# BOOK REVIEWS

*Seeds in the Heart: Japanese Literature from Earliest Times to the Late Sixteenth Century*. By Donald Keene. Henry Holt, New York, 1993. xiv + 1,265 pages. $50.00.

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WITH this volume Donald Keene completes a project, conceived twenty-five years ago, to produce a history of Japanese literature. His works on Tokugawa literature, *World Within Walls*, 1976, and modern literature, *Dawn to the West*, 1984, precede this volume. The author remarks in the preface that his original intention was to essentially duplicate his lecture notes for his survey course in Japanese literature. Accordingly, the book would have been a rather loose and anecdotal account concerning works that Keene himself found the most interesting. But when a Russian scholar asked him where Western students could go to get accurate, comprehensive knowledge of Japanese literature, Keene realized that there was no such work and therefore reconceived his project to answer that need. The resulting books became much more inclusive both in the number of works treated and the quantity of biographical information provided. *Seeds in the Heart* maintains and even exceeds the high standards set by the two earlier volumes in these respects.

In terms of sheer comprehensiveness, this work may not have surpassed Konishi Jin'ichi's multi-volume *History of Japanese Literature*, but no other survey of this period presents such a range of information in such an accessible form. There are several aspects of *Seeds* that make it extremely useful and tractable to a wide variety of readers.

One is the writing style, which still maintains the flavor of Keene's orally delivered lectures. Little previous knowledge of Japanese literature or familiarity with specialized literary vocabulary is needed to appreciate the book. Although dealing with a vast number of texts, Keene has a gift for providing the telling detail in description and the apt citation that makes readers feel they have received the particular essence of an individual work.

A second facilitating aspect is the book's organization. The chapters are relatively short and are subdivided by topic headings for the texts described, thus making it easy to look up particular works without even resorting to the index. The notes and bibliographical information are supplied at the ends of chapters rather than at the back of the book. Given that this portly tome runs to 1,265 pages, it would have been a nightmare to readers if all the notes had been located at the end of the book. Splitting up the

bibliographical information and placing it at the end of each chapter is particularly helpful. It results in many subject-specific bibliographies so that if a reader wants direction as to where to start doing research on, for example, *Man'yōshū*, it is all there handily at the end of that chapter. It also makes it easy for a teacher to put together a syllabus for a survey course in Japanese literature. Providing this valuable tool in such a useful format is a generous thing for Keene to have done. In addition, he also offers a 'Selected List of Translations into English' at the end of the book and a thorough index running to seventy-six pages.

There is another virtue to be singled out with respect to the bibliographies in this volume, for they include Japanese secondary literature as well as that in European languages. Of course, the listing of works in Japanese is the less exhaustive, but it is clear that Keene has made particular effort to include several of the most representative and important works in Japanese scholarship for every area covered. This provides students with their first pathway into the jungle of Japanese secondary works on classical literature.

A few specifics about the scope of this study are in order. As in his first anthology of Japanese classical literature published decades ago, Keene pays serious attention to works written in Chinese by Japanese authors. Readers will not only find here the expected descriptions of Chinese poetry in *Kaifūsō*, or the works of the Muromachi Gozan poets, but also more obscure works such as *Shin-Sarugakuki* by the Heian author Fujiwara Akihira. The author also studies Buddhist doctrinal writings by Kūkai and Dōgen as well as briefly describing the Heian-period histories. Thus the net for literature is cast wide indeed.

Another aspect of this volume's comprehensiveness is that Keene's familiarity with every phase of Japanese literature allows him to make illuminating cross-references. The one that particularly caught my eye was a quotation from the modern poet Ishikawa Takuboku, in a note to a comment about the preference in the Heian period for the 'brief lyric'. The note runs:

> This might seem to limit the possibilities of poetic expression, but a thousand years later the tanka poet, Ishikawa Takuboku, would write, 'People say the tanka form is inconvenient because it's so short. I think its shortness is precisely what makes it convenient. . . . We are constantly being subjected to so many sensations, coming from both inside and outside ourselves, that we forget them soon after they occur, or even if we remember them for a short while, we end up by never once in our whole lifetimes ever expressing them because there is not enough content to sustain the thought. . . . Although a sensation may last only a second, it is a second that will never return again. I refuse to let such moments slip by.' (p. 271)

With this one inserted comment, history of Japanese literature is collapsed and the continuity in the culture made transparent. Such insightful asides are not rare in this book.

There is only one aspect of this work that I find less fortunate, and that is the tacit acceptance of the 'Great Works' view of literary history. This is the point of view where we of the Western world with our canonized works at the top of a hierarchy of value survey the rest of the world's literature and designate quality according largely to what can be appreciated in terms of the great works in our own canon. For example, after

several pages of informative and illuminating commentary on *Kojiki*, Keene remarks on the lack of heroes in the text:

> This is perhaps the most disappointing aspect of the *Kojiki* to those who search for resemblances to epic poetry composed in other parts of the world. Heroic traits are found in some of the gods and godlike mortals, but *no one merits* the name of hero in the sense that Achilles or Beowulf is a hero, and the stories of these *putative* heroes are *marred* by disquieting inconsistencies of characterization; heroic and extremely contemptible qualities are not infrequently found in the same person. (p. 41; emphasis added)

Take the value judgment out of the above statement and is this contrast not fascinating? Does it not speak volumes about how the conceptual world of ancient Japan differed from the Western ancient world? The point is that the value judgment contributes nothing to an appreciation of that difference. It is not that there is an inherent problem with value judgments per se, but the problem lies with an absence of questioning about the basis for the evaluation.

The problem with this kind of unexamined value judgment is compounded by the comprehensiveness of the present volume, including as it does many works beyond the generally acknowledged 'masterpieces'. Thus, on almost every page we are being reminded of the inferior quality of what is being examined. For example, 'Narihira was not a profound poet . . .' (p. 233). As for the poems of *Kagerō Nikki*, 'None is of the highest quality' (p. 370). With *Heichū Monogatari*, it is 'the ordinariness of the narration and the feebleness of the conclusions' (p. 460). *Takamura Monogatari* is good because it does not require 'any concession for its time' (p. 466). One begins to get the impression that never has so much effort been spent on material of so little literary value.

There is terrible irony to this situation because the extraordinary time, energy, and love that Keene has devoted to this volume, indeed his whole career, are inconsistent with a perception that the greater part of Japanese literature has inferior literary value. Keene himself admits that it was not merely out of a sense of duty that he included 'lesser' works. He notes in the preface, '. . . I often found in lesser works scenes or subjects of such interest that I wanted to tell readers about them' (p. xiv). Moreover, in other places he reveals an awareness of the shifting and context-bound quality of value judgments in general. For instance, speaking of the traditional admiration for the works of the *Man'yōshū* poet Akahito, which to a 'modern western reader' is puzzling in a way that admiration for Hitomaro is not, he observes, 'It is possible that the diminution of Akahito's reputation in the twentieth century says more about that century than about the ultimate value of his poetry' (p. 127). I can only wish that this kind of awareness were more in evidence throughout the work.

Aside from the unconscious acceptance of the 'great works' school of literary history, *Seeds* is not founded on any other theoretical framework nor does it engage in extended argument upon literary matters. In this respect it is quite different from Konishi's *History*, which starts off by examining large questions such as 'What is literature?' and 'What is Japan?' It also differs from Katō Shūichi's *Introduction to Japanese Literature: The First Thousand Years*, 1979, which gives significant attention to building a theoretical framework that can encompass Japanese literature.

Still, in his comments and asides, Keene raises issues and makes thought-provoking

observations upon which many theses could be written. For example, concluding remarks about the *Man'yōshū* poet Yamanoue Okura intimate that in his themes he actually presages the poetry of the T'ang dynasty. It is commonly held that Okura was the Japanese poet most influenced by Chinese poetry, but that conception takes a new twist when we consider that the Chinese poetry that Okura's work most resembles was written after his time. Commenting on the fact that in *Tosa Nikki*, it is likely that all the poems were composed by Tsurayuki himself even though they were put into the mouths of others, Keene comments, 'This note of fiction suggests how flexibly the term *nikki* might be used by authors who wrote in this mode' (p. 363). This one short observation summons up the question of truth and fictionality with respect to 'self' writing, a hotly debated topic in contemporary literary circles. In discussing the group-endeavor aspect of renga, Keene points out, 'Indeed, it has been argued that all traditional Japanese literature is in some sense the literature of the group or at least multiple authorship' (p. 933), and goes on to consider the exchange of waka poetry in this light. This should suffice to show that there is a lot of food for thought in this work even if it does not expend energy in building theoretical edifices.

Let me conclude with some remarks comparing *Seeds* and Konishi's *History*. As I noted above, one of the major differences between the two works is the degree of importance given to method and theoretical model, a great deal in *History* and very little in *Seeds*. While Konishi's *History* has been generally acclaimed, the one criticism leveled at the work is summed up in Earl Miner's observation that it 'may be above the head of all but specialists.' This is certainly not the case with *Seeds*, and indeed an important role of Keene's volume is that of complementary companion to Konishi's study. The requisite information to fully appreciate Konishi's writing is easy to find and digest in *Seeds*. In contrast, moreover, to Konishi's dense and exhaustive mode of description and argumentation, Keene's style is light and impressionistic, and prefers to suggest by way of well-chosen detail and casual comment rather than argue to closure. In this way, Keene's work has some affinity with the traditional *zuihitsu* style in Japanese literature. Pursuing this train of thought a little further, it is interesting to compare the titles of the two works. Keene's *Seeds in the Heart* is a metaphor from and literary allusion to the *Kokinshū* preface, compared with Konishi's solid, straightforward, and academic *History of Japanese Literature*. It goes too far to say that Keene's history is the more 'Japanese' of the two, for this would require a more rigorous discussion of the possible meanings of 'Japanese' in this context than I am prepared to do here. But it is an intriguing thought that here a Japanese scholar and an American scholar have in some respects switched stereotyped roles. Somehow it brings the world closer together, a nice balance of trade in the scholarly world.

*Seeds in the Heart* will be an indispensable source to teachers and students of survey courses, which are proliferating around the academic world, as well as to general readers who wish to inform themselves broadly about Japanese literature. This was Donald Keene's intention and he is to be commended for accomplishing it so ably.