Yosano Akiko's *Princess Saho* and its Multiple Speakers

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Abstract

To translate is to interpret, and this is especially so for a difficult poet like Yosano Akiko. The translator confronting the task of interpreting the stupendous number of poems that Yosano Akiko (1878-1942) published over the course of her career begins, of course, by looking into the biographical background and reading as many commentaries as possible, but often that is not enough. Then come such avenues of inquiry as comparing iterations of the same themes within the corpus of the poetry itself, picking up echoes of Japanese classical and other literatures, and noting connections to Western literature, art, and ideas. In working with the poems here, I have used all these avenues. There is also one other approach, and that is to cycle between Akiko's prose and her poetry. She often touched on the same topic and themes in both genres, sometimes using the prose to explain the poetry and even vice versa.

The essay "Bosei Henchō wo Haisu" (I oppose the glorification of motherhood, 1916) is usually considered only in terms of its role in the public debate on the protection of motherhood (*bosei hogo ronsō*) that Akiko carried on in the media between 1916 and 1919, but it also provides a good background for reading her poetry. This is because Akiko explains her criticism of the glorification of motherhood by eloquently articulating her conception of the self as multi-focal, a conception which in a certain sense is the philosophical counterpart of the multiple speakers that populate her poems. Akiko's poetry needs to be read with an awareness of its multiple speakers, some real, and some imaginary, and of the many self-incarnations it depicts as well. This article opens with my translation of "I oppose the glorification of motherhood."

Tanka Sanbyaku Kō (Explications for 300 Tanka, 1916) includes Akiko's prose comments and explanations of 88 poems from her eighth poetry collection, *Sahohime* (Princess Saho, 1909) . If one of the 30-odd poems I translated from among the 514 poems of *Princess Saho* was also included in *300 Tanka*, I include the "explanation" here, immediately after the poem itself. If additional annotation seemed desirable, that is added in the notes.

In addition to a complete translation of the essay "I oppose the glorification of motherhood," this article contains translations of approximately thirty poems by Yosano Akiko, nine with Akiko's own comments and more than a dozen with my own annotations. There is also one translation of a poem from the *Kojiki Kayō*.

For the translator confronting the task of interpreting the stupendous number of poems that Yosano Akiko (1878-1942) published over the course of her career it is helpful, beyond the the basic tasks of looking into the biographical background and reading as many commentaries as possible, to cycle between her prose (essays, stories, newspaper columns, reminiscences, letters) and her poetry, seeking moments at which a prose statement sheds light on a poem. Another useful strategy is comparing the frequently-occurring variations on the same theme within the body of the poetry itself, a task that has been made much easier by the meticulous index to the poems compiled for *Tekkan Akiko Zenshū*, edited by Itsumi Kumi and her colleagues. On occasion, some mysteries are cleared up by catching echoes of the classics of Japanese literature, of then-contemporary Western literature, or of Western art, thanks to a remark by a critic, scholar or poet, or the translator's own store of knowledge.

One example is the prose essay, "Bosei Henchō wo Haisu" (I oppose the glorification of motherhood, 1916). This essay, although usually considered only in terms of its role in the debate on the protection of motherhood (*bosei hogo ronsō*) that Akiko carried on in the media between 1916 and 1919, also provides the perfect background for reading her poetry. This is because it resists the glorification of motherhood by eloquently articulating Akiko's con-

ception of the self as multi-focal, a conception which in a certain sense is the philosophical counterpart of "the ambiguous I" (Kawano, 14-15), and the multiple speakers (Beichman, *Embracing the Firebird*, 199-226) that populate her poems.

Another example of a helpful prose work is *Tanka Sanbyaku Kō* (Explications for 300 Tanka, 1916), which includes Akiko's own comments and explanations about 88 poems from her eighth poetry collection, *Sahohime* (Princess Saho, 1909). After reading all of *Princess Saho*'s 514 poems and choosing a number of candidates for translation, I was eager to see which poems the poet herself had chosen and what she had to say about them. If one of the poems I had chosen was also included in *300 Tanka*, I include Akiko's words about it here, immediately after the poem itself. Sometimes an explanation was so compelling that I decided to include a poem I had originally passed over. In both cases, if additional annotation seemed necessary, I added it in the notes at the end.

From the above, I hope the reader will understand why an essay on a collection of poetry begins with a rather long prose essay by the same writer about a topic that on the surface has nothing to do with poetry. I have bolded the core passage, but as in many of Akiko's essays, this core passage relies for its power on what came before, so I include the entire essay.

"I Oppose the Glorification of Motherhood"
By Yosano Akiko

According to the venerable Tolstoy, we are taught that woman must dedicate herself to her intrinsic mission of giving birth to as many children as possible and bringing them up and educating them. Ellen Key, too, teaches that the center of a woman's life is her maternal mission. Tolstoy, however, allows a woman with strength left over to assist in a mans labors and considers this very valuable, whereas Key rejects a woman's cooperative labor with a man, seeing it as an abuse of rights which exceeds her inherent limitations. Again, whereas Tolstoy sees the general inborn potential of men and women as completely equal in spite of the differences in the shape of their lives, Key sees it as decadent for human beings to try to make the lives of men and women equal when nature has created them unequal. Both thinkers, however, share the belief that physical labor and mental labor are the intrinsic mission of men whereas such labor must be matters of secondary importance for women.

The assertions of these two thinkers and other similar ones current today are commonly termed "the theory of the centrality of motherhood." I have my doubts about this theory.

In order to avoid misunderstanding let me first say this. I do not deny that I am a mother, nor do I regret being one. In fact, I have experienced much satisfaction from the experience of motherhood. I say this not in order to boast, but only to convey the plain truth of my own life. Compared to to those women who have given birth to one or two children and then brought them up and educated them, I have experienced more maternal hardships. This fact should serve to demonstrate that the thoughts I will express here do not spring from an egotistic abandonment of the maternal role or from a desire to evade my maternal duty.

Why must we make motherhood alone the central element in a woman's life? On what basis has it been decided that this is woman's definitive role? To begin with, those doubts arise in my mind. Tolstoy replies:
"The primary occupations of mankind may be divided into two. The first is the increase of human happiness, the second is the perpetuation of the species. Only women are suited to the latter, and so they devote themselves to it completely. . . .These occupations were not invented by human beings but are rooted in the basic nature of things." (Katō Kazuo's new translation of "What must we do?")

This reply only increased my doubts. It may be due to a lack of intellience on my own part, but I can not help thinking that there is a serious inconsistency in Tolstoy's reply. He says that the primary occupations of men and women are determined by the basic nature of things. The meaning of "the basic nature of things" must be, for men, the basic nature of men, and, for women, the basic nature of women. I turned this over in my mind until I realized that behind the outward distinction between male and female lies, at a deeper level, a total inner equality, which is the quality of being human. It follows that the primary occupations of human beings can not be divided into two as Tolstoy maintains. There is only one occupation, "the increase of human happiness," in other words, the attempt to

realize the fundamental desire to live better. This is the sum total of humanity.

If my thinking is not mistaken, then this sole basic desire includes everything to do with being human. I see what Tolstoy calls “the perpetuation of the species” as one very important element within all things. Thus in the primary occupation of humankind—to increase its own happiness—all human beings participate equally, and even if there is a difference between male and female in their outward appearance, fundamentally men and women, as equal human beings, combine their strength for the sake of the perfection of humanity. Of course in the real world the cooperation between men and women is unbalanced, sometimes extremely so. Such cases are useless or even damaging to the enterprise of “the increase of human happiness,” and because of them the world loses its way, progress is retarded, and tragedies multiply. A good example is the murderous enterprise called war, which is planned by men alone.

All things human can be carried out equally by men and women acting as human beings. It is only that viewed from the perspective of the masculine and feminine, these two different forms may give rise to various different appearances. Concretely speaking, Tolstoy maintains that men can not have any role in the perpetuation of the species but it must be obvious to anyone that this is an erroneous idea. Human beings can not clone themselves. Man must cooperate with woman to perpetuate the species. In this case, it is only their outward appearance, as man and woman, that differs. It is shallow to look only at the form, and decide that because a man does not give birth and does not have breasts to nurse with that the perpetuation of the species is off-limits to him and must be the special province of women. If one thinks of how parents who have achieved sexual and emotional harmony feel the same love towards their children one realizes that in an inner sense the cooperation between man and woman is equal.

This was how I judged, as far as my powers allowed, Tolstoy’s “true nature of things.” Thus I realized that each human being differed in the outer circumstances in which he or she lived. This is not a distinction that can be adequately conveyed by a general division into male and female. If you want to be accurate, you have to give a name to every single different outer circumstance and even if you have given millions of such names, each new way of discriminating will give rise to more new ways and there will never be an end. The reason is that the conditions in which humanity is realized are different for every single human being. This is the meaning of individuality. Healthy individuality does not quietly achieve its fulfillment and then stop. It is always changing, evolving, growing. It does not seem possible to me to decide that one thing is the central element of a man’s life and another is the central element of a woman’s. The same person’s life circumstances change with time according to heredity, age, environment and education. To be even more precise, in the course of even a single day the life circumstances/appearance of even the same person change innumerable times and as they do, his or her center also moves. This is not difficult to prove concretely. Anyone can understand it if they simply observe themselves and the people around them. If one simply looks at those nearby, it is apparent that there is no one whose personality is the same as anyone else’s. It goes without saying that innumerable human beings will each have different personalities.

It is the same with oneself in the course of a day. When you eat a meal, eating is the center of your life. When you read a novel, art is the center of your life. Each time you do something, that one thing before you becomes for the time being the focus of your entire attention. This is a psychological fact that anyone can verify for themselves.

Thus it is a truth of human life that no single element can be a fixed and absolute center. In this way one might think that there is no unity to human life, but that is an outward distinction. Internally there is a unity, whether consciously or unconsciously, based on the fundamental desire for an “increase in human happiness.” To eat, to read, to move, to give birth, all are nothing but humanity’s actualization of the will to live better.

Each time you undertake something, the center of your life moves to that thing and you focus on it, to the exclusion of all other things, which become marginal. Thus human nature goes along changing its center endlessly. This is what gives human life vigor and creates its momentum, enabling us to create meanings and values that differ from the past and thus make progress. Such is the healthy condition of human life. But there is also a diseased human condition which differs from this, as when, for example, you are eating but find it hard to work up enthusiasm and can not enjoy the taste of your food. Or when everything is stagnant and you can not find a center to make your focus. It is clear that human beings are not content with such diseased states of alienation from the fundamental human desire, but that is not all. They also give rise to a subjective sense of impurity, laziness, cowardice,

escapism, decadence, and corruption. This gives rise to self-hatred, shame, and suffering, and then you try as best you can to rid yourself of such feelings.

There is also another diseased state. This is when something that is useless or positively harmful becomes the center of your life. An example is when a woman's life revolves around a vulgar sense of honor or glory that can never bring her true happiness. In fact, it will actually make her life go against the fundamental human desire and bring her unhappiness. In such a case, you must, with the true mission of humanity as your standard, criticize that malignant central element and eradicate it until you attain a healthy life condition in which the central elements, with their necessary rewards, can go through their natural cycles.

When I became a mother I experienced for the first time the new creation of a real life as a mother. Then I experienced how each time my attention gathered around the matter of bringing up my children, motherhood became the central element of my life and marshalled my whole self. My children did not exist outside of me; I clearly saw them within myself, wrapped in love. My children permeated all of me; we became inseparably related. Together with other women who have children, I was able to experience at firsthand how important motherhood is when a woman has children herself.

However, to become a mother was by no means absolute. Even after I became a mother of children, I was the wife of a certain man, I was the friend of certain other people, I was a member of the human race, and I was a citizen of Japan. I also thought, wrote poetry, published essays, sewed clothes and cooked food, and was a human being who engaged in various other kinds of mental and physical labor. It was the natural condition of my life that each of these in turn became the center of my life and to the extent necessary I devoted myself exclusively to each.

I do not live by motherhood alone. Even at times when it seems that motherhood is the center of my life, in my self the various other aspects of my life that I have already enumerated are revolving just like a cluster of innumerable stars circling one star that someone is actually watching. Then next time one of those other aspects will become the center of my life, taking the place of motherhood, and then another, and then another. These different aspects make endlessly cycling centers as they cooperate and supplement each other, or else reverse each other and contend. They are in a state of perpetual flux out of which my self grows and my life evolves.

If I were to name every facet of my life, I would need an infinite number of names. Motherhood Central, Friendship Central, Marriage Central, Work Central, Art Central, Citizenship Central, World Central..... The centers of my life are almost infinite, and constantly in the midst of flux and change, so much so that to name them would be unbearably complicated and almost meaningless. Even for the twenty-four hours of one day I could not be exclusively in one life circumstance; still more would it be as impossible for me to spend my whole life with motherhood as the absolute center, as impossible as it would be for me to spend my whole life with art as the absolute center. And this impossibility applies not only to me but to all women. For example, when I am concentrating on nursing my own child, motherhood is the center of my life at that moment, but in the next instant, in spite of the fact that my breast is still in the child's mouth, the center of my life has already moved on and I am engrossed in thoughts of a new poem. That the previous moment had motherhood as its center was necessary to nurse my child. After being used for that necessity, my motherhood yielded to my artistic aspect as the next to rise to the central position, and then, as is fitting, became one of the innumerable backgrounds of that aspect, drifting off into the depths of consciousness. Two things can not occupy the same position at the same time. When nursing a child, it is motherhood that is central, and when making a poem, it is chiefly art that is. That is exactly what makes it possible for both nursing and composing poetry to be accomplished in my life. I find it impossible to imagine conditions under which one could live a life in which motherhood was the absolute center. If there is a woman who could achieve a life in which her heart did not move from her children for even an instant, I do not know her. If being human begets infinite desires, and to respect each wish and carry it out, to the extent that it contributes to one's growth, is natural for human life, then it should be impossible for anyone to over-emphasize one desire to the exclusion of all others."

Selected Poems from Yosano Akiko, *Princess Saho*:

A plectrum-like thing
invaded my chest and is scraping
and grating, scratching and
striking, tangling things up—
I am in such pain!

撥に似しもの胸に来てかきたたきかきみだすこそくるしかりけれ
Bachi ni nishi/mono mune ni kite/kakitataki/ kakimidasu koso/kurushikarikere (#2)

My heart of course is neither a biwa or a samisen. And yet today something like a plectrum is creating a swirling sound and pounding so that sounds rise in my heart, and for a time there is a tuneless, dissonant kind of music which is exceedingly painful. With such thoughts again I have decided not to approach love today.(*300 Tanka*, *TAZ*, 15:252)

Paint
as much
as you can
see—
of this person
whose heart
is not
a monochrome

見るかぎり絵などに書きておきたまへ一いろならぬ心の人を
Miru kagiri/e nado ni kakite/oki tamae/hitoiro naranu/kokoro no hito wo (#12)

I want to reassure the people I know that it's enough to depict me as I look to them at any particular point in time. Someone who lives with feelings as complicated as mine can never explain them completely no matter how they try, so lying is, in effect, the natural state of affairs. (*300 Tanka*, *TAZ* 15:254)

The light of the Morning Star
gave birth to the breeze
of dawn—
are you one of the
family too, mountain *hototogisu*?

明星の光りの生みしあけがたの風のたぐひか山ほととぎす
Myōjō no/ hikari no umishi/akegata no/kaze no tagui ka/yamahototogisu (#28)

I was giving myself over to the breeze as it blew on me in the early summer dawn, feeling as though it had arrived from the Morning Star itself—the Morning Star, radiant with a light even clearer than water—when a cuckoo called. I could not help smiling as I thought to myself that its voice might have come from the Morning Star too. (*300 Tanka*, *TAZ* 15:257-258)

I set a qilin
free
in a garden
of white orchids

and even
then

I grieved

for all the vanished things

白蘭の園に麒麟を放つ日もものはかなき歎きをぞする
Hakuran no/sono ni kirin wo/hanatsu hi mo/mono no hakanaki/nageki wo zo suru (#40)

http://yokai.com/kirin/
Image of Kirin (Qilin) by Matthew Meyer, courtesy of Matthew Meyer

Will you
perish
with me
amid
these flames,

I asked
once,

a little
before
dying

おなじ火に燃えたまふべき心かと一たび問ひぬ死のしばしまへ
Onaji hi ni/ moetamaubeki/ kokoro ka to/ hitotabi toinu/ shi no shibashi mae (#52)

April was sweet
with mountain smell
and August burned,

hot with the winds
from the sea

Those were the
climates of delight
for me

山薫る四月と海の風ほめく八月などを好みぬわれは
Yama kaoru/shigatsu to umi no/kaze homeku/hachigatsu nado wo/konominu ware wa (#55)

The months I prefer are April in springtime, when the mountains give off a scent that seems to say all their inward preparations are in place; and August, when the hot sea winds blow as if trying to seduce the quietly resting body and heart. (*300 Tanka*, *TAZ* 15:260-261)

"Ah, how wonderful
ah, how miraculous
is the light of the sun,"

the tall trees whisper,
tears dripping down

日のかげをあなたふとあな尊とぞ大木のおとす涙のしづく
Hi no kage wo/ana tōto ana/tōto to zo/ōki no otosu/namida no shizuku (#71)

Expressing their gratitude for the sun and its beauty, the tall trees are dripping slowly after rain. Like an ignorant human being, seeing an image of the Buddha, weeps tears of joy. (*300 Tanka*, *TAZ* 15:262)

It was me, that girl,
her obi reflected
in the mirror stores'
mirrors as she came and went,
sashaying down Hachiman Way

ゆきかへり八幡筋のかがみやの鏡に帯をうつす子なりし
Yuki kaeri/Hachiman Suji no/kagamiya no/kagami ni obi wo/utsusu ko narishi (#82)

Shinsaibashi's Hachiman Way—simply hearing the name is enough to quicken the heart of any young girl. By anyone's light, this is the most fashionable street in all of fashionable Osaka. Even the sight of the collar makers' shops lined up here summons up the whole of Osaka chic, for they are lovelier than the evening clouds or a greenhouse full of flowers. No drab Tsukushi ikat or earth-colored *men ōshima* fabric for kimono there. Then there are the shops selling cosmetics, the handbag stores with their glittering gold embroidery, and two or three mirror stores. Most of the mirrors are full-length, three-feet and two-feet high, but they have many other sizes on display too, and the very smallest can be tucked neatly into one's obi. Confident men and women who feel they really belong in Osaka like to peek into a mirror for a glimpse of themselves as they pass by. When I reminisce about myself, I always remember

how I smiled at the fancy knot of my obi in the mirror store as I came and went on Hachiman Way. (*300 Tanka*, *TAZ* 15:263)

…don't know
which faded
first,
soul or
body, but
it's sad…

心まづおとろへにけむかたちまづおとろへにけむ知らねど悲し
Kokoro mazu/otoroenikemu/Katachi mazu/otoroenikemu/shiranedo kanashi (#93)

Sometimes, when I am in a negative mood, I wonder if it was my feelings losing their sharpness and splendor that precipitated my mood, or if a decline in my outward form came first and made me sick at heart. Whichever it is, I can not deny that I am now experiencing both, which is the source of my sadness. (*300 Tanka*, *TAZ* 15:264)

It's like hearing
the sound of
paulownia scattering—

the whispery rustle
of hair
falling
out,
falling
down

桐のちる音きくごとくさやかなる響は立てね髪おちてゆく
Kiri no chiru/oto kiku gotoku/sayakanaru/hibiki wa tatenu/Kami ochite yuku (#95)

I remember
how I wrapped
them in a scrap
of cloth—

rice,
greens,
a bit of dried fish

一はしの布につつむを覚えける米としら菜とからさけをわれ
Hitohashi no/nuno ni tsutsumu wo/oboekeru/yone to shirona to/karasake wo ware (#96)

Like a blind street singer,
hands clasped as she kneels
on the stones
of a great temple's portico,
so I as the night comes on

大寺の石の御廊にひざまづく瞽女のやうにも指組む夕
Ōtera no/ ishi no mirō ni/ hizamuzuku/ goze no yō ni mo/ yubi kumu yūbe (#97)

In the shadow of one of the massive pillars lining the stone corridor of a large temple, a *goze* beggar, a blind woman street singer, sits with her hands clasped on her knees, looking down, listening intently for the footfalls of the worshippers. I suddenly noticed that my hands were folded like a *goze* beggar in a temple. Of course this is an evening when I can not see my lover in my home. (*300 Tanka*, *TAZ* 15:265)

Whales
swim
serenely,
showing
their
black
backs

in the sea
off Kazusa

under
the dawn-dim moon

おほらかに黒き脊見せて勇魚ゆく上総の海のあかつき月夜
Ōraka ni/kuroki se misete/isana yuku/Kazusa no umi no/akatsuki zukiyo (#105)

As autumn's mist
envelops my body,

it brings to mind
the fragrance
of unpolished rice

秋の霧身をまく時にくろ米の飯のにほひをおもひ合せつ
Aki no kiri/mi wo maku toki ni/kurogome no/ ii no nioi wo/omoi awasetsu (#110)

During the summer, while convalescing in the mountains, the mists that enwrapped me during my morning and evening walks always made me think of a time in my childhood. I had been left in the countryside at the home where my grandmother was born and a vagrant set a fire which burned down the entire village. We had to stay a mile or more away at a big temple nestled deep on the mountainside, along with various other people, some of whom we knew and some of whom we did not, for several days or weeks, I forget which now. For the first three days, we had to eat unpolished brown rice. I don't remember if it tasted as bad as people usually say, but during my convalescence in the mountains as an adult, every time the mist wound around me it brought back the smell that rose up from the rice as it was transferred from the vat on the earthen floor of the big kitchen to the wooden rice tub from which we were served. (*300 Tanka*, *TAZ* 15:226)

I was the girl who ran
with horses
through the wind-blown
green sedge field
as darkness fell!

風そよぐ青菅原を夕されば馬にまじりて走る子なりし
Kaze soyogu/aosugehara wo/ yūsareba/uma ni majirite/hashiru ko narishi (#187)

All night long
I stitched away
at a little shirt—
my pathetic
joy!

世をこめて小き襯衣をぬひいでしよろこびなどもあはれなるかな
Yo wo komete/chiisaki shatsu wo/nui-ideshi/yorokobi nado mo/ aware naru kana (#192)

The children's clothes
are all new, all beautiful
today—
it is the first day of May
and the wild irises are blooming

子らの衣皆新らしく美くしき皐月一日花あやめ咲く
Kora no kinu/mina atarashiku utsukushiki/satsuki tsuitachi/hana ayame saku (#204)

I bought rice and
afterwards
still had enough to buy
two branches of flowering plum—
for my dear one awaiting me
at home

米買ひしあとの小銭に紅梅の二枝をかへてわれ待つ背子を
Kome kaishi/ato no kozeni ni/kōbai no/ futae wo kaete/ware matsu seko wo (#236)

We were talking
about something
unrelated
when suddenly
the thought came—

Seven days it's been,
since I slept
in your arms

かかはりもなき話よりふと君に七日いだかれいねぬを思ふ
Kakawari mo/naki hanashi yori/futo kimi ni/nanuka itadakare/inenu wo omou (#307)

Among the Five Signs
of the Decay
of the Angel

would they count
eyes that closed at dusk

but still look
sleep-deprived at morning?

天人の五衰と云ふは宵に寝てねたらぬさまの目もかぞふるや
Tennin no/gosui to iu wa/yoi ni nete/netaranu sama no/ me mo kazouru ya (#308)

High noon,
the moon
cold and white
and bloom time near
for the dead-man flowers
on paths that cross
the rice fields,
weasels calling

昼の月すさまじ白ししびと花咲くなる畔に鼬し啼けば
Hiru no tsuki/susamaji shiroshi/Shibitobana/saku naru kuro ni/itachi shi nakeba (#343)

I laid out a straw mat and
a calf from the cowshed came and
slept there
but I did not chase it off—
I let it stay and thought of
you

つくりたるむしろに小屋の小牛きて寝れどもおはず君おもひ居ぬ
Tsukuritaru/mushiro ni koya no/koushi kite/nuredomo owazu/kimi omoi inu (#344)

My little boy grabbed
the horns of
a two year calf
to make it his friend—
that’s how brave he’s grown

わが太郎二歳の牛の角とらへ友とするまでたけ生ひにけり
Waga Tarō/nisai no ushi no/ tsuno torae/ tomo to suru made/take oinikeri (#345)

Bone-thin horses, calves—
each and every one trained
to carry loads on its back
in the country of pain
where I came of age

やせし馬小牛ことごと荷をになふ苦しき国に人となりにき
Yaseshi uma/koushi kotogoto/ni wo ninau/kurushiki kuni ni/ hito to nariniki (#346)

For you
I picked greens
and rinsed rice—

in the house where
on winter days
the well rope

froze
solid white

君がため菜摘み米とぎ冬の日は井縄の白く凍りたる家
Kimi ga tame/na tsumi yone togi/fuyu no hi wa/inawa no shiroku/kōritaru ie (#368)

Here will be
the harbor
for my boat,
I decided,

and let down
the anchor,
then rolled up

the crimson sail

この船の泊さだめて錨してわれは真紅の帆をおろしける
Kono fune no/ tomari sadamete/ ikari shite/ ware wa shinku no/ ho wo oroshikeru (#404)

Today I take my place
among women,
daughter
of those who
from ancient ages
have stumbled,
believing they are powerless

古ゆちからなしとしあやまちし少女の末に今日われを置く
Inishie yu/chikara nashi to shi/ayamachishi/otome no sue ni/kyō ware wo oku (#407)

Notes:
#2
The pain of living in opposition to the prevailing belief, held even by prestigious feminists like Ellen Key, that "physical labor and mental labor are the intrinsic mission of men whereas such labor must be matters of secondary importance for women" must have been immense, and especially acute for Akiko because she was an artist, and her artistic imagination and practice were intrinsic to her sense of who she was. How could she ever think of her artistic

pursuits as “secondary”? The source of the mental suffering and agitation expressed in this poem is in no way defined in Akiko’s explanation, but here, as so often in considering Akiko’s life, Virginia Woolf’s remark in *A Room of One’s Own* keeps coming to mind: “—who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet’s heart when caught and tangled in a woman’s body?” (Woolf, 73).

#12

Princess Saho is bracketed by a dedication to the late Yamakawa Tomiko, Akiko’s poet-friend and sometime rival for the indecisive Tekkan’s affections, and a series of *aika*, or elegies, written after Tomiko’s death. Most accounts focus on the elegies as one of the high points of the collection, but in truth they are more of biographical than literary interest. In between the dedication and the elegies there is little evidence of any attempt to impose order, beyond a few runs of poems written while on short trips. For me, the emblematic poem of the collection is this one, “Paint/ as much.” Its theme, in a sense, is the the theme of all of Akiko’s poetry: the richness of emotion and the many facets of herself that were called into play as she connected to the world in which she lived. This manifested as poems about both the real world and imaginary ones that she invented herself, as well as fantasies and images that suddenly struck her mind, as well as poems about the scenes and events of daily life.

Other than literature, the art with which Akiko and her husband Yosano Tekkan (Hiroshi) were most intimate was painting and many of their friends were artists. Akiko described the way she would like to be depicted in a portrait on at least two other occasions, in the free verse poems “Shōzō,” and “Eshi yo” (see Ishikawa Kyōko, *Yosano Akiko Nōto*, pp 32-35).

#28

The clear transparent light from the Morning Star (Venus at dawn) melts into a breeze and then, out of that medley of visual and kinesthetic imagery, arises, for the ears, the bird’s song.

Myōjō, or Mornng Star, was the name of the journal of literature and art that was begun by Akiko’s husband Hiroshi in 1900 and, as the center of romanticism, was where she published most of her poetry and prose until it folded in 1908. Claire Cuccio’s discussion of the meaning of the journal’s title (Cuccio, pp. 2-3) should preface the reading of the many poems by Akiko in which the Morning Star appears, for Akiko’s feelings for the planet were of a piece with the feeling she had for the journal.

Another Morning Star poem:

The Morning Star—
  left behind
  as though without a country
  to return to—
Autumn winds are blowing

明星は帰らん国ももたぬごととり残されて秋風ぞ吹く
Myōjō wa/kaeran kuni mo/motanu goto/torinokosarete/aki kaze zo fuku（*Taiyō to Bara* [The sun and roses], 1921, #298）

Here, the Morning Star is an exile, a refugee, unable to return to its native land. The chill winds of autumn blow, presaging winter, and endings. This poem, published twelve years after *Princess Saho*, evokes Akiko’s sense of her place and the place of her literary circle in the literary and cultural world of Japan at the time. In retrospect, she was central, and her work is now canonical, but at the time it did not feel that way.

#40

The qilin (kirin in Japanese), an imaginary beast of great gentleness and good omen that originated in China, was, with the dragon, a symbol of royal power and prestige. But the incident recorded here—someone releasing a qilin

into an orchid garden and then grieving—is Akiko's invention. Like a dreamer arranging her dream, she steps into the world of her imagination, being reincarnated in the process as a regal figure (since only such a one could possess and then release the magical kirin) but one with a poet's sensibility. Mirror opposites—beauty, freedom, and life versus death, transience, and grief—fuse in a single moment of experience.

Akiko first published this extraordinary poem as the first poem of "Hyakushu Uta" (One Hundred Tanka), in the May 1909 issue of the magazine *Subaru*. She also included it in her own self-selected poems (*Yosano Akiko Kashū Jisen*, p. 42). However, to the best of my knowledge only one of the many editions of her selected poems (Itō Shinkichi, et al., p.163) includes it, and as of this writing, no commentator, again to the best of my knowledge, has so much as mentioned it.

I use the Chinese name "qilin" rather than the Japanized "kirin," in order to keep the slightly foreign flavor that this poem has in Japanese. (Although the same characters are used for *kirin*, giraffe, the *kirin* in this poem is, needless to say, not a giraffe.)

#52

A whisper in the dark while making love. Dying, of course, is here a metaphor for the peak of erotic bliss, and the flames are the flames of passion. This poem feels almost too intimate to intrude on. It is not only the setting; the poem also has the flavor of a private memory, turned over in the mind with pleasure.

Akiko may have been partly inspired by the farewell poem Princess Ototachibana addressed to Yamato Takeru in the *Kojiki* when she jumps into the sea to save him from the wrath of the sea god, for that poem also uses the verb *toishi* 問いし, glossed by modern scholars as *tsumadoi* 妻問い, to declare one's love, to court.

> In the little field
> of Sagamu,
> the fires burned,
> the fires—
> and you stood there
> among them and
> asked me
> to let you love me
>
> さねさし / 相模さがむの小野に / 燃ゆる火の / 火中に立ちて / 問ひし君はも
> Sanesashi/Sagamu no ono ni/moyuru hi no/honaka ni tachite/toishi kimi wa mo (*Kojiki Kayō*, attributed to Princess Ototachibana; translation adapted from that in Ōoka Makoto, trans. Janine Beichman, *Oriori no Uta,* 202-203)

Akiko, a self-didact, knew the classics of Japanese literature backwards and forwards by the time she was in her teens, and given her early interest in poems by women and also love as a poetic topic, there is no doubt that she knew this poem well.

Traditionally, *toishi* in the *Kojiki* poem was glossed as "you asked if I was all right [even though we were surrounded by flames, as Yamato Takeru's enemies were attacking]," but more recently scholars (see Ōoka again) suggest that it means "you declared your love," or, as translated here, "asked me/ to let you love me," and that the setting is the annual burning of the fields which was accompanied by couples pairing off.

But whether the flames are from Yamato Takeru's enemies or from the seasonal burning of the fields, they are real ones, while in Akiko's poem they are a metaphor that derives extra power from its subtle connection to an earlier time and place.

#55

Akiko's explanation for this poem almost calls for explanation itself. We may gloss "internal preparations" with the

kernel of a long passage from *Akiko kawa* (*Akiko poem talks*, 1915) on Akiko's evolution into a poet:

> "…suddenly, from within my life, a new urge had arisen. It was a sweet and yet tormenting and wild urge, as when a plant forces the flower's bud to swell from within.
>
> I had awoken to young love." (Beichman, *Embracing the Firebird*, 77)

And we may gloss "seduce the quietly resting body and heart " to describe the hot winds with this, the kernel of a similar long passage, but from *Uta no tsukuriyō* (The making of poems, 1915):

> "In those days [the late teens], new and various emotions were welling up in me at every moment and the effort to keep them in check caused me great pain. I had violent mood swings, and the most trivial things could give rise to passions that made it seem the whole world was on fire." (Beichman, *Embracing the Firebird*, 61)

In the adolescent Akiko's imagination the landscape was alive. In the same passage, she wrote:

> "The flowers and the moon were not cold natural objects, but things which turned to me and spoke, and wept; or else I made them speak for me; or else they and I shared joys and sorrows." (Beichman, *Embracing the Firebird*, 61)

The weather of early spring (April) and the height of summer (August) spoke to her own sense of "a new urge" swelling from within, and her own disordered passions, passions which "made it seem the whole world was on fire." Akiko's explanation for this poem maps the body of the awakening young woman onto the landscape of mountains and sea. The world is the poet, and the poet is the world.

A poem from Akiko's first collection, *Tangled Hair*, published eight years earlier, treats part of the same theme and is so famous it often appears in high school textbooks:

> Somehow feeling
> you awaited me
> I walked out
> into the flowering meadows
> under the evening moon
> *Nani to naku/kimi ni mataruru/kokochi shite/ideshi hanano no/ yūzukuyo kana* (*Midaregami*, no. 75; Beichman, *Embracing the Firebird*, 117)

There is a significant difference between the two poems. "Somehow feeling" evokes only the sweet swelling: it is the April of the soul, the time when the "internal preparations" are in place (and yet, the way it quietly turns the stereotype of the waiting woman on its head, subversive in its own way). In contrast, "April—sweet" includes not only the sweetness but also the ungovernable passions. It is a larger poem, worthy of a person old enough to look back on her youthful self and see it whole.

In Japan at this time, to say "I" or "me" in poetry, especially for a woman, was an act of daring, but one that was common for Akiko. Here, by concluding with the first person pronoun, *ware*,"I" or "me," the poet decisively distinguishes herself from all those with the conventional preference for the full blossoming of June and the colorful leaves of autumn. Paradoxically, however. the presence of all the others is conjured up by their absence, thereby enlarging the poem in another sense, and giving a kind of afterglow. Perhaps this is a modern iteration of the classical effect known as *yoin, 余韻*, "reverberations."

Konomu 好む can mean simply "to like," but also, as it does here, "to like one thing more than others, " "to prefer," hence "appealed most."

#82

Akiko's childhood was not a happy one. One example: Akiko was dressed in secondhand clothes bought by her thrifty paternal grandmother, and hated it. However, by the time she was in her late teens, she had become so useful in the family store that she acquired a certain amount of indepedence. In addition to attending gatherings of local poets, she was able to order her own kimono and even travel to Osaka. This time of her life remained very important to her in terms of the gradual liberation she had won, almost entirely by her own efforts, from the restraints under which she had grown up. The backstory given in *300 Tanka* vividly evokes an aspect of this time that she did not reveal in any of her prose reminiscences but which is hinted at by the memories of her sister and her friend, the poet Kawai Suimei. (For details, see Beichman, *Embracing the Firebird*, Chapter 3, especially 48-50).

Admiring herself in the mirror seems trivial, superficial even, but it was actually quite important. Perhaps because it was part of learning to love her own self, to experience her own life force, and so acquiring the confidence that she needed to run away from home later on and make her own life. The "mere woman," *tada no onna*, that her parents meant to bring up did not admire herself in mirrors.

Ko 子 does not mean "child" in the literal sense. As in other poems by Akiko and her circle at this time, the usage reflects the indirect influence of English poetry, in such works as Byron's "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage."

#93 and #94

In Akiko's work, the themes of physical decay, the dimming of love, and simple exhaustion play a counterpoint to themes of sexual desire, belief in the eternity of love, and artistic ecstasy.

#95

This is one of a number of poems in which Akiko is trying to see her own "decay" as beautiful. It combines her down-to-earth view of herself as weary and emotionally exhausted—from her day to day obligations as a professional writer, dedicated wife to a difficult if brilliant man, and devoted mother to a brood of children—with the never quite forgotten world of ideal beauty that sustained her. Another poem from *Princess Saho* that transposes extreme fatigue into a dream of beauty is:

If a morning glory vine
came and its flowers blossomed in my hair,
I'd lie abed until the leaves
of autumn
fell

朝顔の蔓きて髪に花咲かば寝てありなまし秋くるるまで
Asagao no/tsuru kite kami ni/hana sakaba/nete arinamashi/aki kururu made (19)

Then there is this, published a few years later, which reflects on the difficulty of the whole enterprise. It is the first poem in *Sakurasō* (Primroses, 1911):

These days I find
myself
sometimes forgetting

the art of seeing
my own decay

as beautiful

この頃のわが衰へを美くしと見るすべ時にうち忘れつつ
Kono goro no/waga otoroe wo/utsukushi to/miru sube toki ni/uchi wasuretsutsu (*Sakurasō* #1)

See also the note below on poem #308.

#96
Remembering the early days of their marriage.

#97
Akiko wrote several poems about the goze, blind female entertainers. This is another well- known one on the topic from a few years later:

On a cold mat,
one hand atop the other,
sits a goze in quiet majesty

when I peek inside
my heart

寒げなる筵の上に手をかさね瞽女ぞいませる心覗けば
Samugenaru/mushiro no ue ni/te wo kasane/goze zo imaseru/kokoro nozokeba (*Shūyōshū #60*, *TAZ*, 15:113)
Imaseru is honorific for *iru*, hence "sits in quiet majesty." The beggar so poor she must sit on a cold straw mat is exalted in the poet's eyes, reflecting Akiko's image of herself, at least at that moment.

#105
This poem and #343, "High noon/the moon/cold and white," are descriptions of natural scenes on a panoramic scale. Here three elements—the giant mammals, the sea, and the moon—come together in a way that seems at once mysterious and completely real. This is not the animistic nature of poems like "April---sweet" It is nature apart from the poet, quietly observed.

Kazusa was the name for what is now central Chiba Prefecture. The setting is the sea off the Pacific Coast of what is now called the Boso Peninsula, an area where whales were hunted, eaten, and used in many ways for centuries. The sight the poet described would have been common in the early years of the 20th century, but is no more, for the whale populations have been decimated. This poem is moving to a modern reader in a way that it could not have been for Akiko's contemporaries. To us, it speaks of a lost world.

#308
Tennin gosui is a Buddhist term for the five signs that portend the death of a deva, those mortal deities who reside in the sixth and highest realm of existence. It is also the Japanese title of Mishima Yukio's *The Decay of the Angel,* translated by Edward G. Seidensticker. There the signs are summed up:

"the once-immaculate robes are soiled, the flowers in the flowery crown fade and fall, sweat pours from the armpits, a fetid stench envelops the body, the angel is no longer happy in its proper place." (Mishima Yukio, tr. Seidensticker, 51-53).

It goes without saying that the poet is not seriously comparing herself to an angel or a deva. If she were posting on social media, the question might be followed by that usefully ambiguous phrase, "Just asking" and maybe a moji for a rueful smile.

#343
Like #105, "Whales/swim/serenely," this poem is a description of a natural scene on a panoramic scale, but while

"Whales" moves from the sea to the sky, this poem moves from the sky to the earth. In terms of tone, it differs too, having a faintly surreal and sinister quality— the cold noon moon of autumn, the "dead-man flowers" (Japanese has several names for spider lilies, of which this is one; they may be red or white), and the ineffable whisper—or hiss—of the weasel's call. Weasels are nocturnal animals—have they mistaken the time because the moon is out during the day? There is a spectral quality to the beautiful scene that suggests the time is out of joint.

#404

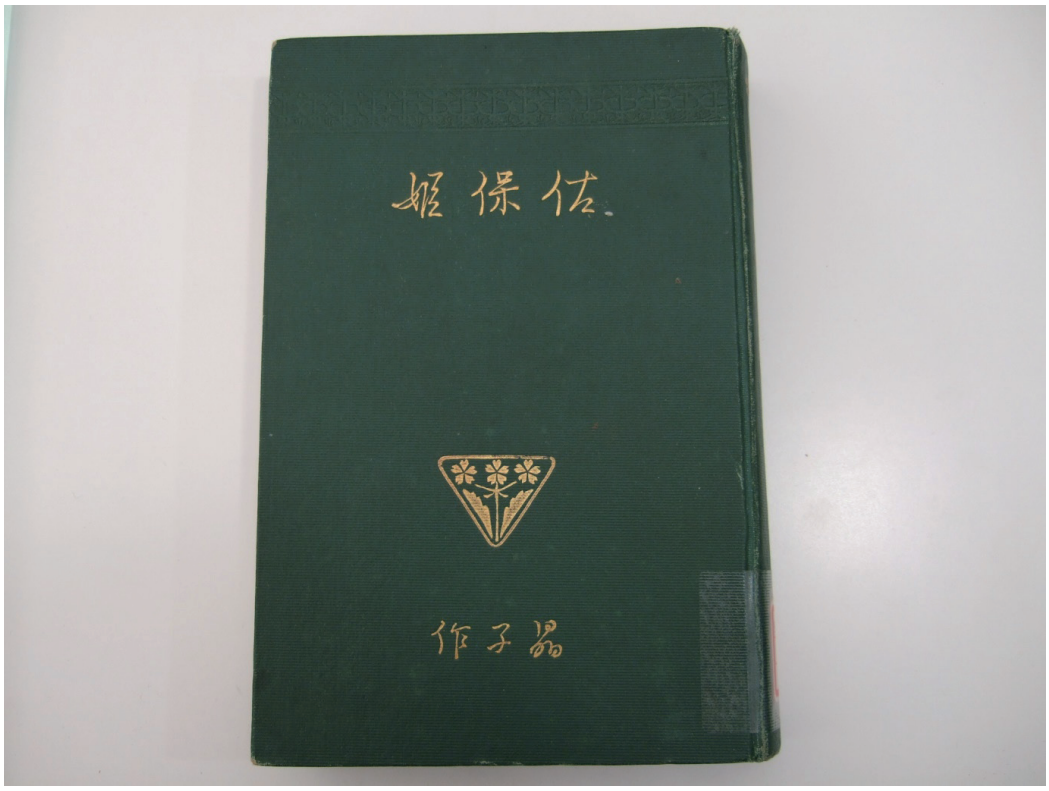
This poem was first published in early August 1908. At the time, Akiko was pregnant with her fifth child, and in her first trimester. The crimson sail was her private symbol for art and learning, and the poem announces, in her personal code, a temporary retreat from the oceanic worlds of art and learning into the quiet harbor of the mother body, to nurture the growing seed within. This is part of an extensive body of writing on pregnancy and birth spread across Akiko's entire oeuvre.

#407

This poem moves boldly through centuries, as the poet sums up the history of all women from ancient times to the present, and then quietly slips in to take her place in that line, as if she too is not exempt from the fatal mistake that women have repeatedly made—the mistake of mistrusting their own inherent powers and believing themselves helpless.

Akiko's feminism was predicated on the idea that women had to take responsibility for their own lives and not rely on the state or society to support them. This poem suggests that it was almost a sin—*ayamachishi*, literally "to make a grave mistake," and translated here as "stumbled," is a very strong word—for women not to achieve their potential, that that failure was not only due to societal oppression but also to their own poor choices. At the same time, the poem is a kind of confession of the poet's own uncertainty. Where will she go from here? She stands at a crossroads, heir to the benighted women of the past, but at the same time not knowing if she will go beyond them.

This poem can be read biographically. Or not. I think of it as reflective of Akiko's mood during her fifth pregnancy, but there is no reason not to read it apart from the life as well, as uttered by anywoman.



Cover of *Sahohime*.
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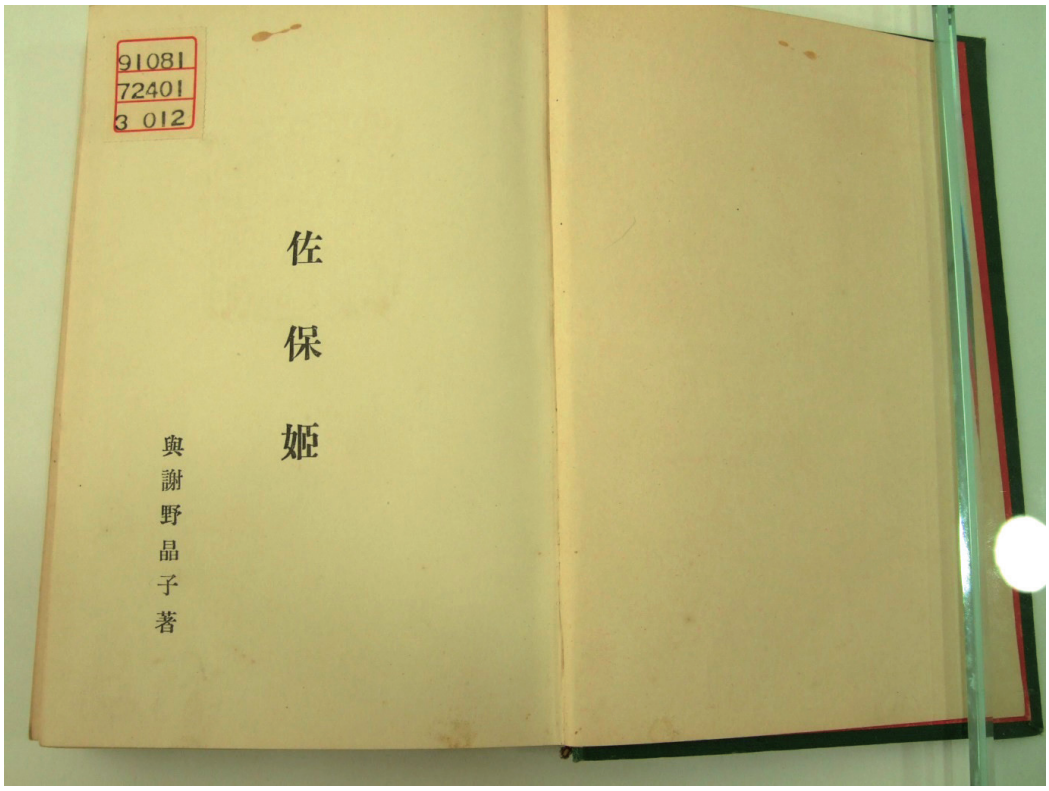
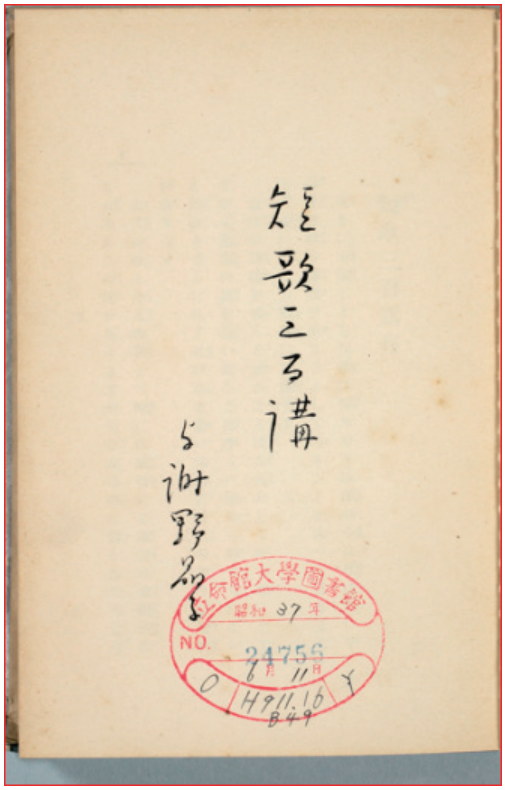
Frontispiece of *Sahohime*



Title page of *Sahohime*

Cover of *Tanka Sanbyaku Kō*

Frontispiece of *Tanka Sanbyaku Kō*



Title page of *Tanka Sanbyaku Kō*

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