

## Nature and/or poetry? Based on “A Poem of One Hundred Links Composed by Three Poets at Minase” (Minase Sangin Hyakuin, 1488)

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Iio Sogi is the best known renga master of Japan. He was of low origin (which is said by every encyclopedia and biographic essay); his family was in the service of the Sasaki clan. Some sources say the poet's father was a Sarugaku Noh teacher, while others call him a Gigaku master; and his mother was born to an insignificant samurai clan, Ito. The image of Sogi – an old man, a traveler with a beard wearing old clothes and living in a shack – looks hagiographic and conventional Zen, rather than something real.

Renga (linked-verse poetry) is a chain of tercets and distiches (17 syllables and 14 syllables), which is sometimes very long, up to a hundred, a thousand, or even 10,000 stanzas built on the same metric principle, in which a stanza comprising a group of five syllables and a group of seven syllables (5-7-5 and 7-7) in a line, is the prosodic unit. All those tercets and distiches, which are often composed by different authors in a roll call, are connected by the same subject (dai), but do not share the narrative. Every tercet and distich is an independent work on the subject of love, separation, and loneliness embedded in a landscape and can be easily removed from the poem without damaging its general context, although it is related to the adjoining stanzas.

**Keywords:** renga, poetry, Sogi, Minase Sangin Hyakuin, Emperor Go-Toba

On the 22nd day of the 1st moon cycle of the 2nd year of the Chokyo era (1488), three famed poets – renga master Sogi (1421–1502) and his pupils, Shohaku (1443–1527) and Socho (1448–1532), – gathered by the Go-Toba Goeido pavilion, the Minase Jingu Shinto sanctuary in Minase between Kyoto and Osaka, to compose a poem of one hundred links commemorating the 250th death anniversary of Emperor Go-Toba. The emperor frequently visited his Minase mansion. A sacred scroll depicting Go-Toba is now stored at the Go-Toba Goeido Pavilion.

Iio Sogi is the best known renga master of Japan. He was of low origin (which is said by every encyclopedia and biographic essay); his family was in the service of the Sasaki clan. Some sources say the poet's father was a Sarugaku Noh<sup>1</sup> teacher, while others call him a Gigaku<sup>2</sup> master; and his mother was born to an insignificant samurai clan, Ito. Yet in the zenith of his glory Sogi was received by aristocrats and even by the shogun. He was very young

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<sup>1</sup> *Sarugaku Noh* – (monkey games), performances by vagabond companies, forerunners of the Noh Theater staging short didactic plays involving dance, magic tricks, and acrobatics.

<sup>2</sup> *Gigaku* – theatrical performances originating in China or Central Asia, part of Buddhist ritual, masked drama dance.

when he became a monk at the Sho Kokuzi temple of the Zen Buddhist sect of Rinzai in northeastern Kyoto – a center of literary creation and Buddhist thought. The Zen sect of Rinzai nurtured numerous literary and philosophical schools of that period, including Five Mountains literature (*gozan bungaku*), Sung philosophy, and linked-verse poetry (*renga*). Unlike other *renga* masters, Shinkei or Gojo, Sogi never climbed to the top of the Buddhist hierarchy and had no clerical rank. Japanese researcher Konishi described him as *kojikisho* (rankles mendicant), a monk of the mendicant order without ranks and distinctions [Konishi 1991, p. 30–31].

He became a *renga* master (*rengashi*) at the age of 30, composing poems of a hundred links together with students and other *renga* wise men (Sogi named Seven *renga* Wise Men<sup>3</sup>, the best poets of the genre, same as Ki no Tsurayuki named Six Geniuses of Japanese Poetry *Rokkasen*). He studied the Tale of Genji (*Genji Monogatari*, 10th century), the commentary on the Tale, and legends based on that text under the supervision of Shidara, a modest vassal of the shogun, and learned how to compose *waka* from Masachika no Asukai (died in 1490), a heir to the aristocratic *renga* school Dojo of Nijo Yoshimoto. The classic education played an important role in forming his style: reserved, simply, shadowy, and “converged on the antiquity.”

Since his young years, Sogi was known as a mendicant poet who travelled across Japan with a staff. Sogi visited places connected to poets, wrote theoretical works on *renga*, studied the *yugen* (hidden beauty) category, gave lectures on the *renga* genre, *waka* anthologies, *monogatari* tales, and *nikki* diaries, and wrote travel notes.

The image of Sogi – an old man, a traveler with a beard wearing old clothes and living in a shack – looks hagiographic and conventional Zen, rather than something real. The path of Sogi was earlier chosen by famous travelers Saigyō, Shinkei, and, later on, Bashō, as well as plenty of others, less remarkable. In the last year of his life, Sogi was sick but still traveled

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<sup>3</sup> Sozei (Takayama), Tiun (?–1448 г.), Noa (1397–1468), Gejo (1405–1469), Senjun (1411–1476), Shinkei (1406–1475) and Soi (Katamori, 1418–1485). Notably, the tradition to group writers came from China. “Importantly, the inclusion in a collection is not just membership in a certain prestigious club, but the designation to a literary community dating back to times immemorial. In China, a person acquired a social status only as part of the family (which is directly linked to the cult of ancestors, a fundamental idea of Chinese conscience); a man of letters could also establish oneself only in the context of predecessors, contemporaries, and descendants. It is not accidental that a handful of Chinese poets are mentioned on their own. As a rule, critics group even the greatest literary men into pairs, Li – Du (Li Bo and Du Fu), trios, the three Xie (three Xie poets of the 5th century: Xie Lin Yun, Xie Hui Lian and Xie Tiao), the uncountable “four talented,” “five remarkable,” “seven late” and “seven early,” “eight famous”, and “ten friends” practically overwhelm literature of any epoch. Those pairs, trios, and others were united into larger groups by different parameters, such as place of birth or residence, and time intervals ranging from one imperial epoch to longer periods, such as early Han to the golden age of Tang, up to the dynasty (the dynasty community manifested itself practically on every level) [Smirnov 2000, p. 267].

through highlands along the entire eastern coast of Japan via Edo, Shinagawa, Kamakura, and Odawara. The death of Sogi was also hagiographic: he died at the age of 82 in the mountainous area of Hakone famous for its beauty, and pupils carried him in a palanquin over the Suruga mountain pass to a creek flowing near the gate of the village sanctuary Jorinji. Before he died, Sogi asked the pupils to position him in a way he could admire Mount Fuji. Here is the tercet he composed after moving into a lone hut standing on a mountain slope:

世にふるもさらに時雨の宿りかな

*Oldness has come.  
I spend my night alone  
Under drizzling rain*

Sogi (New Mount Tsukuba collection, Shinsen Tsukuba shu, 3801)

### Origin of renga

The origin of renga is important to us, considering that this genre incorporates many features of classic waka (tanka)<sup>4</sup>, the forerunner of renga, such as images, techniques, the range of subjects, and associations.

Renga derived from tanka's division into two parts: 5-7-5 and 7-7. It is not exactly clear why the verse was divided into two parts. Some say that first poems of the haikai renga genre were humorous, and a joke told in a poem had to be brief. Another likely explanation is the caesural break after the first two lines of the pentastich. The caesural break evolved into a pause, and the second part of the verse ceased to exist.

Hokku (introductory) is a bridge between ancient waka poetry, i.e. tanka pentastich, and three-line haiku, which are the two most common genres in Japanese poetry. The original haiku, called haikai in the early days, were always humorous: they were sort of topical semi-folklore limericks. Their nature changed completely in the later period.

The first mention of haikai (humorous poetry) as a genre can be found in the classic poetry anthology, "Old and New Songs of Japan" (Kokinshu, 905) in the section Haikai Uta (Humorous Songs), but it was just the outset of the haiku genre as we know it. Another acclaimed anthology, "Mount Tsukuba Collection" (Tsukubashu, 1356), included the so-called haikai-no renga, long lines of verse on a given subject by one or several authors, in which the first three lines were most valued. The renga (kusari renga) lines were mentioned for the first time in the Ima Kagami work (Today's Mirror, dating back to the late Heian epoch), a historical monument presenting the fictionalized history of Japan. The first anthology of haikai-no renga proper, "Insane Collection of Mount Tsukuba" (Chikuba kyoginshu) was prepared in

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<sup>4</sup> *Waka* (Japanese song) is a general notion, which mostly includes tanka (short song) and, in the ancient period, nagauta (long song), sedoka sextain, and some other exotic genres.

1499. The greatest poets of the new genre were Moritake Arakida (1473–1549) and Sokan Yamazaki (1464–1552). The best renga anthology is “New Mount Tsukuba Collection” (Shinsen Tsukubashu, 1494) prepared by poet Sogi under the emperor’s rescript. Sogi was 73 years old at that time.

It was fashionable to improvise a three-line hokku verse at meetings of rangashi poets, where renga poems were composed. Hokku (also known as hakku) is the first three lines of the long links of renga, sort of amoebic form composed by two poets or more, a poetic roll call of three and two lines on a given subject.

In fact, renga is a 31-syllable tanka pentastich divided into two parts (before and after the caesural break), a question and an answer, a start and a continuation, in which the verse is not so much about the text as the subtle but still noticeable connection between the separate parts, kamino ku (the upper stanza, which has 5-7-5 syllables in the line) and shimono ku (the lower stanza, which has 7-7 syllables in the line), or maeku and tsureku, which is called kokoro (soul, heart) in Japanese.

Renga (linked-verse poetry) is a chain of tercets and distiches (17 syllables and 14 syllables), which is sometimes very long, up to a hundred, a thousand, or even 10,000 stanzas<sup>5</sup> built on the same metric principle, in which a stanza comprising a group of five syllables and a group of seven syllables (5-7-5 and 7-7) in a line, is the prosodic unit. All those tercets and distiches, which are often composed by different authors in a roll call, are connected by the same subject (dai), but do not share the narrative. Every tercet and distich is an independent work on the subject of love, separation, and loneliness embedded in a landscape and can be easily removed from the poem without damaging its general context, although it is related to the adjoining stanzas. There are similar poetic forms in the Orient, such as the Malay poetic form of Pantun. Still, every verse is connected to the lines before and after it: this is a chain of questions and answers, or, to be more exact, starts and continuations, in which every next tercet or distich adds value by a change of the subject and an unexpected interpretation of a word. The meaning of the previous couplet is connected only to the next one, and together they create a new unity and acquire meanings which none of them has on its own.

Classic anthologies, which are the source of renga associations, recorded a certain state of literature, suggested ideal models, chose texts from the great variety of poems, and established them as the most representative of their epoch. Those poems were not always the best; the anthology was based on the complex principles of a dialogue, and poetic “heights” showed off against the backdrop of “gorges”, the reflection of the Sky and the Earth. Sometimes, low-tier poems set off real masterpieces. The procedure of poems’ selection by the poetic community was also a method of literary critique: verses which were not included in the anthology for some reason were

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<sup>5</sup> Renga consisting of 1,000 or 10,000 stanzas are called anthologies of one-hundred-line renga.

doomed to oblivion. The anthology of classic waka is not a mere sum of elements but a roll call between texts, which became a new unity.

It is important to understand that the roll call, renga's "dialogue between poets," is rooted in classic anthologies.

Renga lines were improvised at poetic meetings, where two poets or more chose a canonic subject and composed tercets and distiches by turn. The relatively vast renga and the preserved tanka poetic form and many of its features make it possible to see the set of associations inherent in this genre unfolding throughout comparatively large material.

This poetic dialogue of roll-call songs (*mondo*) originated from the "Myriads of Leaves Collection" anthology (*Manyoshu*, 8th century) and the old waka of "The Records of Ancient Matters" (*Kojiki*, 8th century) written by two authors. As time passed, renga tercets acquired a meaning of their own and developed into a new poetic genre, which the renga genre eventually disappeared from the stage and lost its independent significance. The renga genre actually ceased to exist in the 16th–17th centuries<sup>6</sup>.

### **Kokoro (heart, soul, essence) and kotoba (words)**

Sogi wrote that renga originated from *uta* (Japanese song); he was very attentive to words but still believed that the connection between words was even more important and described it with the term *kokoro* (heart or soul). Sogi viewed *kokoro* as an amalgam of words and an art of handling words. The art of renga mastered poetic vocabulary: simple, uncomplicated, unsophisticated, and non-individualized words were preferred. Besides, the poet was mindful of the previous verse and responded to it in an unusual way, while the earlier verses in the renga line were sort of "forgotten."

The improvisation could go very far, onto other subjects or areas, and it was never known how the renga line might end. Whenever fall was chosen as the renga subject, poets were prohibited from wandering off to a different season, but when renga had a different subject, for instance *dzo* (miscellaneous) or *jukai* (memories), it was possible to mention various seasons in adjoining stanzas. It was even possible to mention fall and spring in the same tercet (for example, Minase Sangin). Some researchers compared renga to *koanami*, Zen Buddhist absurdist dialogues, because there was often no logical connection between questions and answers, starts and continuations. "Renga's inclination to replace the identical with a series of oppositions was similar to Zen koans." [Goreglyad 1997, p. 343].

A huge importance was ascribed to "here and now", the instant spontaneous coupling of stanzas, similar to a key Buddhist category of *sokkon* (at this moment). The improvised nature of renga also emphasized *sokkon*.

Before it left the stage, the renga genre flourished in the Muromachi epoch (1336–1568). Such remarkable poets of the previous epochs as Fujiwara no

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<sup>6</sup> The renga vogue is currently coming back.

Teika and Fujiwara no Tameie, and Emperor Go-Toba obviously had an interest in the renga genre, but saw it as a game, an amusement. Poetic competitions held under plum trees, for instance at Kyoto Buddhist temples, became popular in the 13th century (they were called poems composed under flowers). Those were not just poetic battles, but also sorts of “calming the flowers” rituals at the Bishamonodo and Hosshoji temples. Those temples had famous weeping plum trees (*shidare zakura*), where renga competitions attracting huge audiences were held. Those competitions were poetic festivals and “calming the flowers” rituals which helped prevent diseases characteristic of the plum tree blossoming period in spring [Konishi 1991, p. 426].

### Appearance of renga theory. Main treatises

The attitude to the renga genre changed in the 14th century. A number of theoretical treatises were written, among them *Tsukuba Mondo* (Dialogues on Mount Tsukuba, 1372) by a major court poet, Yoshimoto Nijo (1320–1388), the regent and chancellor of the Northern Court at the beginning of the reign of the Ashikaga shogunate. He was an author of the first imperial renga anthology *Tsukubashu* (Mount Tsukuba Collection, 1357). Nijo and his teacher, Gusai (aka Kyusai) (1283 – 1376), were the first to lay down renga rules, *Renga Shinshiki* (Renga Composing Rules, 1372), rooted in an earlier treatise by Fujiwara no Tameie, *Kenji-no shikimoku* (Rules of Sword and Jasper, circa 1275). It took Nijo and Gusai over 25 years to develop the renga rules, which appeared to be extremely complex: the poet was bound by a set of regulations and restrictions, a kind of numerological matrix, which built the frame of every renga. It was not possible to exceed these canonic boundaries; quite the opposite, the restrictions enabled the renga genre to exist. The instant and spontaneous nature of renga seems to contravene the rigid and irrevocable composing rules.

There was also a thesaurus of possible renga subjects (*dai*). Konishi mentioned some of them: *yabun* (evening), *hikarimono* (luminaries), *sanrui* (mountains), *tori* (birds), *furimono* (snow, rain), *suihen* (river bank), *tabi* (travel), *isho* (clothes) and many others.

Nijo and Gusai determined connections between poetic vocabulary and images of nature, which already existed in the national poetic tradition but were put into a new setting. In order to describe the withering of the fall season, the poet needed to create a string of poetic images: from a withering leaf, cold dew, the dark skies, and the white land to the moaning of a cicada. Those images were created throughout centuries for waka poetry; now they were applied to the broader space of renga, which made a cross-game possible. The one-hundred-line form (*hyakuin*)<sup>7</sup> became renga's classic.

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<sup>7</sup> There are much more common *renga* of 1,000 or even 10,000 stanzas, they are called anthologies of one-hundred-line *renga* (*hyakuin*), which are divided into 50 *choku* (long stanzas of 5-7-5

Those images (nests of meanings) were supposed to be embedded in pro-  
tensive images of nature. There was some experience of creating vast images  
of the kind in the Japanese tradition: the first anthology of Japanese poetry  
released in the 8th century, Manyōshū (“Myriads of Leaves Collection”) fea-  
tured the *nagauta* form (long song), which, however, rapidly left the stage. It  
was recalled from time to time, and *nagauta* was copied in the 18th and 20th  
centuries, but Japanese literature had no other long genres. True, there were  
*doku renga* (linked verses of one poet) in the genre, but most poems were  
composed by two, three, or more authors. I wish I could say that every poet  
added something individual to the *renga* lines, but that did not happen: the  
principle of those poets was anti-innovation (as Confucius once said, a  
transmitter, and not a maker). They realized that nothing vanishes in culture  
and literature, the range of subjects is canonized, images are mastered to per-  
fection, and the language is simple but intricate.

Every *renga* has a long history: many generations of classic poets (most-  
ly, *waka*) nurtured it with their creative work. Sōgi deemed *Kokinshū* (Col-  
lection of Old and New Songs of Japan, 10th century), *Shinkokinshū* (New  
Collection of Old and New Songs of Japan, 12th century), *Genji Monogatari*  
(Tale of Genji, 10th century), *Ise Monogatari*, *Yamato Monogatari*, and  
poems by Kakinomoto no Hitomaro, Yamabe no Akahito, and many others  
to be ideal works and sources of images. Lots of contemporaries described  
Sōgi’s comprehensive knowledge of the classic tradition as practically unat-  
tainable<sup>8</sup>. U.S. researcher of Sōgi’s work, Steven D. Carter, noted that linked  
verses and classic education in the spirit of imperial anthologies and *monoga-  
tari* were combined only after Sōgi’s appearance in literature and were in-  
spired by his example [Carter 1981, p. 40].

Japanese commentators of *renga* based their work on known *waka* from  
imperial anthologies and *monogatari* tales; they found the same images, mo-  
tives, and keywords in *renga*. Actually, both old and new academic commen-  
taries make references to classic texts of the eras of Heian (9th–12th centu-  
ries) and Kamakura (12th–14th centuries). There is practically no difference  
between comments of various authors on the famed beginning of Minase  
Sangin: Sōgi’s tercet and Shōhaku’s distich.

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moras per line and *tankū* (short stanzas of 7-7 moras per line). In all, there were 17 and 14 syllables.  
Together they were called *renku*, linked verse. Some *renga* were relatively short: 24, 36, or 50 stan-  
zas. Poems were based on the classic pentastich consisting of tercets and distiches: the upper *renku*,  
*kamino ku* or *maeku*, and the lower *renku*, *shimonoku*, *tsureku*. Some *renga* were inversed: a *maeku*  
tercet followed a *tsureku* distich. Some *renga* had fewer stanzas: 50-stanza *goju-in*, 44-stanza *yoyoi-  
shi*, and 36-stanza *kasen*.

<sup>8</sup> We should say that contemporaries had same enormous respect for the knowledge of poet and  
*haiku* theoretician, Masaoka Shiki, the last *haiku* genius (out of four: Bashō, Buson, Issa, Shiki).

### Renga masters and examples of ancient and early medieval poetry traditions

Commentators (for instance, Minato Keiji, Kijiro Kaneko, and Tetsuo Ichiji) agree there is an allusion to tanka in the Songs of Spring, scroll 1, by Emperor Go-Toba, a remarkable poet and patron of arts. Notably, the Minase Sangin renga is dedicated to the 250th death anniversary of Go-Toba.

The initial tercet by Sogi (hakku) is an allusion to the verse by Emperor Go-Toba included in the 13th century in the Shinkokinwakashu anthology's The Songs of Spring section:

雪ながら山もとかすむ夕かな

*Snow keeps falling,  
But foothills are already  
Enveloped in haze. It's nightfall.*

Sogi writes about the change of season: it is still snowing on top of the hill, but the foothills are enveloped in haze. Kasumu (enveloped in haze) means spring.

見渡せば山もと霞む水無瀬川夕べは秋となにおもひけむ

*Wrapped in haze,  
Minase River  
Flows by the mountain...  
It was so wrong of me to think  
That fall is the only time when  
Dusk is beautiful*

Go-Toba

Poet Shohaku responded to Sogi's tercet with a distich:

行く水とほく梅にほふ里

*Water flowing to a far distance  
The village full of plum blossom aroma*

Signs of the season, snow and a plum tree, run against one another in these two couplets: they mean early spring, end of winter, "white on white." The subjects here are furimono (snow), ki (trees), suihen (river bank), and kyosho (village).

It is consonant with the poem written 700 years earlier, in the 8th century, by celebrated Tabito Otomo, whose works were included in the first Japanese poetic anthology, Manyoshu ("Myriads of Leaves Collection").

わが園に梅の花散るひさかたの天より雪の流れ来るかも

*Do I see white blossoms  
Of a fragrant plum tree in my garden?*



*Or is it snow falling on the ground  
From the eternal sky?*

Otomo Tabito

This tanka has a canonic motive: the poet cannot tell white blossoms from snowflakes. The same motive manifests itself in the first Manyōshū anthology (8th century).

The commentator said that the word *sato* (village) was linked to the foothills, which led to a phrase of “a village at the foothills.”

Commentators also mentioned a tanka from the *Kokinshū* anthology’s The Songs of Love section. An unknown author mentioned a waterless river, *Minasegawa*:

水無瀬川ありてゆく水なくばこそつひにわが身をたえぬと思はめ

*They call it  
Minase, a waterless river,  
But water is flowing!  
Ah, I would have left the mortal world  
If I had stopped hoping ...*

Unknown author

川かぜに一むら柳春みえて

*Wind coming from the river  
Swaying riverside willows  
It looks like spring is here*

Socho

The third poem by Socho is about willows (*yanagi*), which is related to a plum tree (*ume*), and both words belong to the subject of *ki* (trees). *Yukumizu* (running water) is related to the word *kawa* (river) from the previous stanza. Leaves of the young willow are so transparent that they can be seen only when the willow sways in the wind. The willow is a word for the early spring season, when trees are covering with fresh leaves. The wind coming from the river sways branches of the willow, which reflects the movement of water in the previous stanza. The willow and plum trees belong to the category of *ki* (trees).

You can see that the couplets are connected by subjects and motives: *suihen* (river bank), *kyosho* (village), and *ki* (trees) (in this case, a plum tree and willows). There are also several thousand words of the season, *kigo*: *shimo* (frost), *mushi* (cicadas), *wakana* (young grass), *kasumi* (haze), *kiri* (fog), *tsuki* (moon), and *kusakare* (dry grass).

舟さすおとはしるき明がた

*The sound of water splashing under the boat’s pole  
Is loud and clear at dawn*

Sogi

Water connects the second and fourth distiches. There was silence in the previous stanzas, which is characteristic of the renga poetry, and here is the splash of water, especially loud at dawn (people say every sound is more loud at dawn), which is a canonic sound of the genre.

月は猶霧わたる夜にのこるらん

*Did the moon  
Darken last night  
In an envelope of fog?*

Shohaku

This is about the change of season – the moon signifies early fall, when moonlit nights are the brightest. It also mentioned fog, *kiri*, which is a sign of fall, in contrast to haze (*kasumi*). The stanza describes late fall, as the moon is enveloped in fog.

霜おく野はら秋はくれけり

*Wasteland and fields are  
covered with frost. It is late fall.*

Socho

The word frost is related to the words fog and moon from the tercet above, which consistently develops the subject of the fall.

なく虫の心ともなく草かれて

*Neglecting complains of  
Cicadas,  
Grass has withered*

Sogi

The frost from the preceding distich us related to the word *kusakari* (withered grass); *naku mushi*, moaning cicadas, is also from the subject of fall. The commentator quoted *waka*, an invariant of this tercet from the 14th imperial anthology *Gyokuyoshu* (Collection of Jeweled Leaves, 1314) by Fujiwara no Yoriuji :

詠めわび月の誘ふに任すればいづくにとまる心ともなし

*Can't stop looking  
At the sad moon  
As if I am its captive:  
It knows no peace,  
Keeps wandering around the sky.*

Fujiwara Yoriuji

The commentary means there is an echo of *waka* poetry of the previous epochs in *renga*. Poets and the audience of the poetic competition are per-

fectly aware of the genre's context – they instantly recognize classic waka poetry.

First of all, the commentators know that the second stanza is related to the first one by the words *yuki* (snow) and *ume* (plum), which pictures the very beginning of spring: the snow is still melting, but plum trees are already in bloom. Secondly, the word *yamamoto* (foothills) is associated with the word *sato* (village), which suggests “a village at the foothills.” This connects the initial tercet and distich of the *renga*. Then authors mention water, the river, wind, the pole boat, the splash of water, and the motives of fall – frost, the moon, and fog – come next.

Everything – snow, the plum tree, the village at the foothills, even the venue of *renga* masters (*renju*)'s meeting, the waterless Minase River, – reflects the classic tradition, which *renga* inherits from the famed anthologies of the past, where those images were created and cast on poems of later days, without any damage to the beauty and sense.

Several generations of poets gave a sense and beauty to snow, the plum tree, the cherry tree, the willow, flowing water, dry grass, etc. Poetry is moving far from its outset, but meanings and images do not deplete: there may be new turns but no new colors: colors and impressions are still the same. Their goal is to evoke the same associations as the combination of snow and the plum tree evoked in the 8th century – frosty weather, fragility, and white on white. Hence, Japanese comments – the primary method of literary criticism in the Far East – projects the analyzed text on the known images.

Earl Miner, a U.S. expert in Japanese studies, described such comments as editorial allusions, hinting that *renga* associations are connected to classic waka and monogatari tales [Miner 1979, p. 217].

The vocabulary used by Sogi and his pupils is similar to the vocabulary of Heian classics, so he can be considered a conservative in this respect. Sogi was very meticulous about the vocabulary; he carefully chose words on the principles of overcoming external complexity, concreteness, and factuality, and avoiding uniqueness. He was looking for universal and unsophisticated words devoid of poetic devices and did his best to bring specifics to the level of universal phenomena.

Comments are a special type of the creative activity of Japanese philologists that came into existence in the early days of literature and were important for building the genre's context. *Renga* commentaries are canonical, and old and new commentators follow the same pattern: they start with transposing a tercet or a distich in a lengthy prosaic form, and indicate keywords of the stanza and their connection to keywords of the previous and subsequent stanzas. After that, they mention words, which may be used in the *renga* once, twice or more times, and give their ordinal number.

### Renga's structure

Ikkumono (or ichizaikku)– are words, which are so important and fundamental to the tradition that they could be used just once in a one-hundred-line renga (shika – deer, saru – monkey, wakana – new grass, tsutsuji – azalea, mukashi – buddy, yuugure – evening, nightfall). Words, which can be mentioned twice, in a one-hundred-line renga, ichizanikumono, are also clearly indicated (yadori – night lodging, inochi – life, tamano-o – jasper string, and kari – wild goose). The rest of the commentary gives examples of tanka from the classic anthologies of the 8th–12th centuries, monogatari, and nikki, which served as an invariant to a particular renga or were a source of inspiration for rengashi. For instance, the famous beginning of the Minase Sangin renga (these stanzas are called hakku, the introductory stanza)<sup>9</sup>, has two waka poems, Manyoshu and Kokinshu, as its underlying theme.

Poetry is moving farther from its outset, Kokinshu, Genji monogatari, Minase Sangin were written almost 500 years ago, and the first Japanese anthology, Manyoshu, is 700 years old, yet it becomes more valuable and rich in content as time passes. The repetition of the same images of nature in various combinations and connections will never be boring; it opens new depths and endlessly projects new texts on the known images. Japanese poetry experts immediately see those connections, while others use commentaries, which mostly give examples of old poems in comparison to the new verse and indicate bonds between old ideal poems and new works. Notably, the sources of inspiration and new poems belong to different genres, classic waka and renga, which brings us to a conclusion that the later genre was using the range of artistic devices and samples of the classic genre.

Commentators define as key characteristic features of Sogi's creative work the grandeur, seriousness (literally, the presence of heart, ushin)<sup>10</sup> and hidden beauty, yugen. Compared to earlier renga schools, Kyogoku – Reizei, he favored a greater degree of independence of every stanza, either tercets or distiches, in the renga line. For instance, renga poetry specialist Yasuda Eta believes that Sogi required of his pupils more independence for every stanza. The independence of stanzas did not transform the long renga into a collection of poems. Those were strictly regulated abstracts integrated into a

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<sup>9</sup> *Shoomote* – the first eight stanzas written on the front of the folded paper *morinokogami*, which was blue and purple with a cloud design. Each of the four *renga* sheets was folded in half and had two sides, the front and the back. *Renga* stanzas were written on both sides and were called differently: front stanzas (*omote-no ku*) and back stanzas (*ura-no ku*). The first eight stanzas were written on the front, and the next 14 on the back (*shoura*), then there were 14 stanzas written on each side of the next two sheets, and the last sheet mirrored the first one: it had 14 stanzas on the front, and eight on the back, which was called *nagori-no ori* (the last fold).

<sup>10</sup> In contrast to *ushin renga*, there was *mushin renga* (heartless), which was an extremely popular humorous genre.

framework of complex relations and consistent with a particular numerological matrix.

A remarkable researcher, J. Rowley, said about the composition of a Chinese painting that it was built on the principle of added parts, i. e. it continued in time, while its unity was achieved by means of breaks, intervals, and harmonious repetition of devices [Rowley 1989, p. 45]. The renga structure is based on that same principle: new stanzas are added, there are intervals, repetitions, and interchanging images. One cannot appreciate renga without studying its complex language, allusions to former classic images, and associations between images within the text.

### **Nature and/or poetry**

If we take a closer look at the meaning of nature for a renga poet, we will have to admit that poetry of the previous epochs was a key and practically only source of inspiration. Nature was too “factual,” and “concrete.” The classic waka poetry was the mirror, which every classic genre (renga, haiku) poet of later epochs was looking into. The landscape was not concrete not because of the limited space of the line but because the underlying meaning was more significant than words.

It was not accidental that Sogi mentioned *kokoro* (the soul, the heart) as a category with a much bigger significance than *kotoba* (words). This phenomenon was studied in detail by the best haiku poet of the 20th century, remarkable poetry theoretician, Shiki Masaoka, who build a theory of *shasei* (a lifelike description) and *sei* (description of an idea, rather than a landscape) [Shiki Masaoka 1928, p. 14].

Western literature usually describes the renga poetry as “landscape lyricism.” True, it speaks of nature and the cycle of seasons (most stanzas are seasonal) but a closer look at renga stanzas shows that their world consists of repeating, standard images. The bricks they are made of are diverse but never change. Three hundred or five hundred years more will pass, but frost will always be combined with fog, and the plum tree with snow, willows will turn green in the haze enveloping the river, and the Manyoshu waka speaking of the waterless river or the heron in withered reeds will make you feel sad.

Japanese commentators do not use the “landscape lyricism” definition. The renga landscape is not about nature; it brings to mind poems of the predecessors, instead of beautiful places. Bright leaves of maples, dew on the grass, mat-grass, and cicada’s moaning, all those things evoke your senses not because the world of nature is wonderful and appeals to humane feelings but also because it was written about by recent and long gone predecessors. “Everything was supposed to be described with the words somebody else said earlier, and themes, which served as markers of potential plots, were designated,” a sinologist wrote about classic Chinese poetry [Smirnov 2000, p. 265].

For instance, the idea that a human life lasts no longer than morning dew was suggested in China in the Han epoch (3rd century BC – 3rd century AD) in the yuefu folk song. The image became one of the principal symbols of the brief life, *mujo*, in the 8th-century Japan. The same comparison is often made in poems composed in the 21st century. Nothing in the tradition can wear out, and patina only adds charm to words. Words included by authoritative compilers of classic anthologies (traditionally, their role has always been more important than that of poets) have more meaning than any innovations. The landscape is what a layman easily sees, while Japanese commentaries amassed over centenaries of philological work show us depths of poetry and the basis on which *renga* poets rely in their work. The constant reference to earlier poets and the knowledge of the key to the tradition are crucial.

The text of the one-hundred-line *renga* Minase Sangin is very simple and its form is deliberately modest or even unremarkable, the vocabulary and grammar are uncomplicated, the *renga* is easy to understand, and there are no complex parts. Sogi believed that *renga* poetry should be shadowy, calm, modest, and ineffective. There are details, *renga* gives a detailed description (or rather names, because there is no space for describing) a village, a mount, a river, and a crane amidst dry reed, but they have no relation to the factuality.

A *renga* landscape is never a real landscape, neither Chinese nor Japanese poets or artists have ever painted from life. Mendicant poets have never transformed the nature they saw into poetry, the process was more complex, it is described by the term of Chinese artists, *xiewu* (depicting an idea, not real life). Chinese and Japanese art does not reproduce real images. Chinese artists do not seek consistency of their works with the prototypes; they seek commitment to the real truth of life, deeper sources of human experience; they are more interested in how something is depicted than in the depicted object per se; their primary focus is not the way creative inspiration is conveyed, but the one who has the inspiration, recollects every moment of one's existence, remains invariable in every metamorphose of the world, and represents the sacred eternal succession of the spirit (*chi shen*). [Rowley, 1989, p. 122]. The parallel between *renga* and traditional art is obvious; the lyrical character and the poem's author fit the ancient ideal. China called him "a lone, free man" (*yu jeng yi she*), and in Japan hermits and mendicant poets had an extremely high and unquestionable authority. All the three poets who authored Minase Sangin belonged to this special group of people blessed by the rich tradition.

The knowledge and understanding of the classic tradition was put ahead of everything in composing *ushin* (spiritualized) *renga*. The poet did not look at the landscape before his eyes; he saw a landscape of canonical poetry un-

folding since the ancient times, in which every image and relation already exist, and somebody else's words are dearer than one's own.

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