CULTURES AND CLIMATES OF LIBERALITY IN JAPANESE COURT LITERATURE

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The topic of cultures and climates of liberality provides an opportunity to test hypotheses. The first, on which all others must stand or fall, is that it is possible to speak of a climate and culture of liberality outside the European tradition. Is the idea of liberality itself so culture-specific that it can be applied in non-European contexts only by stretching definitions to the point where it is no longer possible to make useful distinctions? Since this discussion could go no further otherwise, it will probably come as no great surprise that I believe it is in fact possible to speak of a culture and climate of liberality outside of European culture and its offshoots. It also becomes apparent that Japanese court culture is going to be presented as a demonstration that the proposition is true in at least one case.

Once the major hypothesis is tentatively accepted, others quickly suggest themselves. A particularly interesting one is that a culture and climate of liberality may be a necessary precondition for the appearance of a great age in the arts. I do not expect to prove this now, but I will attempt to show that such a climate was present in Japanese court culture and that it is difficult to imagine the literary accomplishments of that age without this climate. The same may be the case for other periods in other countries, but it is likely that a final proof could only be achieved by exhaustion. If so, the hypothesis will probably have to remain a hypothesis. It may still be worthwhile to try to demonstrate its plausibility in this instance.

The problem becomes more manageable if we can agree that liberality is by its nature a relative phenomenon. There is some slippage in even the most rigid of social orders and there is no freedom to do anything at all under a state of anarchy. We may deal with the question of a culture and climate of liberality in three ways. First, we may look at the question of liberality from within a given cultural context at a given time, using the kind of operating definitions and hypotheses already suggested. Second, we may make diachronic comparisons within that cultural tradition, to see if it is possible to make statements about the degree of liberality in operation at one time as against another. Finally, we
may make cross-cultural comparisons in order to test their possible significance. Space does not permit either the diachronic or cross-cultural comparisons here and therefore this will be just a preliminary exercise at the first and simplest level of this question.

It is necessary to define terms before this discussion can be taken any further. What is a culture and climate of liberality? If we attempt to generate a definition reasonably free from equating liberality with the pleasant and attractive or the merely familiar and reassuring (or with the licentious and dissolute), we may come up with something like this: A culture of liberality is one in which basic assumptions make due allowances of the value and validity of individual experience, individual insights, and individual initiatives. The opposite of liberality would be a condition in which precedent, received opinion, and constituted authority always carry the decisive weight. Liberality thus defined is perhaps nothing more than the closest approximation of the golden mean that can actually be achieved in human society. It is that which humanistically-oriented cultures forever seek, seldom find, and usually do not recognize until it has once again been lost.

A climate of liberality would be one that had a culture of liberality so defined as its precondition. A culture may have assumptions and values consonant with liberality present in its official heritage and yet have them in some periods more or less in eclipse insofar as the actual operation of institutional and social life is concerned. Only when the tradition and the current mood are congenial to liberality can we speak of a culture and climate of liberality.

Japanese court culture, with which we are to concern ourselves here, lasted for some six centuries, from the beginning of the seventh to the end of the twelfth centuries A.D. It had been preceded by the development of a high culture which gradually prevailed over and unified a hodgepodge of quasi-tribal kingdoms of varying ethnic backgrounds. This was followed by a long period of military domination that lasted through the middle of the 19th century. Court culture still existed in an attenuated form, and it remained the supreme model for elegance and refinement as well as the ultimate source of legitimacy but it was no longer at the cutting edge of cultural life.¹

Chinese culture, both that directly received through Japanese contacts with the mainland and that transmitted through Korea, was the source and model for Japanese court culture. The eventual dominance of the Yamato people and the acceptance of their leader as emperor of Japan was in large part due to the cultural and technological advantages that accrued as a result of its hospitality to the Chinese and Korean intellec-
tuals and craftsmen who fled to Japan during the long unsettled period on the continent that followed the collapse of the Han dynasty in China. Yet this court culture remained a native creation, reflecting native values and world views so strongly that it became the creator of most of the basic monuments of Japanese culture.

Throughout the period we are considering, the culture of the Japanese court was narrowly aristocratic. Court circles were claustrophobically small and restricted. At the height of court culture probably fewer than 50,000 people participated in it in any direct way, even when we include top-ranking officials in the provincial posts that early came to be viewed as virtual sentences of exile. The aristocracy was of course wealthy when compared with the general populace, but Japan has always been a country of limited natural resources and its aristocracy lived a life that was rather austere in material terms when compared with that of most other aristocratic societies at similar stages of development. Luxury was more a product of the artisan and the artist than of the bounty of the land. The glories of the aristocratic milieu were created by the application of technical skill and artistic brilliance to materials that were for the most part ordinary or even humble. Woodworking, weaving, lacquering, dyeing, the work of the landscape gardener and of the architect were applied to the routine products of nature to produce a context of elegance and sophistication. These crafts reflect a highly visual emphasis that remains one of the salient characteristics of Japanese culture down to the present.

At the highest levels of court society even the personal attendants were of aristocratic origin. Only workmen, menials, and the servants of the lower fringes of official life were commoners. When court literature speaks of the upper, middle, and lower classes, it is always understood that the various levels of the aristocracy are meant. The rest of the populace quite literally did not count and are dismissed in those very terms in the literature. Social isolation was nearly absolute and geographical isolation was if anything even more extreme.

Members of the imperial family were almost completely confined to the buildings of the imperial palace which lay within its own series of enclosures at the northern edge of the city. Members of the upper aristocracy might have villas in the nearby suburbs, but in the normal course of events only political or personal misfortune could account for their being as much as fifty miles from the capital.

The aristocracy lived on the income from tax-free estates which, except for the rare parcel of land near the capital, they would be unlikely ever to see. Exceptions to this tendency to stay close to home occurred primarily in the case of exile or its near equivalent, being posted to.
The one compensation for being sent down to the provinces was that it was often possible to amass a fortune rather quickly there. A family that had lost out at court could rebuild its financial base by accepting a provincial vice-governorship (the governorships were purely honorary and their holders remained at court). Upon returning to the capital it could use its wealth to try to re-enter the upper levels of court society. This particular fragment of the aristocracy is important to our immediate concerns because one of the most effective first steps in returning to court was to send a gifted daughter to serve as tutor to the empress. This provincial vice-governor class was therefore the primary source of the great female intellectuals who created most of the great prose literature of the period. Murasaki Shikibu, the author of *The Tale of Genji*, is the most distinguished member of this distinguished group.

What we have been describing so far is a rigidly-structured, small, isolated, and exceedingly exclusive society. At first glance it might seem unlikely to provide for the rise of a culture of liberality. But there was another side to this culture and it is with this side that we are concerned. For all its narrowly aristocratic character, Japanese court culture shared with the rest of Japanese society an overriding emphasis on the experiential and on concrete reality as defined by everyday life. The distrust of the abstract, the systematic, and the rigorously logical in Japanese culture has long been remarked upon. These qualities, quite unusual in highly literate cultures, made the world view of the Japanese aristocracy fundamentally different in some ways from those of other highly-cultured aristocracies.

One notable difference was that in the absence of systematic rationalization as a mainstay of the world view there could be no systematic rationalization of the position of the aristocracy. Such rationalizations start from abstract first principles and there was little awareness of or interest in the question of abstract first principles in Japan. The position of the aristocracy was seen by all, aristocrat and commoner alike, in a matter-of-fact and straightforward way. Some people occupy more advantageous positions than others. Since a hierarchical social order in fact existed, anyone who was not altogether stupid was going to be conscious of his or her position in that order. In a society little interested in abstract moral questions there was little concern over whether or not the social hierarchy did or did not reflect a hierarchy of moral values. Nor was the aristocracy hostile to commoners; it was merely indifferent to them. So profound was the social isolation of the aristocracy and so complete their lack of interest in abstract rationalization of their position...
that there was no compelling reason to deny the common humanity of high and low. The Buddhist concept that high rank, wealth, personal attractiveness, talent, and all such advantages were the rewards for merit accumulated in previous lives seems at this period actually to have strengthened the sense of common humanity at the same time that it underlined social distinctions.

The aristocracy, free from the need to rationalize its position, was also free to use the leisure and refinement that came with this position to consider the universal aspects of its experience. In *Genji*, Murasaki Shikibu is never telling us how a minister or a prince behaves but rather how a unique human being who happens to be a minister or a prince responds to unique circumstances. The cyclical perception of time and human experience serves as a framework within which it is possible to make an orderly presentation of human experience and to make comparisons and achieve insights, but we are also clearly shown that things are always different each time around.

A second way in which this matter-of-fact acceptance of common humanity functioned was by reducing hostility in confrontations between high and low. Since the aristocracy had never felt called upon to base its cultural life on a denial of common humanity, the aristocratic culture never became a general object of commoner hostility. Instead it became the most important point of reference against which other classes measured themselves once they acquired the security that enabled them to think beyond mere survival. All of this is not to suggest that Japan under court culture was a utopia free from strife. There was strife in plenty at the best of times and it increased as the age approached its bloody conclusion in the wars of the last half of the 12th century. Yet the basic gentleness of the age is underlined in the fact that no capital punishment was carried out at court for nearly three and a half centuries in spite of abundant statutory provision for such actions.

Kamo no Chōmei gives a convincing picture of the misery and humiliation that followed from being poor and weak in twelfth-century Japan:

> When a man of no great standing happens to live next door to a powerful lord, however happy he may be he cannot celebrate too loudly; however griefstricken, he cannot raise his voice in lamentations. He is uneasy no matter what he does; in his every action he trembles like a swallow approaching a falcon's nest. The poor man who is the neighbor of a wealthy family is always ashamed of his wretched appearance, and makes his entrances and exits in bursts of flattery. And when he sees how envious his wife and children and his servants are, or hears how the rich family despises him, his mind is incessantly torn by an agitation that leaves not a moment's peace.
It was if anything even less bearable to be poor and powerless than now. The social conditions that Chômei describes seem once again to lead paradoxically to a decreased spiritual distance between rich and poor when compared with many other societies. He continues his description of the trials of life:

If a man's house stands in a crowded place and a fire breaks out in the neighborhood, he cannot escape the danger. If it stands in a remote situation, he must put up with the nuisance of going back and forth to the city, and there is always a danger of robbers.

Those who are powerful are filled with greed and those who have no protectors are despised. Possessions bring many worries; in poverty there is sorrow. He who asks another's help becomes his slave; he who nurtures others is fettered by affection. He who complies with the ways of the world may be impoverished thereby; he who does not appears deranged. Wherever one may live, whatever one may do, is it possible even for a moment to find a haven for the body or peace for the mind?  

Without sentimentally glossing over the advantages of the wealthy, Chômei nevertheless points out that the difference between rich and poor is in the end largely a difference in sorrows. The central fact of the world remains the first Noble Truth of Buddhism: Life is suffering or, in other words, that things will not go as mankind would have them go.

Even though there was no shortage of misery and humiliation and catastrophe as the period came to an end, there was subtle but significant difference in the psychological context in which they were experienced in Japan. The question is not one of better or worse. It is simply one of difference and of trying to understand the implications of that difference. Catastrophe was not only waiting, it had already struck during Chômei's lifetime, but it is not with the catastrophes that we are concerned here. It is with the age preceding the catastrophe, one of those rare times in human history when, in spite of Buddhism's first noble truth, matters did go well enough to leave a memory of greatness firmly imprinted on the consciousness of succeeding generations.

The implicit acceptance of common humanity under Japanese court culture could readily become explicit when occasion arose. There is an uncondescending primitivism in some of the Manyôshû poetry, and Murasaki Shikibu shows a deep sympathy for the few commoners who appear in Genji.  This acceptance was a necessary precondition for the appearance of the kind of literary culture that grew up in the Japanese court, but it was not sufficient. It is only with certain aspects of Shinto and Buddhism, that is to say, of certain Japanese habits of mind when considering the numinous, that we may begin to approach sufficiency.
Shinto is notoriously inchoate and unsystematic and Buddhism had to shed much of its philosophical rigor and complexity when it left the monasteries to participate in Japanese life. Kato Shuichi has described what tended to happen when tightly-organized, sophisticated, and transcendental world views came to Japan:

In some cases the foreign world view was accepted for itself; in some cases it was rejected but in the majority of cases the foreign thought system was adapted to Japanese needs. This adaptation was in standard form when the thought system was highly organized and sophisticated as in the case of Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, and Marxism. Abstract, theoretical aspects were weeded out, the transcendental basic principle was excluded, the comprehensive system dismantled and only that proportion of it retained which had value in terms of practical application. What remained was a 'Japanized' world view.

Thus, when we speak of Buddhism in Japan, we are not referring to a religious and philosophical system but to an influence traceable in the nuances it introduces into Japanese intuitive processes.

For all the diffuse qualities of Shinto it is possible to discover certain things within it that outline a world view that is palpably and recognizably Japanese. In this world view there is some speculation about origins and some vague hints of an afterlife, but reality is here and now and it exists in terms of the experiences of living people. Experience is defined in terms of esthetic response; it takes place in a world that is innately good. All the negative aspects of experience; those aspects that more systematic approaches might separate under such headings as crime, sin, contact with the dead, wounds, illness, uncleanliness, or solecism are in Shinto treated as varieties of pollution. All were at least to some degree manageable through appropriate purification procedures.

The positive aspects of life, those parts of it which are truly "natural," are also treated in esthetic terms. The good, the clean, the beautiful, are discussed in vocabulary that is in large part interchangeable. In this world view there is something like a hierarchy of beauty reflecting the natural order of a world in which man and nature are not in opposition and in which there is no clear dividing line between man and god. This hierarchy progresses from the sweet, the pretty and the sentimental, to the ever more simple and austere forms of higher beauty. The restrained dignity of the shrines at Ise is a familiar example of this hierarchy of beauty.

At first glance, Buddhism would seem to be the antithesis of Shinto.
The world seems innately negative and horrible. The unsaved are bound to it in an endless cycle of rebirths. But Buddhism also shares some common assumptions with Shinto. Perhaps the most significant of these is that man is in no way separate from nature but is rather a part of it. Both Shinto and Buddhism are pantheistic, but the pantheism of Buddhism is worked out in elaborate detail while it remains characteristically implicit and unsystematic in Shinto. Buddhism has an elaborately detailed teleology and soteriology as one would expect from its premises, just as one may readily and correctly deduce from the premises of Shinto that these fields of thought are of little interest to it.

The dominant impulse in East Asia whenever religious views came into competition has been for accommodation and reconciliation. On the doctrinal level this has been a matter of great subtlety and complexity. Dual Shinto in its various manifestations is the most characteristic product. On the practical level, the working accommodations between Shinto and Buddhism seem to have come through an exploration of the Buddhist insistence upon the illusory nature of all distinctions. This was completely congenial to the Japanese world view. It displays itself most notably in the emphasis on the particular in the court poetry that was the central literary discipline and which assumed the essential identity of subject and object. The court poet did not attempt to illustrate universals or to demonstrate doctrinal points. He attempted instead to capture the emotional tone of the moment and to isolate the smallest unit of a reality in which his internal state and the outside world were one.

Ame sosogu
Hanatachibana ni
Kaze sugite
Yama-hototogisu
Kumo ni nakunari

Rain-drenched
Orange blossoms
Stir in the wind;
Mountain hototogisu
Sing in the clouds.

Fujiwara Shunzei (1114–1204)

This is the kind of moment that most of us will usually miss altogether. If we should notice it, it would be as a fleeting sensation that we are neither able to describe to others nor even to supply with enough verbal markers to retain it in our own memories. Shunzei has brought this fragile moment to us intact over eight centuries and half a world away because he was a great poet working in a tradition in which all experience was significant. To grasp that significance requires strength and discipline of a high order. Triviality exists only in eye of the inadequate beholder. Shunzei displayed his mastery by disappearing com-
pletely from his own poem while presenting his experience fresh and untainted. The first requirement for this kind of poetry is a complete openness to experience that does not choose between the joyous and the painful, but accepts all equally. This openness reflects a courage that is every bit as impressive and is in fact of the same order as that of the warrior on the battlefield. In displaying these qualities, Shunzei demonstrates that he participates fully in the court culture which valued them so highly. Yet these qualities are not quite so central to our immediate concerns as is the discipline by which Shunzei is able to so vastly improve the signal to noise ratio of ordinary human perceptions. Signals given by breezes and orange blossoms are too subtle for most of us to deal with. Shunzei's touch is so sure not only because he was a gifted poet but because he was working in a tradition that had been refining these techniques for more than five hundred years. These techniques served above all to heighten and to preserve individual experience and they sprung from an assumption that individual experience was, if perceived with full authenticity and integrity, in no way different from ultimate reality. In focusing upon the particular rather than upon the general, it encouraged a liberalized perception of human beings.

The reconciliation of Buddhist despair about this world and the Shinto celebration of it comes through this treatment of the particular. Since small, ephemeral happenings were simply aspects of the ultimate reality, they were not distinct from it. If one fully and truly grasped any part, one grasped the whole. The understanding that resulted, the "enlightenment" that Buddhism speaks of seems in part to be an understanding that all distinctions are illusory. Nagarjuna taught that "nirvana is samsara, samsara is nirvana." Samsara, the world of conditioned experience and of suffering, and its opposite, nirvana, the world of extinction, are in the end identical. Even this distinction is illusory. The philosophical presentation of this proposition is among the most difficult in all of Buddhist teachings, but after undergoing in Japan the kind of adaptation through simplification that Kato describes, it seems to have informed Japanese thought in such a way that the Shinto and Buddhist world views also appeared to be essentially identical. The source of suffering in everyday life lay not in the evil nature of the world but in the misapprehensions that people held about the nature of the world. Such misapprehensions could be viewed as "impurities" or "pollutions" and Buddhist metaphysics could be recast in terms of Shinto estheticism. The world was benign after all, but the problem of purification was both a more difficult and a more urgent one than it had first seemed to be in early Shinto.
In Shinto, a pursuit of beauty through a hierarchical order of ever more austere forms could in itself take on the character of an ascetic discipline. Such a discipline could be carried out in terms of a pursuit of excellence in any particular area of skill since all are aspects of the great unity. Thus the readiness in Japan to refer to any skilled calling as a "way" or quasi-religious discipline and the tendency for the roles of artist and priest to shade into one another are accounted for. In the end we come to something that seems like Buddhist salvation but which is realized through Shinto means as one is freed from the suffering of this world through a disciplined purging of inadequate perceptions. The end product of this reconciliation of the Shinto and Buddhist world views is what might be called a kind of informal doctrine of "salvation through beauty." The question of salvation through beauty is one that underlies Japanese artistic endeavour from Murasaki to Bashō and, through ironic inversion, the works of such twentieth-century writers as Nagai Kafū and Tanizaki Jun’ichirō.

The preoccupation with the particular, with its predisposition to focus on the individual, and the idea of salvation through beauty, with its inclination toward the positive, both predisposed Japanese court culture toward liberality. The appearance in the Heian period of the Shingon and Tendai Buddhist sects with their message of salvation for all (shikkai jōbutsu) was perhaps the final factor that brought this tendency into maturity. The assumption that no one had any advantage in the quest for salvation because of worldly position now received further reinforcement. The absence of triviality was more clearly apparent; neither incidents nor people could be dismissed out of hand as being of no consequence. Individuals were important in their own right and the way in which they dealt with their own lives was of high significance. The important things were after all in this world just as Shinto had maintained, and the focus on this world brought us back once again to the individuals in it. These ideas and assumptions were operating in a social and political context of considerable complexity but they determined the ruling preoccupations and in particular that preoccupation with aesthetic matters that Sir George Sansom has so aptly termed "The Rule of Taste."

Under this "rule of taste," the literature of the Japanese court developed its characteristic stance, informed by the Shinto-Buddhist synthesis. The starting point of this court literature is court poetry. In the Japanese preface to the first imperial anthology, the Kokinshū, published in 905 A.D., Ki no Tsurayuki first attempted a definition of Japanese verse:
Japanese verse, taking the heart of mankind as its seed, burgeons forth into the myriad leaves of speech. In the midst of the complications and distractions of this world, people will express what is in their hearts about what they see and what they hear. The warbler among the cherry blossoms, the frogs that live in the waters; can anything live without singing its song? Without exerting force, Japanese verse moves heaven and earth, it causes the unseen gods and demons to take pity, it makes gentle the relationships between men and women, and it comforts the heart of the bold warrior: such is its nature.  

The function of poetry is expressive rather than didactic and it is this expressivist stance that made most accessible the major concerns of the society. The preeminence of poetry among human activities was due to this expressivist doctrine. The feelings of the individual are important for what they tell others about the social nuances that largely determine lives lived in very close physical proximity. The conventions of court poetry enabled the individual to keep check on his emotions and provided him with a discipline that aids in monitoring them for authenticity. At the same time they provide a socially acceptable outlet for his feelings and assure him that if his verse is both correct and graceful, its emotional content will probably be validated by the acceptance of his peers. This practical social function is not contradictory to the conception of poetry as a quest for reality and truth but, within a world view that is above all pragmatic, reaffirms it.

The world view of Japanese court literature is determined by considerations of authenticity within the conventions observed by the group. Form, content, speaker, poet, and subject are all one, so that a lapse in poetic technique must necessarily reflect a defect in character. The only sin in poetic creation was inauthenticity. Sound diction and form were the hallmarks of authenticity, which was the paramount value. An incident in the career of Ariwara no Narihira (825–880) illustrates the way in which authenticity took precedence over all other values. Biographical material about 9th-century poets is extremely meager but according to the Ise Monogatari version of the story and the prose settings given from the Kokinshū for the poems about the incident it is really irrelevant whether or not the affair really took place at all. Whatever the facts of the matter, this is the version that appeared in two works that were part of the basic education of every educated person in Japan for the next thousand years. Narihira is said to have had a rendezvous with an imperial princess who was in service at the Ise shrines. This was a post that carried with it the strictest requirements for abstention and purification. The next morning after their meeting, the princess sent a poem to Narihira and he sends a poem in reply:
Kimi ya koshi
Did you come to me?

Ware ya yukiken
Or did I go to you?

Omöezu,
I can't tell.

Yume ka utsutsu ka
Was it a dream? Was it real?

Nete ka samete ka
Was I asleep? Was I awake?

Kakikurasu
Through the blackest

Kokoro no yami ni
Night of the heart

Madoi ni ki
I wandered, lost.

Yume utsutsu to wa
Whether in dream or reality

Yo hito sadame yo
Let the world decide.

What is purportedly happening here is the breaking of a major religious taboo as described in two of the most important texts of the culture. Yet what follows is not the scandal, disgrace, and severe punishment that experience with other cultures might lead us to expect to find described in texts that were above all texts for teaching courtly deportment. We are instead invited to appreciate the aftertaste of the turbulent emotions that led to the incident.

At another time, Narihira did get into trouble. He did so not by breaking a religious taboo but, far more serious in court society, a social one. He became involved with a lady, one in the service of the empress, and therefore not supposed to be accessible to him. Yet even this break with convention had far less serious results than it might have had in other courts or even at other times in Japan; the lady was simply sent away. We remember the incident today because it was the occasion of Narihira's most famous poem. The poet visits a room where he and his love had been together just a year earlier:

Tsuki ya aranu
Is this the moon?

Haru ya mukashi no
Is this spring the same

Haru naranu
Spring as that one?

Waga mi hitotsu wa
Only I myself remain

Moto no mi ni shite
The same as I was then.

Both poet and reader are entirely uninterested in the question of whether or not it was "proper" to have engaged in an affair with a prohibited woman. That was a question to be dealt with on the administrative level; it was no concern of poetry. What was important to poetry was the precise emotional tone of this experience. Questions of rank or position, or of religious or moral strictures as expounded in the Buddhist scriptures or Confucian classics were very important but they did not occupy the supreme position in the poet's hierarchy of values. (And
everyone at court had to be to some degree a poet.) The first level of interest is in the emotions of the individual. The proposition is not argued from first principles. No philosophers created systems to demonstrate its truth. The feelings of the individual were simply assumed by the culture to be the locus of supreme value and authenticity consisted in conducting oneself in accord with this truth. Life was an art not a science, and it could not be reduced to formula. Because there was no metaphysical structure underlying this focus on the emotions, the most rigorous discipline had to be followed if authenticity was to be maintained and the poetry was not to become a corrupt mire of empty posturing and infantile self-dramatization. No one would ever have thought to defend slackness as a matter of "artistic temperament"; in this respect at least, the people of the Japanese court would have been baffled by our century.

Intensity and directness of expression were the most important marks of authenticity, and in the conventions of the poetry as in the world at large, it was love that provided the best opportunities for such tightly-focussed emotional experiences. Love poetry was highly prized and the issue was never whether or not the love was proper or sanctioned but whether it was authentic. The tone could be wry and playful:

Koishiku wa If you long for me
Kite mo miyo kashi Why not just come and see me?
Chihayaburu The all-powerful
Kami no isamuru Gods have surely not
Michi nara naku ni Denied the way to you.21

Whatever excuses a laggard lover might have he certainly could not plead the prohibitions of the gods as an excuse. It is interesting that the speaker of this poem is not, as European reflexes might lead us to assume, a woman but a man. Narihira was getting involved with the princess at the Ise shrine. It was, according to the traditional account, she who had first expressed interest, and it was Narihira who was suggesting rather impatiently, almost sarcastically, that she really should be more aggressive; it could hardly be the gods who were restraining her. For the gods too, authenticity was the highest value, far more urgent a need than formalistic adherence to social and religious restrictions.

Paradox was not a serious problem for the people of this culture. Whitman's "Do I contradict myself?/ Very well then I contradict myself," would have seemed completely gratuitous to them, and they would certainly have seen no need for Whitman's explanatory parenthesis. Nor would they have shared the horror of Mitya when he observed
that "Beauty is a terrible and awful thing! It is terrible because it has not been fathomed and can never be fathomed, for God sets us nothing but riddles." In Narihira's world, this was the glory of existence not its bane."

In practice there seemed to be little concern at this particular period in Japanese history with following any rules except the rules of taste in all areas of art and life. All meliorative impulses were directed toward refinement of the standards of taste. These standards were to be judged not systematically and rationally but subjectively in terms of their ability to provide a surer guide to the subtly elusive goal of authenticity. The prodigious snarl of philosophical loose ends that this approach left was not of importance to people who were not philosophers, but lovers of life, the world and, ideally, of each other. The problems it left in the larger political world were never resolved.

It was out of this context that the culture and climate of liberality at the Heian court was created. These were the qualities that made that culture in some ways spiritually akin to our own age of relativism, or at least to those portions of it that partake of anything that might be called a culture and climate of liberality. It is for these reasons that a Japanese critic could observe that Kawabata Yasunari was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1968 in part because he seemed in some ways an advanced writer by Western standards in precisely those areas of his art that referred most directly to the standards and conventions of Japanese court literature. These were the same qualities in Kawabata's writing that made him seem old-fashioned and embarrassing to some Japanese readers.

These aspects of Japanese court life did not altogether eliminate the normal stresses and strains imposed by politics and economics. Life at the Japanese court was remarkably free from violence and deadly intrigue. Although the values we have been discussing surely played a role in the humane quality of court life, the very limited real power of the court during much of the time under consideration also helped to reduce aristocratic competition to levels at which civilized standards were more easily maintained. They played a direct role in political careers, particularly at the middle level. A mastery of poetry, calligraphy, and the polite accomplishments and graces reflected a complete interiorization of the standards of the society. They could often be crucial in gaining recognition and advancement. Insistence on authenticity as defined by court culture standards seems also to have a bearing on the adaptability that has marked Japanese history as well as on certain habits of exclusivity. When authenticity is the dominant concern, ques-
tions of institutional survival tend to take precedence over abstract considerations of doctrinal purity.

If the culture and climate of liberality that prevailed throughout much of Japanese court culture was due in large part to its mistrust of logical rigor and its emphasis on a standard of authenticity that inevitably focused on the individual, this quality could produce many other interesting effects. Some of these lead us directly back to our main theme.

The pragmatic, this-worldly bias of the culture did not exclude an awareness of the elusive quality of reality. We have already seen the difficulty in distinguishing between dream and reality in the exchange of poems between Narihira and the princess. Another poem by Shunzei shows what can be done with this approach when used for its own potential. The poem is built around an allusion to the last chapter of *The Tale of Genji*, which ends inconclusively and which is entitled ‘The Floating Bridge of Dreams’:

Haru no yo no  The spring night’s
Yume no ukihashi Floating bridge of dreams
Todaeshete  Breaks off;
Mine ni wakaruru Drifting away from the peaks,
Yokogumo no sora The cloud bands of the sky."

The dream world of the first three lines is opposed to the “real” world of the last two, but the “floating bridge of dreams”: of the first part of the poem, insubstantial as it feels, is far more concrete than the transverse cloud that echoes it in the second part. The word “sora” here translated as “sky” can also mean “the void,” “sunyata” in Buddhist terms. The certainties that resonate in the formal perfection and elegant diction of the poem dissolve into a mass of ambiguities and uncertainties. Mitya’s cry of despair becomes a posture of rapture and wonder before the same mystery.

These same assumptions that inform Japanese court literature also made possible the surrealistic word pictures of a Teika or, some centuries later, the abstractions of a Sesshū. Teika was Shunzei’s son and the last great figure of the great age of court poetry. By the time he reached adulthood he was already living in the next age, an age of military horror that he ignored as far as was humanly possible. Here is a poem he produced on the assigned theme of “The Imperial Banquet of the New Year”:

Haru kureba  Kumoi no hashi ni
Hoshi no kurai ni Izuru taoyame
Kage miete

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Spring now comes
And among the ranks of stars
Light blazes forth.

It was not until the 20th century that Japanese poets again approached language in just this way, but they were by then writing a very different poetry. This vision of the court as a realm of stars in the form of courtiers whose brilliance illuminates the beauty of the court ladies as they make their appearance “at the edge of the cloud world,” the conventional term for the court, created with a surety of form and diction that preserves it from excess, reminds us once again of the splendor of this court. It is useful to reflect upon what it tells us of its refinement and elegance of sentiment. Among its many facets are those that suggest that the rational faculties are not the only ones that respond to rigor and discipline nor are they always certain to be the most effective way to honor man, his world, and its wonder.

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NOTES

1. There are several general histories of Japan that give a sense of this development. The first dozen chapters of Sir George Sansom, History of Japan to 1334 (Stanford, 1958) provides the best general coverage.

2. This period produced, among other things, the great anthology of early Japanese poetry, the Manyōshū; the first eight imperial anthologies of poetry, an extensive range of diaries, personal miscellanies, tales, and novels, and the beginnings of a substantial critical literature.


4. Nakamura Hajime, Philip Wiener, ed., The Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples (revised edition, Honolulu, 1964), gives a superb coverage of this problem. The Japanese literature is voluminous. Perhaps the most useful demonstrations of these tendencies in action are in such historical works written in the court period as the Eigakan Monogatari and the Gukanshō.

5. Sansom, op. cit., p. 256.


8. For a discussion of primitivism in Japanese court poetry, see Robert Brower and Earl Miner, Japanese Court Poetry (Stanford, 1961), pp. 21-23. Here, as with all the other poems discussed in this paper I am indebted to Brower and Miner. Wherever I have disagreed with them in translation or interpretation it has been with trepidation and in full awareness that their work is an

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absolutely indispensable supplement to the Japanese commentaries on the subject.

11. Alicia Orloff Matsunaga, The Buddhist Philosophy of Assimilation (Tokyo, 1969) takes up this question from the Buddhist point of view. It is an excellent demonstration of the point that Katō makes.

12. Matsunaga, op. cit., pp. 68-69, gives a synopsis of Nāgārjuna's argument on this point. Like the later coming of Zen Buddhism, this view seems to have been so well-received in Japan because it served to reinforce preexisting assumptions.
13. The poem is number 202, vol. III, Kokinshu. For an alternative translation and discussion, see Brower and Miner, op. cit., pp. 305 and 464.
15. The concept of "salvation through beauty," although never clearly articulated in the literature so far as I know, seems to be one of the great underlying concerns of Japanese literature. It can be traced through works of every major genre and author but it is taken up most clearly in the works of Murasaki Shikibu and Matsuo Bashō. I have discussed Murasaki's treatment of the theme in Comparative Civilizations Review, No. 1 (Winter, 1979), pp. 52-53, but the main source is, of course, the Genji itself. For Bashō, Ueda Makoto, Matsuo Bashō (New York, 1970) is a splendid introduction to these and other aspects of the career of a man who has few enemies but has often suffered terribly at the hands of his friends. The chapter on "Genji as a Modern Novel" in Thomas Rimer, Modern Japanese Fiction and its Antecedents (Princeton, 1978) is to be recommended.
16. Sansom, op. cit., pp. 117-123, surveys the coming of these two schools. Yoshito S. Hakeda Kukai: Major Works is an important introduction to its subject, the most important religious figure of his period. "Essentials of Kūkai's Esoteric Buddhist Thought", pp. 76-100, is a model of the way in which Buddhism was adapted to Japanese needs and preoccupations.
17. Sansom, op. cit., Chapter IX.
19. In the Kokinshū these poems are numbers 645 and 646. They are to be found in their more extensive prose settings in episode 69 of the Ise Monogatari (NKBT IX).
stadter notes the horror and loathing that paradox and "the strange loop" have aroused in traditional Western thought. It had seemed self-evident to most theorists that both resulted from faulty premises or inadequate technique. In practice, Bath joyously accepted them, Escher made a career of them and Gödel seems to have proved that any system that attempted to eliminate them would necessarily and inevitably be self-contradictory. This destruction of one of the last refuges of certainty in Western thought has been yet another shock to a set of world views that looked to certitude as a reasonable goal. It is not at all disturbing to the Buddhist and East Asian world views nor, as Hofstadter demonstrates, to many Western audiences. His approach appears to be a useful one for those interested in making a more systematic translation of Japanese esthetics into more responsible and useful Western language terms than have usually been the case up to now.