



***Japan's Frames of Meaning:  
A Hermeneutics Reader***

Review by C. S. SCHREINER

Michael F. Marra. *Japan's Frames of Meaning: A Hermeneutics Reader*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011. 443pages. \$55.00

The publication of this remarkable book in Japanese interpretation theory, or hermeneutics, is overshadowed by the sudden death of its author, Professor Michael Marra, at the age of 54. He passed away on February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2011 after a two-year battle with cancer. Marra almost singlehandedly established UCLA as a center for study in Asian hermeneutics. The small group of international scholars who work in this area will sorely miss Professor Marra, who was diligent and rigorous in his academic roles as scholar, teacher, and translator. His research bridged two scholarly traditions that most people do not juggle with ease--Japanese literary studies and the German intellectual models that were historically influential in Japanese academia. The book before us is both conceptually recondite, due to its subject matter, hermeneutics, and inaccessible to the common reader due to its consistent recourse to nuances of the Japanese language (and classical-literary Japanese at that). Such a book, likely to be read and understood only by specialists, is best sampled—like rich cuisine—in modest portions, via brief synopses. Our purpose in reviewing *Japan's Frames of Meaning* is to pay posthumous homage to its author, and to clarify some of the book's central concepts and insights for a more general audience than is typical in this specialized context.

The text of *Japan's Frames of Meaning* is organized into three sections with chapters written by individual Japanese scholars and writers going back to the Edo period, each translated into English by Professor Marra, who also inserts his own interpretive essay at the head of each section. Marra isolates the guiding aesthetic and hermeneutic concepts of each section and explains them as clearly as he can, as usefully as possible given that the abstract concepts are resistant to translation from one language to another. One of his main points is that the concepts he seeks to clarify have been indispensable to the methodological awareness and self-understanding of Japanese artists and scholars. Hence the concepts are useful not only for interpreting particular works of art, literature, and philosophy, but for grasping the crafts, methods, and practices that produced those works, and the aesthetic attitudes and decisions that are the precondition for artistic creation.

The first section of *Japan's Frames of Meaning* is titled “Things” and contains three essays on the word *koto*, which, depending on context, can mean “words,” “facts” and “things,” and has a semantic kinship with words such as *mono* or “things,” *kotodama* (“the spirit of words”) and *makoto* (“truth, sincerity”). The connotations and compound constructions of *koto* have pervaded the Japanese discourses of criticism, philosophy, aesthetics, and religion for many

centuries, forming a durable and resonant concept that doubles as a metaphor. In other words, the Japanese think with such a concept, to define and clarify a point, but when it appears in philosophy and literature, the ambiguity of *koto* is a rich source of meaning. Hence it always already functions as an answer *and* a question, tool *and* topic; for these and other reasons, *koto* is an obviously indispensable word for a variety of hermeneutic situations. Professor Marra prefaces the three chapters on *koto* with his own penetrating essay on “Things and Words,” which establishes the Heideggerian background to modern reflections on hermeneutic phenomenology of “things,” (*Sache* in German, *mono* in Japanese) and the relation between language and Being. Several Japanese poems are cited to demonstrate problems of interpretation. The three chapters of section one are authored and titled as follows: Watsuji Tetsurō, “The Japanese Language and the Question of Philosophy”; Omori Shōzō, “An Essay on Kotodama: Words and Things”; Fujitani Mitsue, “An Essay on True Words.”

The second section of *Japan's Frames of Meaning* is concerned with “Depth”—an umbrella term that for Marra thematically encompasses the traditional aesthetic concepts *yūgen* and *sabi*. There is one long chapter here by the aesthetician Ueda Juzō (1886-1973), who taught for many years at Kyoto University; and an exegetical essay by Professor Marra that fully explains the history of concepts integral to the writings of Ueda Juzō. The latter’s chapter is titled “*Take, Sabi, and Yūgen* in Japanese Short Poems.”

Separately, that is, as commonly understood by students, *yūgen* means a style prone to mystery and obscurity, almost beyond reach, in the shadows as it were, while *sabi* is associated with loneliness, isolation, “the decay of life’s vigor,” and “feeling desolate, feeling sad deep down inside one’s heart” (179). Professor Marra prefaces the three chapters on Depth with an essay, “Concealment and Brittleness,” in which he retraces the history of the concepts. Although *yūgen* appears in ancient poetry and music, it was conceptualized as an aesthetic category by the modern philosopher Onishi Yohinori. In this context, the following interpretive passage written by Professor Marra explains Onishi’s hermeneutic contribution and epitomizes Marra’s own critical approach and style of writing:

When, in the early twentieth century, Japanese scholars confronted the issue of the cultural aspect of the formation of nations, the *yūgen* style became one of the most promising candidates for inclusion in aesthetic explanations of Japan. With the philosopher Onishi Yohinori (1888-1959) *yūgen* became one of the leading aesthetic categories (*biteki hanchu*) that contemporary and later scholars of Japanese thought and Japanese literature would use to explain the sensitivity and sensibility of the Japanese nation. In 1939 Onishi wrote the book that put *yūgen* at the center of all aesthetic discourses on Japan—a book titled after two of Japan’s major aesthetic categories, *Yūgen to Aware (Yūgen and Aware)*. *Yūgen* became part of an “ethnic aesthetic consciousness” (*minzokuteki bi ishiku*) that Onishi purported to uncover by analyzing *waka* poetry in terms of the relationship between intuition (*chokan*; Ger. *Anschauung*) and affection (*kando*; Ger. *Rührung*). Onishi saw in *yūgen* the counterpart of Western interiority, as he attempted to explain this concept in terms of the German notion of *Tiefe* (depth)—not just a temporal and spatial one, but a depth in the “spiritual” (*seishinteki*) sense of the word. However, he hurried to add, *yūgen* was a graceful and quiet depth, not a depth informed by the darkness and fears of the Western

Christian world. For Onishi, *yūgen* was a metaphysical depth, a “cosmic feeling” produced by what he called deep “feelings for nature”(shinzen *kanjō*)....Onishi's aesthetic approach led to an interpretation of *yūgen* as a category derivative of the sublime, a local variation of what he considered to be a universal category equally applicable to East and West (178).

Some readers may question whether it finally benefits or diminishes the Japanese hermeneutic categories to align them so closely with German analogues. I think the contrast is productive, enabling Marra to distinguish gradations of meaning and usage between Japanese and German cases. To be sure, the so-called common reader would be reluctant to consider the above passage recreational reading. The trilingual texture of Marra's prose imbues the act of reading it with a referential density that feels cumbersome, especially for those who have no command of Japanese and German. Although the English prose is not complicated, it tends to become congested with parenthetical material of foreign origin. The overuse of abstract nouns and coordinating conjunctions, the latter termed *polysyndeton* by rhetoricians, seems to mimic, unconsciously or otherwise, the prolix German style in which much of hermeneutic scholarship was originally published.

The overall readability of *Japan's Frames of Meaning* is refreshed (made less pedantic) by frequent quotations of poetry in a side-by-side bilingual format. The poems, some ancient, diversify the reading experience and serve to demonstrate the various hermeneutic concepts that Professor Marra painstakingly articulates. The following poem, by the Buddhist monk Kakuen (1031-1098), evinces one particular sense of *sabi* associated with “fading away.” The English translation and boldfacing of **sabi** is provided by Professor Marra. (179)

Yūzuku hi	Beneath the grass
Iro <b>sabimasaru</b>	Whose color increasingly <b>fades away</b>
Kusa no shita ni	In the light of the setting sun
Aru toshi mo naku	The weakening voices of insects
Yowaru mushi no ne	Sometimes nowhere to be seen.

Keep in mind that most students learn the often-used adjective *sabishii* to describe loneliness. One of the virtues of Marra's book is to further refine the connotations of such ordinary words that have as much to do with natural setting and atmosphere as they do with human mood. *Sabi* is not only loneliness but “the desolation and beauty of loneliness.” Implicit in such a definition are aesthetic and existential *situational nuances* not ordinarily attributed to personal moods expressed in English. Human subjectivity is not nearly as grammatically sovereign in Japanese as in English. In this regard, even when someone today says “*sabishii*” in a forest near Mount Fuji, the absence of a personal pronoun in idiomatic Japanese makes it ambiguous whether it is the person who is lonely or the wooded location. In normal Japanese conversation, one would say “lonely,” not, as in American English, “I am lonely.” The difference is most striking as a cumulative aesthetic effect in Japanese literature and fine arts.

The final section of Marra's book, “Being-Time” focuses on perhaps the most celebrated of hermeneutic concepts, *mujō* and *mono no aware*, or “mood of emptiness” and the “impermanence of existence,” made famous in such works as the *Genji Monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*) and Bashō's *Oku no Hosomichi* (*The Narrow Road to the Deep North*). These terms have been used by artists and philosophers since ancient times, and have been linked by association

with “nature” (*shizen*) and “existential sadness” (*sonzai no kanashimi*). Convinced of impermanence, some Japanese became disillusioned with the pursuit of material success and adopted reclusive lifestyles close to nature. Professor Marra supplies a wide-ranging interpretation of the various artistic and philosophical traditions associated with *mujō* in his own essay, chapter seven: “Impermanence and Contingency.” Here, for example, he explains the origins of the modern literary movement called *inja no bungaku* (“the literature of reclusion”). In addition, he carefully shows how Japanese thinkers such as Nishitani Kenji of the Kyoto School dealt with nihilism both in its inner relation to the legacy of *mujō* and as a confrontation with Western interpretations of nihilism and death in Nietzsche and Heidegger.

The subsequent chapters in the third and final section of *Japan’s Frames of Meaning* are authored and titled as follows: chapter eight, Nishitani Keiji, “On Bashō”; and chapter nine: Kuki Shūzō, “Contingency.” The writings of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century wandering poet Bashō become a particularly interesting context for Nishitani and Marra to explore the hermeneutic implications of “emptiness” (*mujō and kū*), “impermanence” (*mono no aware*), and “contingency” (*gūzen*). Nishitani’s essay, borrowing indirectly from Kierkegaard, interprets the ethos of the wandering poet as an existential mode of life in which poetry and philosophy are fused in a practice, an elegant or noble lifestyle, a “poetic existence” that in Japanese is called *fūga* (276). Kuki Shūzō’s essay on contingency first retraces its historical genesis as an aesthetic and philosophical concept, and then interprets this concept in the context of its effects in literary texts by Shakespeare, Kunikida Doppo, and Sophocles. Kuki Shūzō is extremely sharp in his application of Heidegger’s reflections on contingency in focused interpretations of transnational literary works.

We have hardly begun to do justice to Professor Marra’s ambitious book in these brief remarks. The footnote section (“Notes”) alone in *Japan’s Frames of Meaning* is one hundred pages of annotated reference and commentary, including detailed plot summaries of such canonical works as Goethe’s *Faust* and explanations of quasi-hermeneutical terms used by philosophers such as Hume, Leibniz, Kant, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Chomsky, and Carnap. A dense, capacious book like this one cannot be digested in one viewing without discomfort, like the ocular distortion and vertigo experienced by Napoleon’s soldiers in Egypt when they first viewed the Great Pyramids. Kant described their experience as *sublime*, and for those academic specialists with the requisite background to read Marra’s *Japan’s Frames of Meaning*, the same word can be invoked to characterize their encounter: *sublime*—like exploring a pyramid.