Introduction

Naranja, poma, seno, esfera al fin resuelta
en vacuidad de estupa. Tierra disuelta.
—Octavio Paz, “Renga”

On the very idea of a conceptual scheme
dogs set up a sort of barking, underneath

This book will investigate Japanese poetry by means of seven in-depth studies of specific moments in the history of Japanese modernism—viewed not as a single unified movement but rather as an agglomeration of moments covering the twentieth century as a whole. The emphasis is on postwar poetry, which, to date, has rarely been examined in detail in English. The book also has a clear emphasis on language as the chief mediating element of modernist poetry. Therefore, the individual chapters are linked by a focus on the twin themes of modernism and language rather than by a continuous historical narrative.

Discussion of individual books of poetry and poems will take predominance over discussion of theoretical manifestos, although some analysis of such declarations will be undertaken. In addition, one of the chapters will focus on contemporary Okinawan poetry, an area of research as yet in its infancy in the West. Some reference will be made to postmodernism, but, in this study, postmodernism refers to a type of art and poetry created by the avant-garde from the late 1960s or 1970s onward, namely, a particular mode of writing, or of language. Hence, as the analysis that follows will demonstrate (especially in chapter 6), postmodernism is viewed as part of the larger Modern movement.

The volume is divided into two parts. The first part consists of two chapters that provide a prologue to the development of postwar poetry by examining two important early examples of modernist verse. Chapter 1 investi-
gates the modernist experiments of Yosano Akiko (1878–1942) and her husband Tekkan (1873–1935) in the *tanka* genre of traditional poetry, which, in content, led to the birth of a modernist aesthetic and to the creation of the “new woman” in literature. Chapter 2 conducts an analysis of the novelist Arishima Takeo’s (1878–1923) only collection of poetry, *Hitomi naki me* (Eyeless eyes, 1923), which here is read as an early modernist experiment and linked to similar experiments elsewhere.

The second part of the volume comprises five chapters, which represent different approaches to postwar poetry. Chapter 3 examines the poet Soh Sakon’s (b. 1919) poetry collection about World War II *Moeru haha* (Mother burning, 1968) from the perspectives of language and theme. Chapter 4 is a detailed analysis of rhetorical strategies in the poetry of three major contemporary women poets: Ishigaki Rin (b. 1920), Tomioka Taeko (b. 1935), and Itō Hiromi (b. 1955).

Chapter 5 is a study of contemporary Okinawan poets and their struggles with modernist language, with the main focus on the Okinawan poet Ichihara Chikako (b. 1951) and her 1985 poetry collection *Umi no tonneru* (Tunnel through the sea). Chapter 6 reads the contemporary poet Asabuki Ryōji’s (b. 1952) collection *Opus* (1988) as an exercise in late modernist or early postmodernist rhetoric, with discussion of some theoretical issues. Chapter 7 seeks to locate the poet Tanikawa Shuntarō (b. 1931) in the context of contemporary debates over language and poetry and makes explicit reference to those debates occurring throughout the 1990s in the magazine *Gendai shi techō* (Contemporary poetry notebook). Thus the investigation of these seven moments in literary history attempts to trace a genealogy of one dominant thread of twentieth century modernist poetry in Japan.

A strong emphasis on language, a strategy that hardly needs justification when treating poetry, demands a much more intense yet historically mediated approach than biographies of individual poets can provide, no matter how excellent they may be. Similarly, treatments of movements focusing on two or three poets, especially if they belong to a sharply delineated movement, are subject to similar constraints of space and time in that the attention to the movement under investigation prevents a wider examination of the broader linguistic and thematic issues, and sometimes restricts detailed consideration of the verse produced by such movements.

In that sense, this book represents a break from existing scholarly practice in this field and proposes a different way to approach Japanese literary...
history. The focus on linguistic usage is also a strategy justified by the historic importance of language to literary modernism: in a very real sense, I will argue, language is modernism in practice. This approach results in the close readings of the many individual poems that are found throughout the book. As numerous commentators have noted, translation is the ultimate form of scholarly exegesis, and so I have translated a large number of individual poems not merely to provide the ground on which my arguments proceed, but also because most of the poets discussed here are rarely translated.

No single theoretical or conceptual approach will be followed in this book. Reading strategies will be entirely pragmatic. The purpose of interpretive or conceptual frames should surely be to help elucidate the meaning and significance of the texts under examination. Consequently, this study makes use of a wide range of theorists in its attempt to trace a possible outline of modernist poetry in Japan, only one of many such possible outlines. I will also make use of a number of leading Japanese critics and commentators in my investigation of the several themes or threads that combine to make up the book and define the particular historical moments under examination. In addition, I will use the insights of several Western theorists and commentators. This technique allows cross-cultural comparisons to be made and brings to the study the specific advantages to be gained by an investigator working from a perspective outside the language and culture of the poets themselves.

In this study, for the most part, “poetry” means *shi* or Western-style free verse, which was introduced into Japan in 1882 with the publication of the volume *Shintaishi sō* (Selection of poetry in the new style). This genre of poetry became the dominant mode of modernist verse. And, as the name suggests, it was always associated with the birth of the “new” in the minds of the reading public and poets alike. But other modes of writing will also, from time to time, come under examination, at least in part because poetry was not written in a vacuum and drew on various genres of prose for inspiration. In addition, the traditional genre of *tanka* will be considered in the early chapters dealing with the first part of the century, since at this time *tanka* competed with *shi* for dominance as the preeminent poetic art.

The choice of the verse of Yosano Akiko and her husband together with the poetry of Arishima Takeo to represent the early steps toward the development of a modern aesthetic in Japanese verse was made primarily on the basis of two separate arguments. The first is that this aspect of Akiko’s significance as a poet, while generally acknowledged by Akiko specialists in
Japan (as seen in chapter 1), has not been taken up to any great degree by Japanese literary historians of the avant-garde, especially those who work in the area of modern poetry. Nevertheless, my contention is that her contribution to modern verse is precisely where Akiko’s influence and legacy are most striking. The significance of Arishima’s verse, in contrast, arises initially from the fact that it is almost completely unknown, whether in Japan or elsewhere. Yet Arishima is an excellent example of a prewar author who absorbed and understood the lessons concerning the modernist experiments in verse conducted by his compatriots during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Hence his poetry has an intrinsic interest over and above the very specific relevance it holds for insights into his own life and death.

There have been a number of significant English-language studies (mostly in the form of biographical analyses), and many studies in Japanese, of prewar poetry in Japan that map the history of that period in some detail. By comparison, however, there have been few studies of postwar poetry. One of the problems is whom to select for examination from among the many hundreds of poets who have published (and, in the case of contemporary poets, are continuing to publish) in this era. A glance at five representative sets or collections of postwar poets will illustrate the difficulty of the task.

The fifteen-volume [Zenshishû taisei] gendai Nihon shijin zenshû (Collection of modern Japanese poets [complete poems for each poet]), published between 1952 and 1955, purports to contain the complete collected poems to that point in time of sixty-four important modern poets. The thirty-four-volume Nihon shijin zenshû (Collection of Japanese poets), issued between 1966 and 1967, and the thirty-volume Nihon no shiika (Japanese poetry), published between 1967 and 1970, both contain selections from individual books of poems, from roughly the same eighty modern poets. The latter two collections were the result of a “mini-boom” in poetry publishing at the time. The literary historian Shimaoka Shin writes that single volumes of the Collection of Japanese Poets (produced by Shinchôsha) sold over one hundred thousand copies.

The continuing series Gendai Shi Bunko (Library of Contemporary Poetry), which commenced publication in 1968, is divided into three sets and has published 180-odd volumes, each devoted to a single poet, but a number of poets have two or more volumes in the set. Thus, the total number of modern poets represented adds up to about 140 or so poets, many of whom are still active. Finally, a rival series called Nihon Gendai Shi Bunko (Library
of Contemporary Japanese Poetry) that began in the late 1970s has published ninety or so poets, but very few individuals overlap between the two series.8

Thus, the poetry of well over two hundred postwar Japanese poets is available in print in these collections, and, naturally, these poets represent just the tip of the iceberg, with many more poets having published poetry in the postwar era. The question remains as to how to select poets for sustained scrutiny from among so many. The issue of translation is moot, as only a tiny minority of these poets have been translated into English. Subjective factors must enter the equation if only to allow for the actual number of poets who have been read by the investigator: in my case, the poets I have managed to read over the decade and a half that I have been engaged in research on Japanese poetry (including most, but not all, of the poets collected in the sets mentioned above).9

My selections of postwar poets have been made on the basis of a number of factors: most important, the concern with language, especially in a modernist sense, displayed by the particular poets under examination; familiarity with and admiration of the work of the individual poets; and, last but not least, the judgment of those poets by contemporary Japanese scholarship (which represents Japanese readers). One concrete expression of the way in which these poets have been evaluated in contemporary Japan is the large number of literary awards garnered by most of the individual collections examined in this study.

In addition, I have tried to focus on major poets whose verse is not as well known as it should be—a relatively easy task as so few postwar poets have had any extended treatment of their verse in English. As noted above, this also provides a justification for the large number of translations contained within this book. The only exception to this rule is the chapter on Tanikawa Shuntarō: no discussion of postwar poetry would be complete without a consideration of his work, since he is the dominant poet of his era. Early versions of some of the essays included here have been published before, but all have been rewritten for this volume to accord with its overall design and aims. Other chapters have been written specifically for the study.

The translations have been made with a deliberate attention to the aural aspects of the verse forms favored by many of the poets. An emphasis on the musical or rhythmical elements of verse has been characteristic of modern Japanese poetry (shi) since its inception in the Meiji period (1868–1912). The early experiments of the pioneer translator and poet (better known as a
novelist) Mori Ōgai (1862–1922) with end rhyme in his 1889 volume of verse translations Omokage (Vestiges) have been echoed by such postwar poets as Tanikawa in his book Kotoba asobi uta (Word-play songs, 1973) and, in recent years, by rhyming poets associated with the magazine Nakaniwa (Inner garden) such as Umemoto Kenzō and Inaba Michio. Matsumoto Kyōsuke is one of the latest poets to try his hand at rhyming verse with his 1993 volume titled Ōinteikeishishū: Nihongo benro (Fixed rhyme poetry collection: Japanese-language pilgrimage).

The metrical schemes used by postwar poets encompass many more devices than rhyme, and thus to communicate the rhythms and cadences of these poems in English, the translator must have recourse to a wide variety of similar or related techniques. Apart from such poets as Tanikawa and Asabuki, few prominent contemporary Japanese writers are actively involved in “sound poetry” where, as Steve McCaffery explains, “the primary goal [is] the liberation and promotion of the phonetic and subphonetic features of language.”

However, the ear as well as the eye (and, naturally, the cognitive faculties) is important in reading and comprehending postwar Japanese poetry, and so I have made a concerted effort to try to reproduce as best as I can the aural effects and affects of the poets whose verse is translated here. Such sound-oriented poetry falls primarily into the category of “performance poetry.”

The scholar Takahashi Seori argues that the 1970s saw a fundamental split between performance poets like Terayama Shūji (1935–1983) and elite print-oriented poets who rejected this trend, writing ever more obscure and difficult “language” poetry. Terayama created verse dramas for underground theater, produced videos, and composed radio poetry. In 1960, when he was only twenty-four, Terayama wrote a famous essay titled “Kōi to sono hokori—chimata no gendaishi to action poem no mondai” (Action and its boasts—the issue of the fork in modern verse and action poems) in which he criticized poets’ obsession with print media. He characterized jazz poetry and graffiti in public toilets as “action poems” that were “revelations of life overflowing in forks in the road.”

In the late 1960s and 1970s, poetry recitals and performances became extremely popular. Shimaoka cites Terayama’s 1973 action poem “Jikanwari” (Timetable)—a sketch of how to experience poetry by drawing in chalk a square on a concrete footpath and dividing it into various zones—as typical of the kind of verse (or performance) activity that Terayama championed.
struction” in his poetry, poets of an opposing persuasion developed verse in a direction similar to abstract art—this kind of poetry Takahashi calls “conceptual art,” poetry exemplified by Asabuki Ryōji’s 1989 collection _Misshit-suron_ (Closed room treatise).

It can be argued that “conceptual” poets focus at least as much on the eye as on the ear. In Japan, modern poetry that emphasizes visual qualities has had a long history. The modernist poet Hinatsu Kōnosuke (1890–1971), who was active in the prewar period, is a good example of an author whose work stressed the visual surface, in his case using recondite Chinese characters for their artistic (and also phonetic) effect. The well-known avant-garde poet Takiguchi Shūzō (1903–1979) was also renowned for his “plastic” poetry that accentuated the visual nature of his work. These two poets are but a small sample of a large number of Japanese poets who have written as much for the eye as for the ear. The tradition of these poets has continued to the present, with numerous Japanese multimedia poets active on the Internet and in other venues.

Unfortunately, the limitations of space do not permit a thorough consideration of more than a few authors. Consequently, the emphasis here is on poets whose work can be more easily comprehended in translation rather than on multimedia artists whose achievements extend beyond the printed page and thus demand a larger dimension of understanding than can be conveyed by the medium of print alone. Nevertheless, poetry circles in Japan are particularly close and so, despite the factionalism of the various poetry coteries organized around a leading poet and in-house journal, it is fair to say that Japanese poets are well aware of each other’s publications. This is borne out by the many examples of one volume of modern poetry influencing a host of others—as can be seen in the numerous “monogatari shi” (tale poems) produced in the 1960s.

This collection of essays thus attempts to sketch out one version of postwar Japanese literary history, only the beginning of a larger history yet to be written. The postwar poets chosen for investigation are all important authors, and the themes of their work speak not only to Japanese readers but also to readers everywhere. However, there has been little writing on or analysis of these poets (or postwar Japanese poets in general) in any language other than Japanese.

It is important to note that the notion of the postwar has faded in the minds of many Japanese. Several Japanese critics, like Kokai Eiji, would ar-
gue that the era of “postwar poetry” is over, as Japanese literature has entered a different phase of development where many of the issues that arose in the two decades or so after the end of the war are no longer relevant or meaningful to contemporary Japanese. However true this may be for Japanese readers, it is certainly not the case for a non-Japanese audience, as the historical map sketched by this volume is terra incognita for most Western readers. Furthermore, the authors included here represent not only poets who came to prominence in the 1950s and 1960s such as Soh Sakon and Tomioka Taeko, but also poets whose writing became famous much later, for example, Itō Hiromi and Asabuki Ryōji. I hope the chapters to follow will open up new territory and lead to further exploration by both scholars and readers in the West.