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The Work of Words: Poetry, Language and the Dawn of Community

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Abstract:

This essay explores the ontological movement of poetry, its language and words, by establishing a dialogue with the thought of three Japanese thinkers, Ki no Tsurayuki, Motoori Norinaga and Fujitani Mitsue, and the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. The overall purpose, as we progress from one to the other, is to present, explore and disclose a horizon where poetry gradually becomes the locus of a philosophy of language that places it at the genesis of mutual understanding, ethics and, thus, of community.

Poetic language; Japanese classic poetry; Ontology; Heidegger.

Introduction

When discussing art, we almost inevitably end up, somewhere along the path, speaking about the artist's genius and unlimited spontaneity. By the same token, when discussing poetry, we seem rather reluctant in addressing it without considering the reflexive figure of the poet, his emotional depth and subjectivity - and along with it, our own subjectivity as well. Poetry (or art in general, for that matter) is entangled and submerged in the figure of the individual and its inner world, whether the poet or the one who receives and interprets the work. It sprouts from the genius of the artist, only to blossom in the depths of the isolated subject. As Giorgio Agamben argues in the opening chapter of *The Man Without Content*, the introduction of the 'spectator' into

discussions on art, started by Kant but reformulated by Schiller, not only gradually infused art with the subjectivity of judgment, as it also sets in motion the emergence of the artist's subjectivity and creative freedom as an aspect of the artistic process.

But what if the nature of the poetic act was not necessarily related with the inner spheres of thought and the individual genius, be it the poet or the man of taste, but with, *lato sensu*, community? That is, with devising, founding or establishing a shared understanding; with bringing together, despite their individual differences, human beings as they dwell on this earth. What if poetry was not taken solely as a stock of subjectivity *per se*, or as a linguistic exercise in reflexivity, but as the opposite: as that through which human beings open themselves and attend to the shared world they inhabit? The intemporal beauty behind Homer's *Odyssey*, Pindar's odes or Hölderlin's hymns derives from the fact that, although they delve into the depths of human worlds, their true being lies in how they bid us to learn about the human condition and the world by showing us the nature and essence of worldly things. When faced with such works, one does not turn oneself into an inward world, but opens up and attends to the poem's calls and invitations.

In classic Japanese culture and thought, much like in the West at least until the Renaissance, poetry had an important role to play in shaping such a shared moral understanding. However, while in the West poetry was mainly linked with prophecy, divine inspiration, bardic telling and, later, with Christian thought and practice, Japanese classic poetry¹, as well as some philosophies built around it, as we will see, moved through the gap between subjective feelings or thoughts and the shared understanding that constitutes the very possibility of community.² That is to say, although Japanese classic poetry had an obvious social and conventional nature, it was, at the same time, rather lyrical (Brower and Miner 1961, 17–19, 20). It was, indeed, a poetry of happenings, usually arising as a response to concrete socially shared situations; however, that response was not merely conventional or formal, but emotional: it spoke and articulated a *socially shared emotional mood*.

In this essay we will try to explore this specific philosophical aspect of poetic language from a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective in order to bring to light

¹ Here it is followed Brower & Miner's characterization of 'classic Japanese poetry' as the literary court poetry written from the 7th to the 13th century.

² Although this essay focus only on three specific Japanese thinkers, the discourse linking human emotions with social norms and community was a substantial part of eighteenth-century philosophical thought which presented itself as a criticism of, and alternative to, the Neo-Confucianism prevailing in Japan at the time (Flueckiger 2011).

the ‘ontological movement of poetry’: that is, how events turn into verse and how verse founds community. In this respect, a dialogue will be established between three Japanese thinkers, Ki no Tsurayuki (872-945), Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) and Fujitani Mitsue (1768-1822), and the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Disclosed by their thoughts on poetic language, lies a horizon where poetry gradually becomes the locus of a philosophy of language that places it at the genesis of mutual understanding, ethics and, thus, of community.³ Therefore, by placing the following reflection at the intersection between Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology and studies on Japanese poetry and aesthetics, this essay’s overall purpose is to address poetry from an ontological perspective. This means that we will be concerned neither with formal, aesthetic, or stylistic features of poetry nor with the political and ideological contexts behind the mentioned authors⁴, but with the very being and coming to be of the poem as a happening that endows human beings with an understanding of themselves and the world they inhabit.

From events to verse

In Japan’s early literary history, from historical chronicles, to diaries (*nikki*) or stories/novels (*monogatari*), poetry had always a role to play. The first mytho-historical records of Japanese history, the *Kojiki* (712) and the *Nihon Shoki* (720), present the speech and dialogue of the gods as a kind of primitive poetic language; the first non-imperial anthology, the *Man’yōshū* (ca. 759), gives poetry a political and social role; while the first imperial anthology, the *Kokinshū* (ca. 905), preserves poetry’s social nature and infuses it with a deeper lyrical tone. Our exploration starts precisely with the *Kokinshū*, or better yet, with its preface. Written by the poet Ki no Tsurayuki (872-945), this famous and highly cited preface is usually considered to be the first philosophical and theoretical reflection on the origin and purpose of Japanese poetry, aiming to define and establish an indigenous poetry that could be levelled with the prestigious Chinese poetry (Brower and Miner 1961, 24). In it, Ki no Tsurayuki describes, in a very simple yet profound statement, the very genesis or the coming to be of the poem.

³ For an overview of understandings of language in eighteenth-century Japan see: (Sakai 1991).

⁴ Critical works on the matter have already been done by other scholars. Whenever appropriate, relevant references will be added.

As the affairs that human beings concern themselves with in this world become so manifold, they entrust the articulation of the thoughts in their hearts to what they see and hear.

As we approach these words and read them closely, we understand how, in his eyes, the verse do not take form as a direct expression of one's inner thoughts and subjectivity, but by anchoring those thoughts in what one "sees and hears", that is, in the surrounding world⁵ – the poet entrusts the articulation of subjective moods or thoughts to things in the world. In the case of Japanese classic poetry, the verse takes its form by mostly calling on entities or phenomena of the natural world, in order to bestow the most profound thoughts that inhabit one's heart (*kokoro*) with a shared intelligibility. We thus find that at the genesis of the Japanese poetic act lies a concern to anchor the poem's individual and subjective dimension in that which is shared by a community of beings.

So, for instance, when the poet's melancholy or loneliness is far too deep for him to endure, he would write the following poem⁶:

*On autumn nights,
it is the dew
that seems especially cold.
In each tuft of grass,
the grieving of insects.*

Japanese classic poetry sprouts from an incredibly fertile poetic vocabulary. Moving mainly within the realm of the natural world, its tradition has fixed a large set of 'seasonal words' (*kigo*), each one carrying a profound existential association between human moods and emotions, the seasons and elements of the natural world, such as birds, insects, flowers, fruits or weather phenomena (see Shirane 2012, chap. 1). Accordingly, by summoning into the poem a specific season, a particular bird and its song and/or a certain natural phenomenon, the poet weaved an intricate atmosphere or mood, be it happiness, yearning or loneliness. As the poem above shows, the reference

⁵ Although there are authors who reinforce the emotional subjectivity of Ki no Tsurayuki's view of poetry (Ueda 1967, chap. 1), others offer a more nuanced interpretation where the 'subjectivity' and 'first person' of Japanese classic poetry "did not point to a specific speaker", but, rather, "is a type-voice that can be contextualised as belonging to different speakers, not a representation of the voice of the poet to whom they are attributed" (Duthie 2014, 242). The same is applicable to *renga* ('linked verse') or *haiku* poetry. In this essay, as it will become clear, this last perspective will be followed.

⁶ *Kokinshū*, Autumn, I: 199

to the autumn's night, its cold dew and the cry of insects work together to articulate and summon a lonely or melancholic mood. Implicit in the texture of its verses is the idea that in autumn lies a reminiscence of our forgetful human finitude: as the leaves change their colour, they also wither and in a final dance perish in the soil; while insects, far from our gaze, play a final score, being the harbinger of winter's tearing snow and cold that numbs both nature and human livelihood and spirit - we witness time slipping through our fingers. By summoning only a few elements, the poem and its language are able to establish the existential heft of autumn's atmosphere.

Hence, although Brower and Miner's (1961, 161) statement that poetry had a tendency "to charge the phenomena of the natural world with a subjective human experience" is not inaccurate, Ki no Tsurayuki's thought show us the reverse side of this: that subjective human experience is conveyed in the poem *through* phenomena of the natural world. In this connection, and returning once again to the above poem, the verses are not mere vehicles of the poet's – or anybody's – loneliness; rather, the poem speaks of the phenomenon of loneliness or melancholy itself, or any other mood. As the poet steadily names the autumn and the cry of insects (this poem's *kigo*), her own subjective feelings are turned into a mood or atmosphere in order to be intelligible and meaningful to a Thou. The poem, its verses and language turn a subjective emotion into a social or shared one. We witness this social role of poetry in another classic literary piece written by Ki no Tsurayuki, *The Tosa Diary*, where he narrates a boat journey between the province of Tosa and Kyoto and describes particular happenings that he and his companions go through during that period. If we trust the diary entries, we see how poetry played a special role in people's socialization. Every time a significant event took place, he or one of his companions would compose a poem in order to consummate that moment and to share the deep joy or sadness triggered by it. The poem closed, so to speak, that event by publicly fixating in words the emotion or mood that it contained. Again, the poem turned the subjective way in which each person lived a particular event into a shared, social mood or experience.

The key insight to be drawn from this is related to the ontological dimension of the poetic act. The being of the verse and of its language lies in how it finds a shared understanding by anchoring the articulation of subjective states in things, entities or happenings in the world: what "one sees and hears". The being of the poem lies, therefore, in the being of poetic language and its role in communication. The Japanese

nativist⁷ and philologist Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) draws on this aspect from both Ki no Tsurayuki's preface⁸ and *Genji Monogatari* novel (see Yoda 1999) in order to develop his celebrated notion of *mono no aware* (the 'pathos of things')

In Norinaga's view, poetry has the potential to be the fundamental ground of human communication (Flueckiger 2011, chap. 6). When one is attuned with the surrounding world, being able to thereby truly grasp the nature of worldly things (*koto no kokoro*), one cannot help but to be moved by them (*ugoku* or *kanzuru*); and as he articulates it in verses, is able to move the listener as well; i.e., to *communicate* it to a 'Thou'. To paraphrase Norinaga, poems "come forth" (*idekuru*) when one grasps the nature of things and their moving power ([1763] 1983, sec. 1: 282). However, this is not a matter of extolling emotion *per se*, but of creating a shared understanding by being open to the essence of things (*mono*) and their evocative power (*aware*)⁹. Despite their undeniable individual differences, human beings can create such a common ground by being open to the nature of "every single thing existing in this world" ([1763] 1983, sec. 1: 299). Those who suspend the urge of the will and allow themselves to be touched and led by what is disclosed to them, can put into words the being and the spirit of world and things. With *mono no aware*, Norinaga reinforces and develops Ki no Tsurayuki's poetic principle: poems come about as the articulation of one's deepest thoughts by anchoring them in what "one sees and hears".

Here lies not only the happening that the poetic act is, as conveyed by both Japanese thinkers, but that which we call 'poetic language': a language that, by speaking of worldly things (*mono*) with evocative power (*aware*), has the potential to articulate and establish shared emotions, moods and atmospheres. Despite the emotional and subjective depth that poetic language and poetry can convey, there is an empirical ground (the entities of the natural world, their colours, sounds, patterns) that turn the poem not merely into a free expression of subjectivity, but into the very establishing and

⁷ 'Nativism' or 'national studies' (*kokugaku*) refers to an intellectual practice in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Japan, dedicated to reinterpret ancient texts, like the *Kojiki*, *Nihon Shoki* and *Man'yōshū*, without the aid of foreign ideas and writing, thus rejecting Confucianism, Buddhism and the Chinese writing system in a quest for understanding and revivifying ancient native views (Harootunian 1989; Nosco 1990).

⁸ In the opening lines of his essay on *mono no aware* ([1763] 1983, sec. 1: 280-281), Norinaga clearly states that Ki no Tsurayuki's "heart" (*kokoro*) is "a heart that knows *mono no aware*". And he also develops the interpretation proposed in the present essay around Tsurayuki's idea of entrusting the articulation of one's feelings to things seen and heard ([1763] 1983, sec. 1: 309-311).

⁹ Norinaga makes a compelling etymological case for his interpretation of the word 'aware' by diving into its first uses in ancient poetry. There, 'aware' was mainly an interjection, like 'Ah!' or 'Oh!', used when one was deeply moved by things 'seen and heard' ([1763] 1983, sec. 1: 284-297).

founding of a common understanding, i.e., of communication. Thus, tells us Norinaga, “the fundamental thing in poetry is to have *someone* listening and feeling *aware*” ([1763] 1983, 1: 314 emphasis added). The heart of human beings and the emotions that inhabit it are certainly part of the genesis of poetic language, but that which constitutes it takes shape by speaking, in the poem itself, of what is common and that which all share: nature, the human world and the essence of their being.

Accordingly, one can say that *mono no aware* inhabits in the working of a language that, by attending to the world and to that which constitutes it, speaks the nature of things in the form of a poem. Implicit in this view lies a distinction between ordinary language and poetic language. The first, which Norinaga calls *tada no kotoba*, is the language of everyday with its rules and formal principles – it is the language of logic and reason. Poetic language, on the other hand, is an ornate, or patterned language (*aya aru*) that responds to the nature of worldly things and articulates their “heart” ([1763] 1983, sec. 1: 306-309; Marra 1998, 24; Motoori 2007, 13). So, there is something that transcends ordinary language and that only poetic language can articulate and unveil: the depth of human condition and the true being of worldly things. In poetic language resides the very possibility of rendering both the spontaneity and universality of human feelings without rooting them in the individual’s pure subjectivity and self-centeredness – as the following poem¹⁰, written by the eighth-century poet Ōtomo no Yakamochi, beautifully shows:

*Above the spring fields,
trails a mist.
Then in this sad fading light of evening,
a warbler sings.*

As we follow Norinaga, we move from Ki no Tsurayuki’s still incipient principle to a more expanded and nuanced reflection on the nature of poetic language: namely, while ordinary language is the language of self-interest, poetic language, as it grounds its speaking in the essence of worldly things, show us the true essence of that which transcends us as individuals, thus enabling us to come together. But what is it exactly that inhabits poetic language that bestows it with such a communicative power? The philosopher Fujitani Mitsue (1768-1824) drew from ancient Japanese poems a

¹⁰ *Man’yōshū*, XIX: 4290

possible answer to this question: *kotodama*, or the ‘spirit of words’. At least since the *Man'yōshū* we know of the spirit that was believed to dwell in words. Words had a lifeforce, a power of their own that seemed to inhabit them and should be used with temperance. In the few instances that the word *kotodama* appears in old literary pieces it is to underline the idea that the land of Yamato¹¹ is a land "consecrated" and "aided" by the 'spirit of words'. From the 17th century onwards, nativists recovered the idea of *kotodama* as one of the foundations of their linguistic theories on the genesis of ancestral Japanese language. For some, *kotodama* allowed them to emphasize Japanese language's magical power and ability to bless or curse, thereby equating it with other cultured languages, such as Chinese and Sanskrit; for others, by symbolizing the purity of verbal language before the reification introduced by writing, it was employed to place Japanese ancestral language on a higher level than all the others (Thomas 2012; see also Miller 1977).

Mitsue, also a nativist, discards the magical and ritualistic aura that had been built around the idea of *kotodama* and bestows it with both a pragmatic and poetic significance. Although rejecting the objectivist urge to seek the origins of language and its foundations (Marra 1998, 41), Mitsue kept *kotodama* as central notion of his thought on poetic language. To be sure, the ‘spirit of words’ does not change reality, neither does it contain a kind of magical power with which one can bless or curse someone. Nevertheless, it can still change the course of events in a very particular way. It alters not specific happenings in the world, but human being's stance and openness towards them. In a sense, *kotodama* works as if it were the summoning power of poetic words, as they move, with their own steadiness, between subjective will and the needs of the moment. In such a movement, poetry and poetic language preserve the due course of things without disrupting the rhythms and needs of both the individual passions and the community.

Through the ‘spirit’ (*tama*) that inhabits poetic words and language one is able to attend to and preserve what Mitsue called the ‘proper time’ (*jigi*): a thorough awareness of the possibilities, limitations and circumstances of human life at each living moment, finding an appropriate balance between subjective will and the present demands and thus speaking and acting accordingly. The reason for this is that Mitsue sees poetic language as a language “reserved for dealing with gloom” and not, as Norinaga saw it,

¹¹ Yamato is the name of the ancient region of the imperial reign, corresponding to present-day Nara prefecture.

the language of communication ([1811] 1986, 740). By entrusting our deepest thoughts to poetic saying (recall Ki no Tsurayuki's quote), we prevent our selfish desires to become actions, thereby preserving proper time ([1811] 1986, 737). As Marra states when summing up Mitsue's notion of *jigi*, time is "the privileged space of understanding that human passions break and poetry rescues" (1998, 45). Each poetic saying and its words, as it both preserves and adds to the timely course of things, fulfils and attends to proper time; it says no more and no less than what is appropriate and necessary at any given moment. In poetry, sums up Mitsue, "spirit [*tama*] comes forth as the articulation between the public body [*kōshin*] and the private heart [*shishin*]" ([1811] 1986, 738) – he would most certainly approve of Horace's idea, in the opening of *Ars Poetica* (1-37), that art should maintain a certain decorum and pursue what is adequate.

While Norinaga refused the instructive dimension of poetry, placing poetic language as a way to recover the language of the gods and the harmony of ancient Japan¹², Mitsue saw poetic language with a potential to assist human beings as they come together and, as such, is close to what we might call ethics and morality (Burns 2003, chap. 5; Marra 1998, 42). Accordingly, the 'spirit of words' that inhabit poetic language brings to the surface the openness of beings where a balance between reason (*kotowari*), emotion (*kokoro*) and action (*waza*) is observed. Mitsue called it the 'borderline of truth' (*makoto no sakai*), a field of understanding disclosed by poetic language and its potential to reveal 'truth' (*makoto*) to human beings – a truth that, precisely because it emerges in this "borderline", or clearing, is neither objectivist or relativist, but "simply comes from observing proper time" ([1811] 1986, 746). The fact that poetry and poetic language can transcend fixed dichotomies such as 'good and evil', 'right and wrong', makes it the ideal vehicle, in Mitsue's eyes, to aid human beings in the unfolding of their complex and too often conflicting nature. The ways of being human waver between restraints and volition, the dictates of logic and the strength of the passions; and life is an endless strife between those two stances. But just as a dichotomous distinction between good and evil or right and wrong brings with it a reductive view of the complexity of human life, so the choice between reason or emotion leads human beings along degenerative paths. Poetic language and its words

¹² Norinaga rejected ideas that came from foreign traditions, and the notion of 'ethics' is one of them, for it recalls him of Confucianism. In fact, a major dispute of this period was over the appropriateness of reading 'ethical' or 'political' (Confucianist) meanings into ancient poetry.

aid human beings, as they dwell on this earth, in their endless coming to be with one another, preventing them from falling into either of those two ‘opposites’ – thereby preserving ‘proper time’.

From verse to community

As we follow these three thinkers, we are invited to survey the movement of poetic language, i.e., its *work*. The verse appropriates worldly things in order to articulate a thought that a given community can understand and share (if it were solely based on subjective thoughts or the pure expression of an inner state, the possibility for the message to get across would certainly decrease). The verse and its language become, thus, something akin to the ontological origin of communication. However, for the message to get across and communication occur, the one who speaks must be able to grasp the true being of things in the world (*mono*) and infuse it unto the verse. As that happens, poetic words carry a certain potential (*kotodama*) that allows mutual understanding, allows what is said to move through the gap between subjective moods, the demands of the moment and the common ground that shapes a community – i.e., ethics.

Martin Heidegger’s later thought revolves around similar issues. However, unlike Norinaga or Mitsue, he does not draw a clear line between regular language and poetic language. The issue is not so much whether there is ‘regular language’ and then ‘poetic language’, the latter being a more refined one, but that regular language is just a “forgotten and therefore used up poem” (Heidegger [1959a] 1971, 205). Regular language is not a poorer language *per se* – it *became* poor and hence lost the potentiality we usually attribute to poetic language. Here, we find a subtle but crucial aspect common to Heidegger’s, Norinaga’s and Mitsue’s understanding of poetic language vis-à-vis regular language. Although Heidegger does not seem to be making a clear distinction between poetic and regular language, such a differentiation is still there somehow, in the sense that poetic language has a potentiality that regular language gradually lost. Accordingly, what lies at the ground of that distinction, and which is common to the three thinkers, is not something that can be reduced to specific formal or structural characteristics of language itself, thus distinguishing on from the other. The difference between poetic language and everyday language lie in what they are able (or

not) to accomplish, with the moods they institute; that is, with their *work*. In a word, the three see poetic language as having a certain potentiality, or “spirit” (*kotodama*), which is absent from everyday language; and although Norinaga and Mitsue do not employ such terms, they are all concerned with language as a happening, or event, and not as an object.

Nonetheless, we still need to understand what does that potentiality entail. The concept of *kotodama* gave us some light on the subject, but we are still missing something. The word *kotodama* is still somewhat distant and we should not expect to be able to grasp and embrace, in one essay, the historical depth of a word whose roots are at least thirteen centuries old, spreading from ritual to poetry to philosophy and nurtured by a rather different language and philosophical tradition. So maybe our inquiry should now make a slight detour and focus not so much in the coming to be of the verse – as we have been doing until now – but on words themselves, or rather, in their work.

It is at this point that Heidegger’s brilliant reflections on words, language and poetry can help us to go further in our inquiry. Heidegger’s connections with eastern philosophies is well documented (Ma 2008; May 1996), particularly with Japanese thought (Heidegger 1959; Heine 1990; Marra 2010, 167–85) and art (Young 2001, 147–50), as well as the influence on, and some parallels with, some philosophers belonging to the so called Kyoto School (Dallmayr 1992; Parkes 1996; Weinmayr 2005). However, such a cause-effect examination is not this essay’s purpose, for we are still following the movement of poetic language; and we are still in need of seeing clearly what is that poetic words *do* that make them have the potential referred by the previous Japanese thinkers.

Language, tells us Heidegger, is “neither expression nor an activity of man” ([1959a] 1971, 194). That is, we will be wrong to assume that when we speak, we are merely expressing our inner thoughts. By looking at language solely from this perspective, we continue to be stuck within a representationalist framework: speaking is the exterior representation of inner states of mind. This is the starting point for a discourse *about* language (such as a scientific take on language like linguistics or philology or analytical philosophy, for example), but not, as Heidegger prefers, of an experience *with* language ([1959b] 1971, 57–59, 119–20). Language is, as it *happens to human beings*, an event. In this sense, if we truly want to grasp the event of language as an experience that human beings undertake, and not as “an activity of man”, we need to do more than simply collect “information” about the structure of language, its

vocabulary or peculiarities ([1959b] 1971, 58). We need to take language not as an expressing, but as the medium through which human beings are in and grasp the world as the world it is. In this sense, Heidegger's take on language is pathbreaking to the extent that, as some have noted, there is a different understanding of language 'after Heidegger' (Allen 2007; Ziarek 2013). His saying "Language is the house of Being" or Hölderlin's counterpart "Since we have been a conversation..." are different ways to encapsulate this turn.

Reframing the issue in this way, words lose their dimension of representation or expression; they cease to appear to us as a kind of tool we use to translate inner thoughts and gain their status instead as the primordial mode in which thought *happens*. We do not merely "use" or "possess" language, but language *possesses* us, in the sense that we are always responding to its invitations and to the world that it makes visible. If we take this line of thinking, words do more than express: they work as *callings* to which human beings respond ([1959a] 1971, 194). In Heidegger's view, words do not merely designate or point to things that *are* but *calls* them to be closer and present in the calling itself. Let us not forget that, for Heidegger, language itself has this nature, but because regular language became an "used up poem" it no longer issues forth callings. And this is the main reason, we can assume, why we must look at the calling of words in poetic language in order to grasp the event that language itself is. Unlike words in regular language, words in poetic language are still capable of addressing invitations to human beings, to call things to be present for them. It goes without saying that this presence does not mean that what is named by language becomes present in the same way that the chair in your living room *is* present. In Heidegger's terms, it is a "presence sheltered in absence" ([1959a] 1971, 197). In other words, this 'calling of things to be present' is a calling of things to be *meaningfully* present within the horizon of human intelligibility: i.e., making things come forth and exist as things among the realm of human understanding. By calling things into presence, words in poetic language disclose things and incite them to show up in the human world; the poem increases their being within the world, allowing them to manifest themselves as what they are.

A very significant part of this reflection on words and language is grounded on Georg Trakl's poem *A Winter Evening*. And it is curious how similar are Trakl's poetry and Japanese classic poetry. Certainly not in their purpose, let alone in their subject matter or aesthetic principles, but in how words are weaved into a punctuated, abbreviated verse that does not so much describe the details on a given 'theme', but

institutes an atmosphere where it can manifest itself – nothing could be closer to a *calling*. Moreover, both Trakl's poems and Japanese classic poetry tend to omit the subject in such a fashion that what is called by way of the poem are the things that comprise the surrounding world – isn't this precisely what Ki no Tsurayuki claimed? – and not so much subjective states of mind (although the first can eventually induce the latter). Maybe it is these features common to both styles of poetry that lead those who enter the depth of their verses to gain insight about poetic language as a calling of things into presence. Thus, in the same way that Heidegger sees Trakl's poem as instituting a certain atmosphere (a winter evening with its Christian symbols) by calling things to be present and thus creating through words what otherwise would persist only implicitly, so the Japanese poet Fujiwara Shunzei (1114-1204) once wrote that “without poetry, although we might be able to pay our respects to the cherry blossoms in spring and admire the maples in autumn, no one would be able to distinguish [i.e., to understand] their colour and fragrance” (translated in Marra 2010, 65). Words weaved into verse (and, in truth, all art) give presence to what hitherto was beyond the fringes of language and thought.

And here we can step in again into the movement of poetic language and grasp its hindmost moment.

Poetic words have been addressed as a calling of things into presence and as a bidding of human beings to partake of that presence – coming thus closer to Norinaga's emphasis on *mono no aware* and on poetry as the genesis of communication. What is called by way of poetic language is, by the same token, established as the thing it is among a given human community, i.e., the poem institutes a shared understanding about something, making it come forth *for* that community. In *Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry*, as we will see below, Heidegger gives us a final light on the subject: the fact that poetry and its language establish community itself. Such a step cannot be found in Norinaga, for he always rejected an approximation between poetry and ethics; and without ethics we can go around and talk about communication, but not about community. On the other hand, although Mitsue completes Norinaga and allow us to get closer to community by reuniting poetry and ethics (recall '*jigi*', 'proper time'), it is again in Heidegger's thought that we can find the hindmost moment in the movement of poetic language we are following here.

Such a moment finds its realization in the poetic act itself *as* the “establishing of being by the word and in the word” or the “firm basing of human existence on its

foundation” (Heidegger 1949, 304, 305). If we take ‘community’ to mean not merely an aggregate of individuals, but that which allows them to come together and share some kind of understanding, we come to see how the movement of poetic language meets its destiny in the articulation of a *common-unity* of meaning. In the same way that in *The Origin of the Work of Art* Heidegger draws our attention on how the Greek temple, as a work of art, founds a community, so the poem, by means of its callings, speaks and articulates a shared understanding, thus establishing community (in *lato sensu*) by means of the word.¹³ Heidegger refers to what is established as “the permanent” (1949, 304) – and what is the “permanent” if not what endures and that on the basis of which what stands as meaningful for a given community can manifest as such? So, for example, Romans’ understanding of their city after the *Aeneid* cannot be split into, on one side, the real happening that was Rome’s historical foundation and, on the other, Virgil’s epic poem – the epic fixes the “permanent” (Rome as a community) and continuously nourishes Romans’ understanding of themselves and their city; in a similar way, the Japanese warbler’s voice or ‘Saigyō’s willow’¹⁴ cannot be detached any longer from the verses that call them and bring them into presence in the midst of Japanese tradition: they developed into “the permanent”.

What we have come to call the ‘movement of poetic language’ is not a kind of operation that has a closing stage at which the movement itself ceases and everything becomes finally complete. We should briefly recall here the crucial role of Heidegger’s *Being and Time* in showing that the famous ‘hermeneutic circle’ is not a prescriptive method for understanding something, but a descriptive account of how human beings are and come to understand anything at all. Our understanding starts inevitably from a set of presuppositions and, as understanding moves forward, we are continuously going back to what we have already understood and always reconsidering it – strictly speaking, it is not so much a circle as a spiral, for we never return exactly to the same “place”. Accordingly, the movement of poetic language, as it takes place *as* human language and

¹³ At this point, one might get skeptical concerning possible pernicious political agendas behind the connection between poetry and community. However, poetic language as presented here cannot be a suitable vehicle for such purposes, for if that was the case, it would not be concerned with the gap between subjective moods and the shared understanding proper to a community, but with an ulterior motive laying completely outside of both these “domains”, and outside of what was called the ‘ontological movement of poetry’ as well. On the other hand, if that happens, it is up to readers to judge for themselves (or the literary critics to expose) whether a given poem hide something pernicious or not.

¹⁴ This refers to a specific willow, possibly in Ashino village, praised in a poem by the priest-poet Saigyō (1118-1190) and visited and referred again in a poem, five hundred years later, by the famous *hokku* poet Bashō. In fact, this habit of recovering themes, phrases or places from older poems is rather common throughout the history of Japanese poetry (Kamens 1997).

understanding, as we have seen, is a permanent, never ceasing movement, always feeding back into our understanding of the thing called by the poem. So, when we say that the hindmost or final moment in the movement of poetic language is the establishing of community by poetry, we are not referring to a closing stage. In the same movement that the verse and its language call things into presence and establish something as the thing it is, they are also constantly disclosing new aspects of it. After all, aren't we always going back to a certain poem and seeing new things in its callings? And in case its message is truly meaningful, it will endure the test of time and continuously feed back into, and highlight the presence of, what has been established by its words.

Conclusion

If we follow the movement of the poem and its language, as we have been doing so far, we are driven back to this essay's beginning. That is, in order to see clearly how the poem founds and establishes community, we must recall Ki no Tsurayuki's words: the poem's coming into being must be anchored in what "one sees and hears", in that which constitutes the surrounding world; and not simply be a free expression or a putting forth of the poet's subjectivity or inner world. On the other hand, as Heidegger showed us, poetic language does not merely *names* what "one sees and hears", but calls those very same things into presence, it brings them closer so they may inhabit among human beings and bear upon them. In other words, in the same gesture whereby the verse calls what "one sees and hears" in order to give intelligibility to human emotions and moods, that which is called in the poem is conferred with meaning, in what Gadamer (1986) called an "increase in being". Words in a poem do not simply speak *about* things but endow that about which they speak with their true being, thus allowing them to show up within the horizon of human intelligibility. Such a life-force and ultimate essence of words is beautifully captured in Gorgias' remark: "the word (*logos*) is a mighty sovereign that, by the smallest and most secret body, accomplishes the most divine works" (*Encomium on Helen*, §8). Gorgias truly understood that which inhabit the depths of the word. And even though his observation might not mention poetry directly, he would certainly include it in it, for in poetry and its verses the art at work is the work of words.

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