value of that which passes away. It is the tension between value and transience that yields the poignancy of mujō-kan: the vision of value lost.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that while value is affirmed, its passing is not resisted or resented. Aware involves the acceptance of impermanence, because that is the way reality is. Aware thus involves insight, a recognition of the basic character of reality as both valued and ephemeral. This insight also involves conforming to reality, evidenced by both the sorrow and the acceptance. To feel aware is to be attuned to the kokoro or heart of things.

As such, aware is both subjective and objective. It is a personal, emotional response, but that emotion arises from the intrinsic nature of reality in general and of the particular situation at hand. A kind of elitism results, for it is believed that anyone with proper sensitivity would feel aware. Reality, particularly certain moments when mujō is pronounced, simply calls forth aware, and if someone does not feel it, they are insensitive, uncultivated, unaware, and out of touch with reality.

In some contexts, however, there seems to be something more subtly involved in aware. The Japanese scholar Onishi Yoshinori, for instance, has suggested that aware can involve a more metaphysical perception of a darkness at the heart of reality. Rather than arising from the encounter with falling blossoms or the deteriorated house of a former lover, such an aware arises from a more general, indeterminate, but penetrating sense that for all the beauty of life, we live in a night-bound world. The last section of The Tale of Genji, the "Uji" chapters, for instance, seems to be presented within a pervasive but indefinable atmosphere of darkness, characterized by an abiding melancholy without identifiable source.