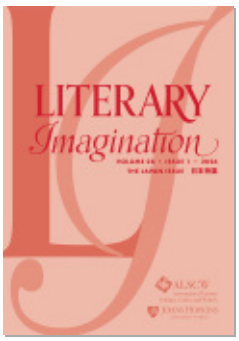
Letter from the Editor

Paul Franz



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Letter from the Editor

The Japan issue of *Literary Imagination* came about by happenstance, or thanks to the zeitgeist; it was inspired by its editor's perception, formed in casual conversation and by discussion online and in the press, that Japanese literature has returned to public awareness, having escaped the domain of specialists and imprinted itself on the consciousness of the age.

For the most part, this interest has concentrated on what might be called Japanese modernism. Besides the ubiquitous Mishima (a perennial object of fascination, now cherished afresh by various niche online subcultures), his near-antitype, the nominally left-wing Osamu Dazai, has himself become the object of online cult, fed by new translations and reissues of the classic versions by Donald Keene. New Directions Publishing has spearheaded the Dazai revival. Meanwhile, New York Review Books, a tastemaker of equivalent standing, has brought out works by Dazai's daughter, Yuko Tsushima, and the contemporary expatriate writer Yoko Tawada, who publishes in Japanese and in German.

Literary Imagination both joins and breaks with this trend. The modern period of Japanese literature is here represented by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa, two of whose stories are translated by Ryan Choi, and by the poet Yosano Akiko, in Janine Beichman's splendid rendition of a selection of her tanka and "free form" poems.

Yet the issue also reaches back in time, to the Heian period, and forward to the contemporary. If today's fascination with literary Japan often concentrates on (somewhat equivocal) images of the masculine, J. Keith Vincent's new translations of Sei Shōnagon and his essay on Murasaki Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji* are a reminder that the classical period of Japanese literature was, as he observes, "an age when women dominated Japan's literary world." Yosano and the contemporary poet Shizuka Omori (here translated by Yuki Tanaka, himself a Yamaguchi-born writer of English-language poetry) attest to the continuing centrality of women writers in this tradition. (A sardonic reference to Nietzsche in Yosano, meanwhile, is a reminder of the international character of Japanese reading habits and an indication that an adulatory response such as Mishima's was not the only one possible.)

Living traditions are the subject of both Vincent's study of the role of literary echoes—of "hauntings"—in the *Genji* and Ryan Hintzman's survey of the "everyday" and "commonplace" practices of traditional Japanese verse-craft. Where Vincent explores the uncertain boundary between prose and verse, Hintzman, by considering uta in light of ongoing debates about "lyric" across the domain of literary studies, shows how recent scholarly arguments have been anticipated within the field of Japanese studies, where they appear to have been pursued, however, in a spirit of greater imaginative sympathy with their objects.

The lone non-Japanese-themed entry in this volume, David Sergeant's analysis of the music of W. B. Yeats's "Cuchulain Comforted," feels strangely at home, both because of the Irish poet's longstanding fascination with the art and ethos of feudal Japan, and because

its "play-correlate," *The Death of Cuchulain*, draws on Yeats's earlier experiments in Noh theater. (This is not to mention the poem's liminal, underworld setting, which chimes with spectral themes in the *Genji*, in Yosano, and in Akutagawa.) As the only poem to feature "true inter-stanzaic enjambment" from a poet who otherwise sought "complete coincidence between period and stanza," its treatment here complements Hintzman's observations on the typical rhythmic counterpoint of uta, in which "only at the end of a given uta do syntax and meter finally coincide and come to rest together."

If Yeats's interest in Japan is present in "Cuchulain Comforted" only by resonance, the same is not true of the two distinguished Anglophone visitors, the Greek and Anglo-Irish essayist Lafcadio Hearn and the Scottish poet G. S. Fraser, whom Ryuichiro Yokoyama considers in light of their shared interest in Japanese volcanoes. That interest, however, is synecdochial of a deeper affinity between the two men, and one that links them to the other contributors and subjects of this issue: their "shared commitment to imagining Japan both as a physical place and as a source of poetic inspiration."

On matters of usage, individual inclination has been prized above strict consistency. Japanese text has been provided for all translated poems and both Japanese and romanization for quotations within essays; English translations either precede or follow their originals, in accord with authorial emphasis. Personal names appear in either Western or Japanese style (i.e., with the family name first or second), in accord with authorial preference and convention.

For assistance and counsel of various kinds in preparing this issue, I am indebted to Dr J. Keith Vincent and Dr Patrick Carland-Echevarria, of Boston and Oxford Universities, respectively. Any remaining editorial errors of fact or judgment are my responsibility alone.

—Paul Franz