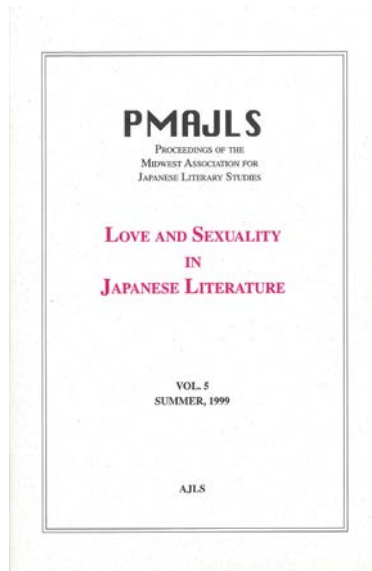


“Ren’ai: The Politics of Eros in the Writing of  
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**REN'AI:  
THE POLITICS OF EROS  
IN THE WRITING OF KITAMURA TŌKOKU**

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I shall begin with a biographical sketch of Tōkoku's early years as historical background to the connection between love and politics in his writings. Tōkoku was born in 1868, the eldest son of an impoverished samurai family living in Odawara. He spent his childhood there before moving to Tokyo with his parents in 1881. As a political science student at Tokyo School of Special Studies (later, Waseda University) two years later, he threw himself into the Freedom and Popular Rights Movement

In the summer of 1885, Tōkoku's closest friend in the movement, Ōya Masao, asked him to join in series of armed robberies to fund a group of radicals led by Ōi Kentarō; their plan was to go to Korea to provoke a democratic revolution there. Tōkoku refused and ceased further activities on behalf of the movement. Ōya was soon caught, tried and imprisoned for robbery. The plan itself failed when the rest of the group was arrested in Osaka on the eve of their departure in what became known as the Osaka incident.

The events of that summer haunted Tōkoku for the rest of his life, and the fates of his associates who challenged the power and authority of the Meiji government in one violent confrontation or another seems to have convinced Tōkoku that fighting force with force was futile. He returned to Tokyo School of Special Studies, this time as a student in the English Department with the hope of becoming a writer of political fiction (*seiji shōsetsu*). He withdrew after one semester, apparently for financial reasons. This so-called "dark age" in Tōkoku's life—the two years following the collapse of the Freedom and Popular Rights movement, ended when he fell in love with Ishizaka Minako, the daughter of a prominent Jiyūtō leader. Minako was three years older than Tōkoku, a mission-school student and a devout Christian. That summer in 1887, Tōkoku converted to Christianity at the age of nineteen, and he and Minako were married the following year. He subsequently earned his living as an interpreter for various missionaries in Tokyo while trying to make a name for himself as a writer.

We see that during Tōkoku's adolescence, love and politics were closely bound up together, much as they were in the popular political fiction of the day, such as Suehiro Tetchō's *Setchūbai* [Plum Blossom in

the Snow, 1886]. When writers of political fiction proved unable to free themselves from the narrative conventions of premodern Chinese vernacular tales and Edo period fiction, they came under attack from critics like Tokutomi Sohō for failing to live up to the new expectations for modern fiction.<sup>1</sup> Tōkoku's first literary efforts may thus be seen as attempts to write a new kind of political fiction. They were *Soshū no shi* [The Prisoner's Poem] published at his own expense in the spring of 1889, and *Hōraikyoku* [Mt. Horai: A Play], also published at his own expense two years later in 1891.<sup>2</sup> Both were modeled after works by Byron, specifically, "The Prisoner of Chillon" (*Soshū no shi*) and *Manfred* (*Hōraikyoku*). Although both were experiments in the new, *shintaiishi* form of poetry, both are narratives that feature protagonists who are political activists but who, far from realizing their ambitions with the aid and comfort of a beautiful woman with the right social connections, find themselves instead imprisoned—literally so in *Soshū no shi*—in a solipsistic world of their own nightmarish hallucinations because they are separated from their beloveds.

Tōkoku is perhaps best remembered for his writings on *ren'ai*, or "spiritual love." The terms *rabu*, [love], *ren'ai*, or some variant were in limited circulation by the early 1890s. Christian writers such as Yamaji Aizan, Uemura Masahisa, Iwamoto Yoshiharu and Tokutomi Sohō, extolled this idea and urged it on their readers as the proper, moral ideal of relations between the sexes. The use of the words "close friend" (*shin'yū*) in some novels of the day, and in some of Tōkoku's letters to Minako, to characterize a relationship based on this ideal is some indication of how *rabu* or *ren'ai* was understood in contrast to the more carnal *koi*.<sup>3</sup>

But Tōkoku seems to have made the term *ren'ai* his own in the essay "*Ensei shika to josei*" [Pessimist poets and women], published in February of 1892.<sup>4</sup> The first sentence of this essay may be his most well-known: "Love is the secret key to human society; once there is love, then there is human society."

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Earl Kinmonth's discussion in *The Self-Made Man in Meiji Japanese Thought: from Samurai to Salary Man*, University of California Press (Berkeley, 1981), p. 92ff.

<sup>2</sup>*Soshū no shi* and *Hōraikyoku* may be found in *Tōkoku Zenshū* (hereafter, *TZ*), Katsumoto Seiichirō, ed., 3 vols. (revised), Iwanami Shoten (Tokyo, 1973–1978), I: 3–33, 42–174.

<sup>3</sup>See Murakami Takayuki, "Is It True that Love Existed Only in Brothels: On the Edo Tradition of Passion." *Hikaku Bungaku* XXXII (1989). p. 229–242; and his "Lovers in Disguise: A Feature of Romantic Love in Meiji Literature" in *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 28, no. 3, 1991, pp 213–33.

<sup>4</sup>*TZ*, I: 254–264.

What was Tōkoku's conception of *ren'ai*? In "Pessimist Poets," Tōkoku argues for the importance of love in the life of the individual and for society as a whole. Indeed, for Tōkoku, there could be no society without love because its basic unit is not the individual subject but a man and a woman joined in married love. This union, for the man at least, is achieved after a terrible struggle between the Ideal World (*sōsekai*) of youthful innocence and the Real World (*jissekai*) of the social order. The latter is characterized by its duties and morality, "complex and enigmatic mysteries," "inconsistencies and irregularities." The Ideal World of youth, on the other hand, is formed in ignorance of the real world by one who, having begun to think for himself, aspires to the Good and the Beautiful. Thus, when the youth first takes notice of the Real World, he reacts with disgust at how different it is from his ideals. What is worse, the youth must give up his Ideal World and take his place in the Real World. A terrible struggle ensues, but however much he may resist, he is doomed. Faced with imminent defeat, "the vanquished general of the Ideal World, frustrated and heart-broken, seeks something to console him," "an ally, a helpmate." "It is then that he begins to toss and turn in bed, his mind racing across the heavens in search of a beautiful woman." When he finds her, "his enemies vanish; and all dissatisfactions, all discord, relinquish their place to the angels of Truth and Beauty." Once married, however, the individual becomes a prisoner of the Real World, "bound by the ropes and nets of the social system." But marriage "civilizes" the individual by making him stand in his "proper place" and thus carry out his role as a member of society.

Whereas previous essays by other Christian writers had discussed *ren'ai* in the tone and rhetoric of a Sunday sermon, Tōkoku couched his argument in the form of a narrative that dramatized *ren'ai* in terms of the anguish of adolescent males struggling with urges that in the minds of most men, were usually satisfied by a trip to the pleasure quarters. Tōkoku quotes Coleridge and Emerson in support of his argument, but it has been shown that Coleridge exerted the greater influence of the two on Tōkoku's conception of love.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, it was probably his reading of Coleridge's seventh and eighth *Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton* that moved him to write "Pessimist-Poets." For Coleridge, love is "a desire of the whole being to be united with something."<sup>6</sup> This desire gives rise to an idea; and "our imperfect nature, in proportion as our ideas are vivid,

<sup>5</sup>Satō Zenya, "Koruriggi to Tōkoku," *Nihon Bungaku*, Vol 23., No. 7 (July 1974):13-29.

<sup>6</sup>All citations from *Coleridge's Lectures and Notes on Shakespeare and Other English Poets*, collected by T. Ashe, George Bell and Sons, London, 1897.

seeks after something in which those ideas may be realized." The "cause and origin" of love, therefore, is not biological but man's "consciousness of imperfection" as a moral being. As we grow up, we begin to feel "passions that invite us to enter the world." By then the individual has learned "the greatest lesson of the human mind," namely, that "we are imperfect." Coleridge continues:

The mind of man searches for something which shall add to his perfection—which shall assist him; and he also yearns to lend his aid in completing the moral nature of another. Thoughts like these will occupy many of his serious moments: imagination will accumulate on imagination, until at last some object attracts his attention, and to this object the whole weight and impulse of his feelings will be directed.

Marriage is the pivotal event in a Platonic ascent, in Coleridge's words, "from sensuality to affection, from affection to love, and from love to the pure intellectual delight by which we become worthy to conceive that infinite in ourselves, without which it is impossible for man to believe in a God." In a line that may well have inspired the beginning of Tōkoku's essay, Coleridge remarks: "without marriage, without exclusive attachment, there could be no society." These ideas, which Tōkoku cited almost verbatim in "Pessimist Poets" and subsequent essays, formed the basis of his conception of *ren'ai*.

Why did Tōkoku write this essay? The proximate cause seems to have been an editorial by Tokutomi Sohō in *Kokumin no tomo* in which he argued that love was incompatible with worldly ambitions, one of the many things one must sacrifice to achieve success, wealth and power.<sup>7</sup> Sohō's essay had appeared six months before in July 1891 and outraged Japanese Christian intellectuals. But Tōkoku was also criticizing Ozaki Kōyō and other writers whose popular stories revealed their debt to Saikaku: "To say love blossoms in the season of desire has been the vice of sham-writers down through the ages: despising human existence, they reduced it to their own sordid ideals." In subsequent essays, Tōkoku became more strident in his attacks on Kōyō's "Saikaku revival," arguing for stories that depicted love based on the ideals outlined above.

If Tōkoku really wanted to write an encomium to love, however, why call the essay "Pessimist Poets and Women"? If Tōkoku had really wanted to challenge Sohō's assertion that love and career ambitions were

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<sup>7</sup>See, for example, Kinmonth, p.147-8.

incompatible, why not cite examples of famous over-achievers in the West, such as the models who were then being held up for inspiration to Japan's youth, and argue that they won their success, their fame or power, because of their *ren'ai* marriages to soulmates? Instead he undercuts his own argument with an anti-narrative of the *ensei* or "pessimist" poet, for whom love and the joys of marriage cannot compensate for being imprisoned in a world he hates. However much she may embody his ideal, however ecstatic their union, the *ensei* poet's ideal woman-in-the-flesh in time comes to represent all the duties and obligations imposed on the individual by society, and so the *ensei* poet comes to hate her and their marriage fails.

The figure of the "pessimist-poet" that emerges in this essay is profoundly negative and all the more powerful in that it anticipates the careers of later writers whose disastrous love-lives were the subject matter of their fiction. Yet for all that, the essay reads like a defense of the pessimist poet.

And there are other oddities in the essay. The "Pessimist-Poets" of the title, for example, are all Western: Goethe, Milton, Shelly, and above all Byron, the Bryon of *Childe Harold* and *Don Juan*. What is more, Tōkoku specifically offers his "defense" of the pessimist poet to counter the argument that poets do not get along with women because they are like women.

Women are extremely narrow-minded and obstinate. But we must admit that poets too, from a certain point of view, have similar qualities. Women are graceful and delicate but poets too are usually graceful and delicate in their thoughts. Even when a poet dashes out powerful verses, he resembles a woman since he strives for elegance. Furthermore, when we observe closely the physiology of a poet's character, he is sensitive, tenacious, and so on, but space will not permit me to recount the many other traits also found in women. Since there are these points of similarity, there is mutual animosity. Is the poet ultimately incapable of having harmonious relations out of his animosity toward the same qualities in another? Perhaps that is so, but I shall appeal to men of learning who ask if there might not be another explanation. (*TZ*, I:257–258)

Tōkoku's explanation is that the fault lay not with women, love, the institution of marriage, or even society with all its "complex and enigmatic mysteries," but rather with the pessimist-poets themselves: because

they are congenitally incapable of feeling at home in the world, they are the exceptions that prove the rule, the truth of *ren'ai*.

Tōkoku seems to want it both ways, but the presence of the pessimist-poet anti-narrative drives a wedge between the very things that, on the surface, Tōkoku is trying to reconcile: the individual and society, the ideal world and the real, love and marriage, men and women, a Western ideal as argued by Emerson and Coleridge on the one hand, and its notable Western exceptions as represented by Byron. It is a divide that points perhaps to Tōkoku's private doubts about what he was trying to argue, or the "inconsistencies and irregularities" of Meiji society itself.

At the time, his wife Minako was pregnant with their first child, and Tōkoku had fallen in love with a young woman named Tomii Matsuko, a student at the Quaker school for girls where he was employed. Matsuko seems to have been a continuing reminder of what Minako had once been to him, an ever-distant ideal of love that made the realities of his own marriage seem the more harsh.

For this reason, perhaps, Tōkoku continued to emphasize the positive. In the months following the "Pessimist Poets" essay, he further elaborated on and idealized *ren'ai* in essays criticizing contemporary fiction. At the same time, however, his interests turned to Tokugawa period popular culture and another form of eros, "Inspiration," which he understood as a momentary self-transcending union with the divine. As I have written elsewhere, this idea first appears in Tōkoku's essay, "*Matsushima ni oite Bashō-ō wo yomu*" [Reading Bashō at Matsushima] published two months after "Pessimist Poets."<sup>8</sup> Crucial in this respect was his encounter with an English translation of Friederich Schiller's essay "On the Sublime" in the fall of 1892. The subsequent development in his thinking is best seen in an essay published in the spring of 1893, "*Jinsei ni aiwataru to wa nan no ii zo*" [What does 'Relevant to Life' mean?]<sup>9</sup> The essay was a response to one by Yamaji Aizan and it sparked a debate between them about the purpose of literature and the role of the writer in society.

For Aizan, "literature" meant historical essays, social criticism, or inspiring biographies of great men, a public "enterprise" comparable to the heroic deeds of warriors of the past, as opposed to private reflection on the beauties of nature. Tōkoku defined literature as a spiritual enterprise, and described the struggles of Japanese poets like Bashō and Sai-

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<sup>8</sup>See my "Tōkoku at Matsushima," in *Monumenta Nipponica*, vol. 45, no. 3 (Autumn 1990):285-306.

<sup>9</sup>*TZ*, II:113-125.

gyō, as far more heroic than the deeds of warriors. A poet recognizes that all human beings at all times are subject to what Tōkoku called, borrowing from Schiller, “nature-as-force.”

This is not, Tōkoku points out, the more obvious “forces of nature,” which man can fight against by building shelter against the wind and rain, but rather what he characterized as a sort of centripetal force that holds reality together. Internally this force manifests itself as the physical needs of the body through which nature shackles us to itself. Externally, nature’s ever-changing appearance dazzles our eyes, blinding them to a larger, spiritual reality the lies behind or beyond the phenomenal world. Simply put, nature-as-force besieges man with desire and illusion.

Tōkoku argues, however, that human beings are subject to another force, one that opposes the centripetal pull of nature, namely the yearning of an inner *seimei*, or “life-force,” to be reunited with that larger spiritual reality. In his view, each individual constitutes his own field of battle, where nature as force vies with his inner *seimei* for supremacy. Tōkoku asserts that the poet more than anyone else is best suited to engage in this struggle, which he described in images of war. That is, desire and illusion are “invisible enemies,” against which the sharp sword of the traditional warrior is useless. Rather, the poet must forge the “sword of his soul.”

When in the course of his battle with nature-as-force all seems lost, an opening appears—not a path of retreat but a way through. In moments of “inspiration” (and here Tōkoku used the English word), the writer leaves the field of battle, transcending it to make contact with the Idea, the Sublime. “The sublime,” he writes, “is not limited by physical shapes; its domain is the Idea: it is the friend one finds after leaping into the bosom of Nature,” a friend with whom the writer “enjoys the rapture of self-transcendence.” His personification of the Sublime as the “truest of friends,” a “friend not of this world” reminds us on the one hand of personifications of the sublime in 18th century English poetry, and on the other, of the use of the word friend to describe one’s beloved in some of the fiction of his day, as I noted earlier.

Tōkoku’s Schiller-inspired vision of the poet’s struggle with nature as force, the poet who, pressed to the extreme, then finds a way out in a moment of self-transcendence, is another version of the idealistic youth’s struggle with the Real World presented in the “Pessimist Poets” essay, the youth who, driven to the extreme, then finds refuge in the arms of the woman of his dreams. The “Real World,” of course, meant Meiji Society, and we may see in Tōkoku’s nature-as-force, the Meiji government-as-force. The Meiji government, derived its moral authority from a hidden



divine center (the emperor). Excluded from that hidden divine center, the politically marginalized poet, in Tōkoku's view, finds a greater moral authority for his words in the divine beyond of the sublime.

For Tōkoku then, Eros was a solution to the problem of politics, a way to rise above a confrontation between opposing forces through a self-transcending union with the Other. It was a union first described as *ren'ai*, in essays such as "Pessimist Poets and Women," where the Other is an ideal woman, a woman-as- "friend," and the union leads to a reconciliation between the individual and society. He then later described it as "inspiration," where the Other is the sublime, the sublime as the "truest of friends," and union with which provides the poet with the moral authority to act politically through writing.

Tōkoku seems to have vacillated between the belief and doubt, his belief on the one hand that union with a divine Other was still possible through love, or in self-transcending moments of "inspiration"; and his doubts on the other that such unions were delusions or hallucinations, or that modern life made such transcendence impossible. In his essays, at least, he argued his beliefs, but it seems his doubts overtook him with the sudden death of Tomii Matsuko in August of 1893. Matsuko's death marked the beginning of a downward spiral for Tōkoku, both mentally and physically, to his first suicide attempt four months later, as if her death signified the death of the possibility of Love itself.