

RENGA:
The Literary Embodiment of Impermanence and Nonsell

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Renga, or "linked verse," is a highly distinctive form of poetry that was extremely important in medieval Japanese literature. It developed from two different literary movements. By the end of the Heian period, renga was practiced as an informal diversion for court poets, a literary parlor game that was played when poets were not engaged in creating serious waka. But renga also developed as a serious practice of low-ranking monks, called *jige* or *hana no moto* renga masters. These monk-poets, closely related to the *hijiri* tradition of unofficial usually itinerant priests, would often compose their linked verses under the cherry trees (*hana no moto* means "under the blossoms") at Buddhist temples.

By the 14th century, especially with the important court poet Nijō Yoshimoto (1320-1388), renga became accepted as a serious literary form in the court and in the process absorbed some of the religious significance previously ascribed to it by the *jige* renga masters. In doing so, renga both continued and departed from the courtly literary tradition. Its canons of taste were primarily aristocratic, yet lower class and professional writers became prominent as the art reached its zenith in the fifteenth century. Its form is quite literally an extension of the traditional waka (five lines of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables), but it is an extension so radical that a verse-link lost its sense of being a singular and unitary whole. Similarly, renga develops the classical practice of progressive change from poem to poem found in imperial anthologies, but it does so in a way that undercuts the comfortable, predictable quality of classical order.

Renga was important as a religious literature for a variety of reasons, from its historical origins among the *hana no moto* monks to its use as an offering by poets to temples and shrines. Here we will focus on renga's peculiar and complex textual form and how it embodies Buddhist truths of impermanence and nonsell. In doing so we will need to spend time describing a few of the basic rules of the form. And renga is a poetry *full* of rules, a fact that can lead those unfamiliar with it to dismiss it as the epitome of restrained, conventionalized, and thus lifeless literature. It is important to understand, however, that the rules existed primarily to keep the poems full of the vitality of life's impermanence.

Our approach in this section will emphasize textuality. Contemporary literary theory has called into question conventional ideas of textuality, e.g., that a text is the transparent voice of the author or is a discrete and integrated artistic object like a well-wrought urn. By its very nature renga raises issues of textuality, and we will see how these are religious issues.¹ One of renga's distinctive aspects is that it is a *group* verse form.² Usually three or more poets would gather to jointly and progressively create a poetic sequence. The sequence is made of stanzas (*ku*) which alternate between three lines of 5-7-5 syllables, two lines of 7-7 syllables, three lines, two lines, and so on up to an agreed upon limit, often 100 stanzas. The poets would take turns creating the stanzas, although the order of authorship was usually not predetermined.

Each stanza links with the preceding and following stanza. The second stanza links with its predecessor to make a five line verse-link³; then it joins to the subsequent third stanza to form a different five line verse-link. The third stanza links with the second and fourth; and so on. As such, with the exception of the first and last stanza, each stanza functions doubly--as a *tsukeku* ("joined

stanza") with the preceding stanza and then as the *maeku* ("preceding stanza") for the succeeding stanza. A sequence, then, is a succession of overlapping five line verse-links: 5-7-5 + 7-7; then 7-7 + 5-7-5; and so on. We will see an example of this shortly.

Central to the practice and to the very idea of renga is that each stanza stands in relation only to the adjoining stanzas: its *maeku* and *tsukeku*. The third stanza is not read in relation to the first; at the point of the third stanza, the first stanza has disappeared from the text.⁴ There is only a single verse-link, a five line combination of a *maeku* and *tsukeku*.

Thus the textuality of a single stanza (either 5-7-5 or 7-7) is impermanent, and in two ways. First, the very meaning of the words of a can change from one verse-link to the next. Consider the following three stanzas from the "Linked Verse at Imashinmei Shrine" (*Anegakôji Imashinmei Hyakuin*):

<i>samidare o</i> <i>ura no shioya noi</i> <i>usukeburi</i> -- <i>Shinkei</i>	Resenting the early summer rains, Smoke rises in faint trails From the brine-boiler's hut on the coast.
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<i>kasuka ni tôku</i> <i>matsu wa kurekeri</i> -- <i>Genkô</i>	Dimly, far away, The pine has faded into dusk.
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<i>tanomeshi wa</i> <i>itsu no ashita to</i> <i>narinuran</i> -- <i>Kô</i>	When was it that I waited By myself 'til morning, In the vain hope you would come?
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Consider the second stanza given here. It consists of a single image of nature, the kind of scene prized by Japanese poets. By itself it is an understandable poetic unit, but its meaning is not fully defined and within the renga sequence that meaning is not stable. Considered as the *tsukeku* of the preceding stanza, it becomes part of a verse in which other elements in the scene are included and the season is defined. The image of the fading pines is enriched by the parallel of the faint smoke; the distant trees stand in contrast to the coast. A human presence now is part of the overall scene. But when this stanza is considered the *maeku* of the third stanza, things change. No longer do we have a season defined, nor is the setting by a hut on the coast. Instead, the fading pine is paralleled by the fading memory of the grieving lover, thinking back to a time when she waited for someone to appear out of the night. In addition, the word *matsu* has taken on an additional meaning: in this verse-link it comes to mean not only "pine" but "to wait," the two words homonymous in Japanese.⁵ We see here an example of *torinashi*, "recasting" the meaning of a stanza. What words mean and what a stanza represents may shift from one five line verse-link to the next.

There is a second form of textual impermanence in renga. After a stanza is linked with its succeeding stanza--its *tsukeku*--it disappears. A renga is not a continuous stream of poetic stanzas forming a seamless poetic whole. Instead it is a discontinuous series of five line verse-links semantically separate from the other verse-links. When the second and third stanzas are linked together, the first stanza textually does not exist. The when the third stanza is linked with the

fourth, the second stanza textually does not exist. Every stanza exists only momentarily.⁶

Elaborate rules were established to guarantee that while short-term continuity was permitted, change would fundamentally characterize any renga sequence. The most important rules governed repetition, intermission, and seriation. Rules of repetition govern how many times an image may appear in a full renga sequence. Some images, such as firefly, could only be used once in a hundred stanza sequence while others were limited to two, three, four, or five appearances. Rules of intermission define how many stanzas must separate an image or category, two, three, five, or seven depending on the image. Seriation concerns the number of stanzas an image or category may appear in succession--for instance, stanzas about spring should not appear more than five times in succession. Put together, these rules ensure that change rather than organic unity fundamentally characterizes renga.

The emphasis on change was not simply a literary technique but a reflection of the Buddhist vision of impermanence. One renga text states, "contemplating deeply the vicissitudes of life of man and body, always keep in your heart the image of transience." [*Renga shotai hidenshō*, cited in Ebersole 1983:60] The type of transience focused on in renga textuality was not the gradual, reliable progression of the passing of the seasons, but sudden, unpredictable change. "One composes linked verse-link by continually moving the sequence in unexpected directions." [Emperor Juntoku, cited in Carter 1987:30] Words change their meaning and then disappear from the text; the sequence quickly severs any continuity that arises. Such a radical impermanence reflects the uncertain character of *mujō*, imaged by terms such as "the floating world" and "whirling flowers and fallings leaves."

In renga the thought of a moment does not remain in the moment that follows. The realms of glory and ruin, of happiness and grief lie side by side, the one slipping into the other in a manner no different from the condition of the floating world. While we think it yesterday, today has come; while we think it spring, it has become autumn; while we think of flowers, the leaves have colored--is it not to contemplate the truth of the "whirling flowers and falling leaves" [*hikarakuyō*]? [Nijō Yoshimoto, cited in Ramirez-Christensen 1981:585-6]

The very textual form of renga, then, embodies *mujō*, the impermanence of life. And the practice of linked-verse was a way to awaken to Buddhist truth. One of the principal renga masters, Shinkei, makes this point as he refers also to the belief in the religious power of poetry noted centuries earlier by Ki no Tsurayuki in his preface to the *Kokinshū*.

At the wellspring of form and content in this art [i.e. renga] lie the awareness of the transience of things and the expression of one's most serious concerns. In renga, men speak to one another of that which touches them most deeply; thus it has the power to move the hearts of even the most ferocious and demonic of warriors, and to awaken us to the truth of our fugitive world. [Shinkei, *Sasamegoto* I:13, cited in Hirota 1977:33]

So far we have been focusing on the temporal aspect of renga's textual form: its manifestation of impermanence. Renga's textuality has another religiously significant aspect: its embodiment of a very complex, interwoven type of identity. A renga sequence involves three types

of poetic units: the sequence as a whole, the verse-link, and the stanza. The identity and integrity of each of these poetic units is real but is only provisional and relative. Each is characterized by what we might call "inter-identity."

We have noted that a renga is a discontinuous series of verse-links rather than a single poetic stream in which all stanzas stand in relation to each other. The renga sequence lacks a simple, conventional identity as a discrete organic whole. However, there is a kind and degree of identity in the sequence. Not only is a sequence distinct from other texts, it has a flow (*yukiyô*) somewhat like a musical score. The brilliance of a great renga is found not only in the beauty of the individual stanzas and the sophistication of the linking but in the movement and shape of the whole.⁷ This flow is found both in the way the poets apply the rules of Frequency, Duration, and Intermission, but also in the application of the standard rhythmical pattern in traditional Japanese music: *jo-ha-kyû*, introduction, slow development, fast conclusion.⁸ (This pattern is used in Noh plays as well.) So a renga sequence as a whole does have an identity, but one that is at the same time undermined by the discontinuity of the sequence of linking.

Similarly, a verse-link is not a simple, integrated whole. Every five line verse-link shares one stanza with the preceding verse-link and the other stanza with the succeeding verse-link. Moreover, each verse-link is not a singular, unified poem as traditional waka is. It is a poetic linking of two distinct stanzas. The great renga poet Sôgi (1421-1502) criticized some sequences of from the previous century by saying that "some [stanzas] read as though they were meant to complete a waka poem, and lack an integral meaning in themselves."⁹ Each verse-link, then, not only lacks an *abiding* identity (it disappears with the next verse-link). It is a *linking* of two poetic units rather than a discrete, organic unity.

But we also cannot say that a stanza has independent identity. Each stanza *does* have its own integrity: its words are distinct from those of other stanzas. But these words by themselves involve what we might call a meaning-complex, a range of possible meanings. The precise meaning of these words depends on the particular *maeku* or *tsukeku* it links with. Each stanza, then, has only provisional or relative identity; within the sequence it inter-exists with two other stanzas.

Renga, then, can be said to embody the Buddhist notion of nonself (Skt.: *anatman*; Jap.: *muga*). One of the three basic characteristics of reality according to Buddhism is that our conventional idea of the selfness of things and persons is a delusion; there are no independently existing, singular entities. Rather, the universe is characterized by radical interdependence. This doctrine is an attempt to steer a middle course between monism (which asserts that the universe is a unitary whole with the apparent difference between "parts" fundamentally unreal) and atomism (which asserts that entities exist as discrete objects and the universe is the accumulation of all these distinct parts).

Buddhism claims that all "things" in the universe come into being and exist interdependently. Every thing, whether a tree or a person, radically co-exists with the rest of the universe. As such, no object has simple identity, and the whole similarly lacks a simple unity. The universe is a net of inter-relationships; there is only a vast expanse of inter-identities.

The very textuality of renga, then, embodies this characteristic of "nonself," of interdependent co-existence.¹⁰ Each stanza does have the individuality of its words. However, the meaning of the words are provisional, dependent on the *maeku* and *tsukeku*. Similarly, each five

line verse-link is a poetic unit, separate from all the others. However, it shares its words with the verse-links it follows and precedes and is a joining of two stanzas rather than a singular poetic whole. And a renga sequence as a whole has its own identity as a particular flow of imagery, but it is not a single poem. It is a patterned succession of distinct textual inter-identities.

The complexity of renga textuality has led to a controversy over how to print the sequence in books. One translator,¹¹ for instance, places the *maeku* and *tsukeku* together as a single, unitary whole. In this approach, the three stanzas given above would appear as two five line verse-links:

<i>samidare o</i>	Resenting the early summer rains,
<i>ura no shioya noi</i>	Smoke rises in faint trails
<i>usukeburi</i>	From the brine-boiler's hut on the coast.
<i>kasuka ni tōku</i>	Dimly, far away,
<i>matsu wa kurekeri</i>	The pine has faded into dusk.

<i>kasuka ni tōku</i>	Dimly, far away,
<i>matsu wa kurekeri</i>	The pine has faded into dusk.
<i>tanomeshi wa</i>	When was it that I waited
<i>itsu no ashita to</i>	By myself 'til morning,
<i>narinuran</i>	In the vain hope you would come?

This approach emphasizes that each stanza is not a self-existent poetic entity; it functions as a link to preceding and succeeding stanzas and the meaning of the words is relative to these other stanzas.

However, each stanza does have a degree of identity: its words and their meaning-complex. To consider the renga simply as a sequence of overlapping five line verses is to blur this identity and to suggest that the verse-links are discrete organic wholes. To emphasize the relative integrity of the stanzas, then, each should be printed separate from the others.¹²

But simply to print each stanza separately in succession seems to assert too much identity to a stanza and fails to suggest its dependence on the contiguous stanzas.¹³ In addition, it does not manifest the textual disappearance of the stanzas as the sequence proceeds. Perhaps the best way to represent the impermanence and the inter-identities involved in renga textuality is to print only five lines on a single page, with each stanza separated by an open line. Both the integrity and the interdependence of stanzas would be upheld, and the transience of stanzas and verse-links would be manifest.

Renga is a preeminently Buddhist *form* of poetry. We could analyze the stanzas of particular sequences for religious meaning, but it is particularly in the textual form itself that it reveals Buddhist truth: impermanence and interdependent identity.

RECOMMENDED READING

- Carter, Steven. *The Road to Komatsubara: A Classical Reading of the Renga Hyakuin*. Cambridge: Harvard University, 1987.
- Ebersole, Gary. "The Buddhist Ritual Use of Linked Poetry in Medieval Japan." *Eastern Buddhist*, 16.2 (1983): 50-71.
- Hare, Thomas. "Linked Verse at Imashinmei Shrine: *Anegakôji Imashinmei Hyakuin*, 1447." *Monumenta Nipponica* 34.2 (1979): 169-208.
- Huey, Robert. Review of *The Road to Komatsubara: A Classical Reading of the Renga Hyakuin*, by Steven D. Carter (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1987). *Harvard Journal of Asian Studies* 50.1 (1990): 352-377.
- Miner, Earl. *Japanese Linked Poetry: An Account With Translations of Renga and Haikai Sequences*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979. Earl Miner
- Ramirez-Christensen, Esperanza. "The Essential Parameters of Linked Poetry." Review article on *Japanese Linked Poetry: An Account With Translations of Renga and Haikai Sequences*, by Earl Miner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979). *Harvard Journal of Asian Studies* 41.2 (1981): 555-595.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ As we will note later, the issue of textuality is a controversial, with scholars disagreeing about central matters.
- ² There were some solo (*dokugin*) renga sequences, but these were recognized as exceptions to the common practice and central thrust of renga composition.
- ³ Even the use of terms such as "stanza" and "verse" is controversial and reflects different viewpoints on the basic nature of renga textuality. Earl Miner uses the term "stanza" for the three and two line *ku* and the term "verse" for the five line link of two *ku*. Esperanza Ramirez-Christensen argues that Miner overemphasizes the integrity of the five line link and misses the poetic identity of the *ku* itself. To emphasize the integrity of the *ku*, she uses the term verse to translate it. As will be discussed later, we argue for a middle path, a more complex understanding of identity which recognizes the integrity of both the *ku* and the link but the provisional nature of both. We use the term "stanza" for the *ku*, and "verse link" for the joining of two stanzas.
- ⁴ Here again the complexity of the textuality of renga makes brief analysis difficult. At the third stanza, the first has "disappeared" in that its meaning has no direct bearing on the meaning-complex (see note ... below) of the third stanza. However, because of the rules of Frequency, Duration, and Intermission, the words used in any stanza may constrain what words can or must be used in another. See below for a discussion of these rules.
- ⁵ See Hare 1979 for translation and discussion of the sequence.
- ⁶ While a renga is discontinuous in *this* sense, it does have a flow and pattern to it and as such a provisional kind of continuity. See below for fuller discussion of this point.
- ⁷ Ramirez-Christensen feels that it was Sôgi who brought the "shapeliness" of the whole sequence to its greatest height (p. 569).
- ⁸ See Carter 1987: 92-95, for a discussion of this pattern.
- ⁹ From *Azuma mondô*, cited in Ramirez-Christensen 1981:564.
- ¹⁰ While renga masters made explicit references to the doctrine of *mujô*, to our knowledge they did make any specific references to this doctrine of *muga*. However, the selflessness of things was implicit in the doctrine of *mujô*: because things are unstable they are insubstantial. In the case of Sôgi, who was most famous for the subtlety of his linking of stanzas, the insistence that a stanza has "integrity" is most likely his way of insisting that a verse-link is not a discrete poetic unit. It is unlikely that he felt that a stanza has discrete identity. He was insisting that *both* lack distinct identities; the two stanzas are distinct but inter-exist within a verse-link.
- ¹¹ Earl Miner in his *Japanese Linked Poetry*.
- ¹² Ramirez-Christensen makes this argument in her "The Essential Parameters of Linked Verse."
- ¹³ This point was briefly noted by Robert Huey. See Huey 1990:364.