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"What is Poetry?": Between Distant Reading and Conceptual History in Modern Japanese Poetry and Poetics

Scott Mehl

The present essay arose from an inquiry that, on the face of it, might have had a brief and straightforward resolution. First, the immediate impetus. A reading of Yoshimasu Gōzō's 吉増剛造 (b. 1939) recent text *Shi towa nani ka* 詩とは何か (What is poetry?, 2021)] reminded me of another book of the same title by a different author: Shimaoka Shin's 嶋岡晨 (b. 1932) *Shi towa nani ka* 詩とは何か (1998). Both books are nonfiction studies of poetry, albeit with altogether different approaches and different evidentiary archives. (I return to both texts below.) The question posed in the identical titles of these two books—what is poetry?—is somewhere between pointless and indispensable. Poets and readers of poetry will find the subject centrally important, while readers who treat poetry as a minor literary form are likely to leave books such as Yoshimasu's and Shimaoka's unexamined. Even some poetry aficionados may view a question about the whatness of poetry as being unanswerable in any satisfactory way: the responses, as one might argue, reveal more about the answerer than about the question being posed.

Still, the writers who have written books or articles that ask directly *what poetry is* have included major figures, Yoshimasu and Shimaoka among them. The very fact that Yoshimasu was returning to a question that Shimaoka had raised more than twenty years earlier piqued my interest: how often has *shi towa nani ka* been used as a title? What I found, in short, is that works by many other Japanese writers—hundreds of them—have taken up the question *shi towa nani ka* in one form or another. (The question has had many variations, as will be shown below.) Part of this essay, then, will be a presentation of my findings—a critical overview, which, given the sheer volume of material, will necessarily be selective

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and much abbreviated for reasons of space. There are also, I believe, methodological reflections to be raised about an inquiry such as this one: it is not a project in distant reading, nor is it a concept history in any usual sense of those terms, yet it resonates with both methodologies. The essay concludes with some observations about the viability of applying distant reading techniques to conceptual history.

Opening Observations

I wish to begin with a description of the search process. First, for pragmatic reasons, I began my research in the online database of the National Diet Library of Japan (NDL). The landing page for searches at the NDL was given a new look in January 2024, but the protocol for use remains largely the same as before.[1] Now, a keyword search for the phrase *shi towa nani ka* (without spaces in Japanese: 詩とは何か) yields various results: the phrase might appear in the title of an item (book or article), or in the title of a book chapter, or in the more extended description of an item (*yōyaku nado* 要約等 or "summary, etc."; *chosha shōkai* 著者紹介 or "author description"; *naiyō shōmoku* 内容細目 or "detailed contents"—three fields that are sometimes included in a book's catalog record).[2] I chose to record any result for which the phrase *shi towa nani ka* appeared in a title (of a book; of a chapter; of an article, etc.); but I disregarded any item for which the phrase *shi towa nani ka* appeared *only* in the extended description, which may have been provided by someone other than the author—for example, the publisher.[3] This was, arguably, an arbitrary decision, but it resulted in the elimination of only a relatively small number of results.

One thing that became apparent immediately was that the question *shi towa nani ka* returned results that were, in the aggregate, more recent than I expected: the earliest result dated to 1912. This was a reminder, if one were needed, that the phrase *shi towa nani ka* would be formulated differently in an early-modern speech register: for example, *shi towa nanzo ya* 詩とは何ぞや. That modified form of the search string yields results from as early as 1897.[4]

It also quickly became clear, unsurprisingly, that orthography matters. For example, a search for 詩とは何か yields results that are distinct from those for the also-useful search string 詩とはなにか, with the ideograph 何 spelled as the hiragana なに. The total number of search results for *what is poetry*, in two different orthographies and two formulations distinguished by stylistic register, is presented in Table 1.

Search string	Number of results
詩とは何ぞや	51
詩とはなんぞや	1
詩とは何か	294
詩とはなにか	113
TOTAL	459

TABLE 1: Number of search results for *shi towa nani ka* in varying orthographies and stylistic registers
As of June 2026. At this stage, no attempt was made to remove duplicate results.

The results of my search in the NDL's database suggest that over two hundred different writers have been listed as authors—I include translators—of at least one work, of whatever length (as short as one page, as long as a monograph), that includes some version of the question *what is poetry* in the work's title or table of contents as represented in the database.[5] Since the material at the NDL was so plentiful, I searched no further—a decision that I comment on in the concluding paragraphs of the essay. I summarize the results of my searches in the Appendix, a year-by-year list of titles, authors, places of publication, and other information.[6] The Appendix materials can be accessed at this URL: https://jll.pitt.edu/ojs/JLL/article/view/443/759.

Second, an observation about frequency. Texts with the title *What is poetry?* or a variant, whether as the title of a single subsection or of the entire text, were not numerous before World War II but became more so in the postwar period, peaking in the 1960s. This observation is about what we might call absolute frequency; it has no bearing on the *relative* frequency of such texts, i.e., relative to "total number of titles published" or the like.

1890-1899	2
1900-1909	9
1910-1919	4
1920-1929	8
1930-1939	13
1940-1949	8
1950-1959	42
1960-1969	69

1970-1979	46
1980-1989	34
1990-1999	30
2000-2009	27
2010-2019	51
2020-	22

TABLE 2: Number of texts per decade
As of June 2026. Results have been scrubbed of duplicates (multiple records for the same text from different libraries in the NDL's network).

Survey of Japanese Critics' and Scholars' Responses to the Question "What is Poetry?"

Now, to be clear, I am not asserting that these searches have identified an *earliest* text to raise a question of the form *what is poetry*, or even anything close to a *complete* set of texts that pose the question, because the search results are identifying only those texts that meet two conditions: (1) a title of the text or one of its subsections (or part of its extended bibliographic information) includes the phrase *shi towa nani ka* (or a variant); and (2) that information has been accurately entered into the database and thus discovered by the search algorithm. To uncover a notionally complete corpus, every word of every text would need to be made searchable, without errors. That ideal database does not now exist. Furthermore, every useful search string would need to be known in advance; such completeness is unattainable.

However, based on the results for the present study, one can say that the earliest texts to elevate a question of the form *what is poetry* to a title position—namely, the title of the whole text, or of a chapter or other subsection—probably date to the late nineteenth century. [7] The chronologically earliest dated result that my researches uncovered was Noguchi Neisai's 野口寧斎 (1867–1905) *Shōnen shiwa* 少年詩話 (Talks on poetry for young people, 1897), which begins with a chapter titled "Shi towa nanzoya" 詩とは何ぞや (What is poetry?)—the more classical-sounding formulation of the question.[8] (The phrase *shi towa nani ka*, in a more modern stylistic register, is attested as early as 1912.[9]) Noguchi's use of the question as a chapter title, early in an expository text, is a paradigmatic instance: writers who are addressing a presumptively wide, non-specialist audience may introduce a topic by using the interactive, dialogic rhetoric of the question *What is* x*?* rather than the more lapidary, off-puttingly authoritative rhetoric of *The definition of* x or other such headings.[10]

There are also writers who pose the question "What is poetry?" with a markedly different rhetorical intent: they raise the question only to dismiss it. The second section of the novelist and poet Moriyama Kei's 森山啓 (1904–1991) book about proletarian poetry is titled "Concerning the question 'what is poetry?'" ("'Shi towa nani ka' to iu koto ni tsuite" 「詩とは何か」と云ふことについて), an expression that in its very construction signals a self-reflexive approach. Moriyama admitted his skepticism about the utility of the question *what is poetry*: he observed that, for many proletarian poets, "We began writing poetry without knowing what poetry was."[11] The very idea that poetry can be defined was, in Moriyama's view, a bourgeois misconception. "Among bourgeois poet-scholars, there are even those who have written books that try to hand down a definition of poetry," Moriyama continues, "but that [subject] is, from our [i.e., proletarian writers'] point of view, uninteresting."[12] The inutility of the definition was proven, for Moriyama, by the fact that "[i]t sometimes even happens that comrades who know nothing about the definition of poetry write superlative poems."[13]

Stepping back, one may categorize the texts on the theme *what is poetry* by their evidentiary archives. To return to Noguchi Neisai's 1897 text, that study began by considering the ancient poetry of China, Japan, and Europe (represented by Homer). Notably, though, the rest of the text is about poetry *in Chinese*, because at the time most readers in Japan understood the word *shi* 詩 to refer to Chinese poetry (whether by poets in China or Japan). It was only later in the history of Japanese discourses about poetry—by roughly the second decade of the twentieth century—that the word *shi* came to be more widely understood as meaning versified verbal creations, regardless of language or era.[14] As for Moriyama, his study focused almost exclusively on the poetry of Japan. Most of the monoglot studies of *shi towa nani ka* have been, unsurprisingly, about Japanese poetry. Still other studies, as we will see, have approached the question *what is poetry* at levels of greater generality, with an aim to describe all texts that might be denominated poems.

The point about the scope of the question *what is poetry* is worth expanding upon briefly, because important facts about Japanese poetics can be inferred from the answers. While a shift from "*shi* = verse in Chinese" to "*shi* = verse broadly conceived" occurred in the first half of the twentieth century, that shift was never conclusive: *kanshi* 漢詩 or verses in Chinese (literary Sinitic), as they came to be called when *shi*'s definition changed, are still being composed and remain objects of

readerly enjoyment and scholarly study.[15] Even in the first decades of the twenty-first century, the word *shi* in certain contexts might still refer to *kanshi*, if that is a writer's subject.[16] However, the fact that the word *shi* was radically redefined might explain how the question *shi towa nani ka* gained momentum in the first place.

Among those studies that were written after *shi*'s transition to being the widely accepted term for *verse in general*, one may observe, as I mentioned, a broad division into two camps: those studies that are primarily about Japanese poetry, and those that are comparative. But even studies about Japanese poetry tend to emphasize longer lyric forms (free verse, for example), while downplaying the shorter, fixed forms such as haiku and tanka. Shimaoka Shin's 1998 *Shi towa nani ka*, which I mentioned above, is a history of modern Japanese poetry or *gendaishi* 現代詩, as the book's foreword proclaims; Shimaoka's historical account begins in the late 1800s and covers the twentieth century.[17] Being a history of modern Japanese lyric verse, Shimaoka's *Shi towa nani ka* does occasionally allude to haiku and tanka, but only when those forms are immediately germane to a specific longer lyric (for example, via in-poem citation). On this point, I might observe, as a first-order approximation, that most poets choose one poetic form as a specialization—either haiku or tanka or the longer lyric—as the form of verse in which they will hone their artistry.[18] This penchant for formal specialization appears also in writings on the theme *what is poetry*. Now, the questions *what is tanka* and *what is haiku* have also been themes for critical reflection—and there is no reason to presume that studies of tanka or haiku would address the history of other, longer forms of verse *in extenso*. (For a comparison of search results for *shi towa nani ka*, *tanka towa nani ka*, and *haiku towa nani ka*, see Table 3.)

Query: What is…	Number of results
詩	459
歌	237
句	119

TABLE 3. Comparison of results about 詩、歌、句
As of June 2026, without scrubbing for duplicate results. (The endnote explains the various spellings of the search queries.)[19]

While I intend to defer the reflections on methodology for later in this

paper, I will note here an incidental feature of the search results: in some results, the search string was, as it were, a *stem* or *lemma* to which other significant text was prefixed or suffixed. For example, in the text by Moriyama mentioned above, the phrase *shi towa nani ka* appeared as *'shi towa nani ka'*, with quotation braces before and after, sequestering the phrase from its surroundings: this is symptomatic of Moriyama's approach to poetry. In other cases, *shi* is the final element in a longer word: for example, a search for *shi towa nani ka* locates texts in which the question is actually phrased as *shintaishi* 新体詩 (new-style poetry) *towa nani ka*, *kindaishi* 近代詩 (modern poetry) *towa nani ka*, and many other variants, as shown in Table 4. For present purposes, I acknowledged the relevance of all such results.

in Japanese	transliteration	translation	as early as *year*
叙景詩	jokeishi	landscape poetry	1902
新體詩	shintaishi	new-style poetry	1912
散文詩	sanbunshi	prose poetry	1918
自由詩	jiyūshi	free-verse poetry	1927
兒童自由詩	jidō jiyūshi	children's free-verse poetry	1927
浪漫詩	rōmanshi	romantic poetry	1928
古詩	koshi	old *shi* (a type of *kanshi*)	1936
現代詩	gendaishi	contemporary poetry	1937
新しい詩	atarashii shi	new poetry	1938
漢詩	kanshi	Chinese poetry	1942
近代詩	kindaishi	modern poetry	1952
国民詩	kokuminshi	national poetry	1952
よい詩	yoi shi	good poetry	1957
真の詩	makoto no shi	true poetry	1957
抒情詩	jojōshi	lyric poetry	1957
英詩	eishi	English poetry	1957
劇詩	gekishi	dramatic poetry	1958
二流の詩	niryū no shi	minor poetry	1960

戦後詩	sengoshi	postwar poetry	1968
具体詩	gutaishi	concrete poetry	1968
風刺詩	fūshishi	satirical poetry	1971
非詩	hishi	non-poetry	1976
少年詩	shōnenshi	poetry by young people	1992
映像の詩	eizō no shi	poetry of images	1996
名詩	meishi	famous poetry, "classics"	1996
翻訳不可能な詩	hon'yaku fukanōna shi	untranslatable poetry	1996
日系日本語詩	nikkei nihongo shi	poetry in Japanese by people of Japanese descent	2002
日本語の詩	nihongo no shi	poetry in Japanese	2007
アジアの詩	ajia no shi	Asian poetry	2009
機会詩	kikaishi	occasional poetry	2010
唐詩	tōshi	Tang-dynasty poetry	2010
口誦させる詩	kuchizusameru shi	singable poetry	2011
句題詩	kudaishi	*shi* based on *ku* from another poem	2016
プロレタリア詩	puroretaria shi	proletarian poetry	2018
2000 年代詩	2000 nendai shi	poetry of the [first decade of the] 2000s	2018
英雄叙事詩	eiyū jojishi	heroic epic poetry	2021
口誦詩	kōshōshi	oral [recitation] poetry	2021

TABLE 4. List of expanded poetry types to which the phrase *towa nani ka* is added
As of June 2026.

As a matter of modern poetry history, the most important essay on the theme *what is poetry* is probably Ayukawa Nobuo's 鮎川信夫 (1920–1986) "What is contemporary poetry?" (Gendaishi towa nani ka), which has been often reprinted and anthologized. The first version of "What is contemporary poetry?" appeared in the periodical *Ningen* 人間 in 1949;[20] Ayukawa expanded the essay in *Arechi shishū* 荒地詩集 in 1951.[21] *Arechi* ("waste land") was a coterie magazine that had a brief run before World War II, went on hiatus due to wartime exigencies, and then resumed after the war for a small number of additional issues.[22] The Arechi poets were

too numerous and diverse to treat summarily, but Ayukawa has sometimes been viewed as a spokesperson for that influential group of postwar poets, and therefore I will briefly recapitulate his essay.

The title of Ayukawa's "What is contemporary poetry?" was perhaps misleading, since it was most centrally concerned with two related matters: the obligations of poets, and the situation of poets in the present era (*gendai*). Ayukawa's essay may in fact be seen as one entry among many in the postwar debate over literary authors' wartime responsibility (*sensō sekinin* 戦争責任). According to Ayukawa, during the prewar years, Japanese poets had treated poetry as a vehicle for emotive self-expression—a tendency that conduced to (what Ayukawa viewed as) the poets' tenuous grasp on the larger social situation.[23] "The antiquated lens of the individual," Ayukawa claimed, "can in no way enable a clear view of contemporaneity."[24] The poet's duty, Ayukawa maintained, is to reflect reality clearly; the reason why Arechi poetry was perceived as "dark" was that "it look[ed] directly at the facts of contemporary life."[25] In other words, for Ayukawa, the best contemporary poetry was not the work of poets who were enamored of their own subjectivity but was rather oriented toward social concerns. Ayukawa's essay was already being excerpted in anthologies within a few years of its publication.[26]

Ayukawa's "What is contemporary poetry?" focused on the titular *contemporary* poetry by poets alive in the early 1950s: Japanese poets—Arechi poets, mainly—such as Tamura Ryūichi 田村隆一 (1923–1998), Kuroda Saburō 黒田三郎 (1919–1980), and Nakagiri Masao 中桐雅夫 (1919–1983); as well as English-language poets such as T. S. Eliot, C. Day-Lewis, and W. H. Auden. But an essay published by Ayukawa a few years later, titled "What is poetry? On Kōtarō, Sakutarō, and Junzaburō" (1955), centered on those three Japanese poets (Takamura Kōtarō, Hagiwara Sakutarō, and Nishiwaki Junzaburō), despite the apparently greater generality announced in the essay's title.[27] The 1955 essay actually gave less attention to the three poets' poetry than to their criticism: in the concluding paragraphs of the essay, Ayukawa observed that the most direct way to determine *what poetry is* is to compare a poet's critical writings with their poetry.[28] So the verb tense of the title question, as Ayukawa claimed, needs to be revised: the question should be rather what poetry *was* or *has been*—past tense, in either case—for any given poet.[29]

One intriguing trait of the writings on the theme *what is poetry* in the aggregate is that, as far as I have been able to determine, they make no attempt at building a cumulative discourse. A text on *what poetry is* will,

in most cases, make no reference to any prior writing on that theme, as if the question about poetry's definition were being posed for the first time. A signal example of this phenomenon would be Ayukawa Nobuo's own multiple writings about what poetry is: his 1955 essay "Shi towa nani ka" makes no allusion to any earlier writing of that title; it alludes to few critical writings of any sort. It does not even refer to Ayukawa's own 1951 essay "Gendaishi towa nani ka." There are many possible reasons why a writer might wish to avoid self-reference, so perhaps other examples would be good to inspect. Take Yamamoto Kenkichi's 山本健吉 (1907-1988) essay "Shi towa nani ka" (1965), published during the heyday of essays on the theme *what is poetry*. In that essay, Yamamoto kept the focus squarely on the topic that concerned him: namely, what he perceived to be the paucity of good anthological work on Japanese poetry. Thus, his essay advocated the creation of a *shikashū* 詞華集, an anthology of exemplary poems in Japanese.[30]

Yamamoto's proposal seems absurd, because for centuries a primary mode of transmitting Japanese verse was the anthology, starting as early as the first millennium CE with indispensable collections such as *Man'yōshū* and *Kokinshū*. But what Yamamoto sought was a meta-anthology of the best Japanese poetry over the centuries—an anthology that would bring together a selection of poems, "giving [Japanese] citizens an overview of all that had been attempted in Japanese poetry and thereby giving them the confidence to attempt new poetry" of their own.[31] By Yamamoto's own admission, he was influenced by T. S. Eliot's understanding of poetic tradition: to add something new to the tradition of poetry in any language, a serious poet-practitioner must know that tradition deeply.[32] Yamamoto named such English-language selections as Palgrave's *Golden Treasury of English Songs and Lyrics* (originally 1861, but probably referring to the 1954 edition, selected by Cecil Day-Lewis), Gerald Bullett's *The English Galaxy of Shorter Poems* (1942), and an anthology of poems published by Oxford (probably referring to *The Oxford Book of English Verse* of 1900), as examples of the kind of florilegia that were not readily available in Japanese.[33] The aim of creating such an anthology in Japanese would be readerly pleasure and popular appeal—again, to inspire "confidence" in the Japanese tradition: "If what we want is to make poetry into something that the citizenry claim as their own, a single good [anthology] would be more meaningful than a hundred scholarly studies."[34] Yamamoto's essay then surveys the types of poetry he would include in such an anthology, taking as a through-line the Japanese

poetry that is most "self-aware" (*jikaku* 自覚) of its place within a continuous poetic tradition.[35] Ironically, in this essay Yamamoto himself evinced no self-awareness about the resonance, if only at the level of the title, between his essay and the (by 1965) dozens of other, similarly-titled critical texts: even as he advocated the construction of a continuous self-aware poetic tradition, he seemed uninterested in the possibility that criticism, too, might have such a tradition.

Here one must acknowledge, though, that methods shape results. Is a database search skewed toward a certain outcome? Every method has its blind spots which are, unsurprisingly, sometimes discovered only after a method has been applied widely enough for problematic anomalies to arise. But every method also has its regions of sharpest focus: the opposite of blind spots, these regions seem important because every object that appears in them looks maximally clear. That clarity is merely an incidental feature of the lens being used. Is the present investigation—a search using a database—scrutinizing too closely a phrase that, after all, poetry critics and scholars would be likely to use? I have claimed that, overall, the search results that I have uncovered do not build intertextual connections: there is no school of *shi towa nani ka* that unfolds over generations, revisiting earlier arguments and refining or refuting them. Should that be surprising? The fact that the various texts are all results of a database search makes them *seem* connected—which in one sense they are, because they share a trait, namely, their use of the phrase *shi towa nani ka* has been logged in a given database. But it might be an error to expect additional connections, connections that the tools being used here might not be designed to discover.

Perhaps the question *what is poetry?* is so fundamental that a poetry critic who poses it might see no need to mention that others have already raised the subject in a rhetorically similar way. (And simply reiterating the question might already qualify as an allusion, a veiled one perhaps, to scholarly or critical precursors.) Certainly it is possible to object to the very form of the question *what is* X, as the comparatist Izutsu Toshihiko 井筒俊彦 (1914–1993) has done. Izutsu faults the "what is" formulation on semantic and philosophical grounds: "the correct answer, to the What-is-X? question is to give the ontological essence of X, which is in fact simply inexistent in the sense intended"[36]—this in a discussion of how "unfortunate it was for the history of Western Philosophy that it began, so to speak, with the Socratic question of the form 'What is X?'"[37]

As I mentioned above, many texts on the theme *what is poetry* pitch

the discussion at a general level, ranging freely across eras, cultures, and literatures. Yoshimoto Takaaki's 吉本隆明 (1924–2012) essay "Shi towa nani ka" (1961) proposed a theory of poetic expression that aimed for generality.[38] Against writers such as the Japanese poet Hagiwara Sakutarō 萩原朔太郎 (1886–1942) and the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, Yoshimoto argued that a poem must refer to actual conditions (*jitsujōkyō*) in some explicit way.[39] The question of how poetry relates to reality then occupies much of the rest of the essay. Yoshimoto approached that question by examining different accounts of the origin of language. One account, that of Orikuchi Shinobu 折口信夫 (1887–1953), posits that language arose from a human need for expressing emotions; while another, that of Georgi Plekhanov (1856–1918), holds that language arose because it was a useful survival tool. Yoshimoto maintained that both models need to be combined, because language combines aspects of what he called *jiko hyōgen* 自己表現 or self-expression (language that emotively describes a speaker's interiority) and *shiji hyōgen* 指示表現 or indicative expression (language whose primary function is referential). By extension, every accurate account of poetry, Yoshimoto asserted, must account for the tension or inconsistency (*mujun* 矛盾) between these two aspects of language.[40]

Readers who are familiar with Yoshimoto's work in the mid-1960s will see that this 1961 essay anticipates the theoretical apparatus that Yoshimoto would eventually expound in the two-volume *Gengo ni totte bi towa nani ka* (1965), the title of which may be translated as *What is beauty for language?* or *What is beauty with respect to language?*[41] That text is too far-ranging for closer examination here, but it, too, may be considered an entry, albeit an indirect one, in the roster of texts on the theme *what is poetry*. The title *Gengo ni totte bi towa nani ka* is, I claim, a variation on the phrase *shi towa nani ka*: the word *poetry* has been reconceived and generalized as *beauty with respect to language*. The title of the later (1965) work announces Yoshimoto's theoretical ambition, in effect, by advertising his simultaneous investments in aesthetic theories (*bi*) and linguistic models (*gengo*) alike.[42] The problems that Yoshimoto was exploring in the 1965 text, however, had already been articulated in the 1961 essay with the more straightforward title.

The above summary of Yoshimoto's 1961 essay mentioned the poet Hagiwara Sakutarō, whose 1928 study *Shi no genri* (*Principles of Poetry*) also theorized poetry broadly conceived, drawing on works by Japanese and European poets. Like many theorists in the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries, Hagiwara viewed poetry, and the arts more generally, as having *form* and *content*. The first chapter of *Shi no genri* is titled "Shi towa nanzoya," and establishes that the question can be answered "either in terms of form or content."[43] However, for Hagiwara, any approach that fails to address both poles of the form-content binary will fall short; therefore, in Hagiwara's study, "The discussion is organized in such a way as to have the face of content reflected in the mirror of form."[44] It bears observing that Hagiwara's text, however, is itself formally bifurcated, with the first half of the book treating content and the second half treating form: discerning the "reflection" of content in form is a task for Hagiwara's reader to undertake.[45]

Then there is Yoshimasu Gōzō's *Shi towa nani ka*, which I mentioned at the outset. It, too, takes a broadly comparative view of poetry, in support of its central assertion that "a 'poem' thus 'arises' only by way of 'sound' or 'voice.'"[46] The concept of *voice* is central to Yoshimasu's understanding of poetry and underwrites his widely allusive approach.[47] The works of artists as varied as Emily Dickinson, J. S. Bach, Paul Klee, Paul Celan, Li Bai, Ishimure Michiko, Franz Kafka, Vincent Van Gogh, and Louis Armstrong all come in for consideration as vocal productions. As the list of names just given suggests, Yoshimasu's elastic understanding of *voice* applies to media such as jazz music and painting, not just poetry: this level of generality far exceeds that attempted by the likes of Hagiwara and Yoshimoto.

"What is Poetry?" as a Topic of Poetry

The question *shi towa nani ka* is evergreen in modern Japanese poetry criticism, but poets, too, have written verses on the theme *shi towa nani ka*. In a poem of that title by Chong Sungbak (Chon Sunbaku 鄭承博, 1933–2001), a wandering poet named Kim Sakkat 金笠 (based on the historical poet of that name, 1807–1863) enters a village, where one of the villagers asks:

> if even a beggar like you can make a poem
> then it must be something we can make too
> so can you tell us
> what the hell poetry is?[48]

To the people there assembled listening to him, Kim answers that one need only speak and one's utterance will be poetry. Thereupon, a man who has been listening challenges the poet, saying, "If that's so, then is it a poem /

even if I say just ‘stone, stone, tree, tree’?” Kim replies, “O! That’s an excellent poem. / Here there are only stones and trees.”[49] The title of the poem refers, clearly enough, to the question posed by the character within the poem; but the whole poem itself can be read as an answer, in a sense, to the title question.[50]

The prolific poet and critic Ōoka Makoto 大岡信 (1931–2017) titled one of his poetry collections *Shi towa nani ka* (1985). That collection begins with a section titled “Shi towa nani ka,” which includes twenty-four numbered poems, all titled “Shi towa nani ka,” some with subtitles. The first poems in the section are quite brief, such as the following:

> What is Poetry?—2
> it’s not
> child’s play
> but the poet
> is a child[51]

This is the second of the twenty-four poems titled “Shi towa nani ka.” The general trend of the whole sequence is toward greater complexity and length. For example, the first sixteen of the poems are all between three and ten lines in length; poem 20 is sixty lines long, while poem 22 is twenty-eight lines long. The final poem, poem 24, is twenty lines long plus twelve lines of endnotes in verse. Poem 2, quoted just above, includes an explicit reference to “the poet,” and seems an answer to the title question. However, not all of the poems are so straightforwardly referential, as seen in Poem 8, here translated in its entirety:

> polishing a sharp blade of grass
> the faint illumination of my palm
> the darkness is still complete[52]

Each poem is being presented, potentially, as an instantiation of *what poetry is*. It is significant, too, that by producing so many instances the poet is implicitly asserting that the answer may be multiple in nature.[53]

Fujii Sadakazu 藤井貞和 (b. 1942), a scholar of classical *monogatari* and a poet, wrote a poem titled “Utaawase: shi towa nani ka” (Poetry contest: what is poetry?), which echoes an essay that he had published many years earlier on the question *hishi towa nani ka*—meaning “what is non-poetry?” An *utaawase* 歌合せ is a contest in which poets or teams of poets write *waka* (sometimes also called *uta*), and a judge or judges decide

the winner; *utaawase* contests arose during the Heian period and would have originally occurred in aristocratic social contexts. Fujii's poem has six parts—five exchanges between two teams, left and right, plus the judge's summation. The poems exchanged are brief free-verse poems, not *uta*, although there are lines that conspicuously resonate with the 5-7 prosody of formal Japanese verse. These poems comment on the sources of poetry, naming various objects and events, sometimes elliptically and sometimes explicitly offering answers to the question *what is poetry*. The text concludes:

> in truth, the old lady,
> the bed cover [*kakebuton*] and the pleasing meter,
> the future-orientedness and the laptop keyboard,
> each in its own way was a poem [*shi*], if only for a moment.
> each of them, secretly, something that makes you want to sing [*utaitai*], perhaps.[54]

As mentioned, the poem recycles ideas that Fujii had explored as early as his 1976 essay on non-poetry. In that essay, which intriguingly took *uta* in a literal sense as *song* (rather than *waka*), Fujii compared *gendaishi* or contemporary free-verse poetry with contemporary popular music and concluded that "pop music [*kayōkyoku* 歌謡曲]…surpasses the 'song' to which contemporary poetry aspires."[55]

Some poets have taken *shi towa nani ka* as a theme for humorous reflection or wordplay. Hirata Toshiko 平田俊子 (b. 1955) varies the question, asking not *what* poetry is but rather *whether* something is poetry or not. Her formulation of the question, though, is a pun: the phrase *shi nanoka*, so pronounced, can mean "Is it poetry?" or "Poem, seventh day of the month," depending on how it is written. In her poem "The Seventh of August" the final stanza begins, 「詩なのか」（詩七日）といいながら *'shi nanoka' (shi nanoka) to iinagara*, which juxtaposes one spelling of the phrase *shi nanoka* with another spelling, in parentheses, of that same phrase.[56] A literal translation of the line would read something like, "Titling it [or saying] 'Is it Poetry?' (Poetry, Seventh Day of the Month)." The repetition of the syllables *shi nanoka* can make the question seem urgent or insistent; but the striking and comical difference between the written renderings of those syllables undermines the topic's urgency, thereby deftly illustrating one function of poetry—self-reference that can be self-canceling—that would defy critical exposition. I would say that, for Hiraoka as for the other poets that I have mentioned in this section, one

reason to take a metapoetic approach, describing poetry *in poetry*, is to underscore the limitations of critical discourse.

Conclusions on Method: Distant Reading and Conceptual History

The foregoing survey has been written with two methodologies in view: distant reading and conceptual history. Yet, as I understand those methodologies, the present essay is neither a distant reading nor is it a conceptual history. I will comment about each negation in turn.

Projects in distant reading are distinguished by the dimension of their archives, or by the reliance on computational algorithms, or both. Grappling with large data sets is a forte of distant reading, and a working knowledge of statistics is indispensable. The use of computer-aided visualizations for representing relationships (e.g., networks of connections between journals and authors) is another area where important work has been done, not least in the field of Japanese literary studies.[57] But the present study has made no use of statistical methods, nor does its evidentiary archive seem massive. About the latter point, a sorites question may be raised: at what number of data points does a data set become large? In a number of valuable studies, scholars have reflected on the difference between macro-scale analysis, meso-scale analysis, and micro-scale analysis.[58] The present essay is not a close reading, exactly—it is not an extended contextualization and analysis of a single text nor of a narrowly delimited corpus of texts—and so it is larger, I would say, than a micro-scale analysis. Its scope is broader than that of a close reading. Is it therefore a meso-scale analysis? I think the number of texts implicated in this study is not high enough to qualify as meso-scale, but I also cannot say with any certainty what the meso-scale number should be in this case.

The implicit stance toward content is an important factor. Instead of, or in addition to, reading the texts, it would be possible to scan the three-hundred-odd search results and convert them into searchable text using optical character recognition (OCR) software or other means. With that large textual corpus, a researcher could compute word frequencies, co-occurrence, and so forth, to discern features that might otherwise escape a reader's notice. I have just mentioned OCR, and I should add that since 2021, the NDL has been using OCR to convert its digitized holdings into searchable text. In 2023, the NDL launched its Ngram Viewer feature, which enables users to do text searches in its digitized holdings, as well as create visualizations automatically.[59] There is also Aozora Bunko, an

online database of now (mid-2026) over seventeen thousand works of literature, nearly all of them in the public domain, that have been transcribed and uploaded by volunteers. Aozora Bunko can be searched in various ways, including the Aozora Search app developed by Hoyt Long at the University of Chicago's Textual Optics Lab.[60] The present essay, with its attention to the titles of texts, has sensibly used the regular online search engine provided by the NDL; other tools, such as the just-mentioned Ngram Viewer or Aozora Search, could lead in other directions.[61]

One obvious limitation of the present study is that I searched only the database of the National Diet Library. Even if the database were a complete and perfect representation of the NDL's holdings, which it is not, that library itself does not hold every piece of print matter. For instance, the poet Niikuni Seiichi's 新国誠一 (1925–1977) essay "Gendaishi towa nani ka" appears in a 2019 anthology of Niikuni's works, *Niikuni Seiichi shishū*.[62] Therefore that 2019 anthology appeared as a result in my initial search. But the anthologized essay is a reprint: it was originally published in 1968 in the periodical *Bungei tōhoku* 文芸東北—which, as far as I can determine, does not appear among the NDL's holdings. Thus anyone using the NDL in the year 2018 or earlier would have needed to use tools other than the database to discover Niikuni's essay. Similarly, the poet Yamanoguchi Baku's 山之口貘 (1903–1963) essay "Shi towa nani ka," originally published in *Zensen shinbun* 全繊新聞 in 1958, surfaces in the NDL database only due to its inclusion in Yamanoguchi's collected works. The database shows that the NDL holds *Zensen shinbun*; but the database does not show the titles of the articles published in that newspaper.

To redress the seeming problem of database lacunae, one might be inclined to try a different, better database, or to draw on multiple databases and aggregate the results. That might indeed be a solution, for certain problems. But one should keep in mind the bias said to have been identified by the psychologist Abraham Maslow. To paraphrase Maslow: whoever has a hammer will perceive nails that need to be hammered. The impact of databases and search engines on research protocols has been pervasive in the twenty-first century. It would be premature, I think, to make evaluative claims: it is not my intention to state whether the ready availability of databases improves or worsens research outcomes, by whatever standard. What is clear is that databasification has altered the direction of research, although I believe more time will be needed to understand the nature of the alterations. (The addition of AI tools is likely

to represent another inflection point; notably, major library databases have tended not to incorporate AI in their search protocols, for now.) As the scholar Haun Saussy has recently observed, "What we choose to put in the archive will predetermine what we get out of it—and may predetermine it in unanticipated ways. Feedback is part of the game"—and the presence of feedback effects is too rarely acknowledged.[63] From students just beginning their studies to senior scholars just settling into retirement, everyone, it seems, has made the Internet a resource of first resort. I agree with the editors of a recent collection of essays on Japanese literature studies who assert that "it would be too easy to argue"—and therefore they do not argue—"that the Internet has [led] or will lead to the demise of literary study in general or Japanese literature in particular"; the editors even assert that the Web has helpfully boosted access to non-dominant genres and literary forms.[64] However, there is still an opening, I would say, for any scholar who would undertake a socio-anthropological study of the impact of digitization on humanistic scholarship: since the story would be about all of us, everyone would find it interesting.

If what one seeks is a comprehensive review of Japanese statements about poetics, a database can facilitate an initial search but nothing more than that. About the JSTOR article database, Lisa Gitelman wrote something that applies with equal accuracy to the database of the NDL: using it "must remain an encounter haunted by unknowns."[65] The search results based on the string *shi towa nani ka* include many crucial texts, but they also omit some enormously important ones, too, because so many writers seem to *avoid* posing the question *shi towa nani ka*. For example, Irisawa Yasuo's 入沢康夫 (1931–2018) *Shi no kōzō ni tsuite no oboegaki* (Notes on the structures of poetry, 1968) is an important modern Japanese study of poetics, but Irisawa would have found it anathema to imply that poetry could be defined.[66] Irisawa's study, too, went undetected.[67] I have already mentioned Yoshimoto Takaaki's *Gengo ni totte bi towa nani ka*, which similarly is not yielded as a search result for *shi towa nani ka*: Yoshimoto, as we have seen, had theoretical reasons to recast the word *shi* in terms of linguistics (*gengo*) and aesthetics (*bi*). Again, though, a researcher is likely to become familiar with landmark texts such as Irisawa's and Yoshimoto's by a method that is quite different from interaction with search engines—namely, by reading, and thereby building a mental library of texts important in one's field of study.

The present essay's relation to the methodologies of concept history is a little more difficult to tease out. Here is not the place for an in-depth

overview of the many schools of scholarship in the history of ideas: in English, there are the fields of historical semantics, the history of ideas, intellectual history, and conceptual history; in German, there are such fields as *Ideengeschichte* and *Begriffsgeschichte*. One may attempt a minute differentiation between these scholarly tendencies—as Elías J. Palti has usefully been doing[68]—but a detached view would uncover much family resemblance among them. In the twentieth century, conceptual historians tended to focus on units that could be expressed as single words: one might write a history of the concept of *freedom*, for example, or *money*. Now, there were also important exceptions. Take a study like the comparatist Leo Spitzer's history of the concept of the *milieu*, which draws on evidence in several languages and examines such related terms as *atmosphere*, *environment*, *medium* (as in the Spanish *medio ambiente*), *ambiance*, and others.[69] Borderline cases may also be found in studies of multi-word collocations: in recent decades, for instance, there have been several histories of the term *tertium quid*—the "third thing" or basis of a comparison.[70]

More immediately relevant for present purposes is a study such as Pierre Duhem's *To Save the Phenomena*, which is nominally a history of the phrase *sōzein ta phainomena* in European astronomy.[71] The fact that Duhem's study is the history of a phrase, not just a single word, sets it apart from most concept histories. Also noteworthy is that the phrase is not the true focus of Duhem's book: what Duhem is tracing is a history of hypothesis-based reasoning, with the through-line being provided by pivotal astronomy texts that use the technique of *saving the phenomena* for generating hypotheses.

The phrase *shi towa nani ka* is not a concept, I would say, but the uses of that phrase in poetry discourse have a history, the examination of which is assisted invaluably by recourse to a searchable database. The rhetoric of poetry criticism can be historicized, and—at least in the modern era—questions of the form *shi towa nani ka* have played a recurring role. One could regard the salience of the question *shi towa nani ka* as an epiphenomenon of publishing trends; it bears repeating that the phrase may seem handy for use as a title. Despite its interrogative grammar, *shi towa nani ka* seems to function as an indicative, signaling the topic *poetry* in general. The very generality of the phrase, however, might render it unhelpfully capacious.

I would wager that certain kinds of phrases would lend themselves to database searches more readily than others, but it would be only a wager.

In English, just for one example, the phrase "always historicize," which I associate with the literary critic Fredric Jameson, might form the basis of a useful study—one of a vertiginously meta-critical sort (historicizing the call to historicize). Scholars in other fields will be able to provide their own examples of phrases that attain currency, spoken and written, and become detached from their original contexts—"the heresy of paraphrase," "the looping effects of human kinds," "the personal is political" and the like. Other kinds of phrase, however, might be less amenable to keyword searching. The term *turn* has had a vogue in recent decades, as seemingly every new development is hailed as a *turn*—a formalist *turn*, a linguistic *turn*, and so on.[72] Given that the shared element in these phrases is a single word, and a common one at that, devising a suitable search algorithm might be technically difficult. Of course, during the decades when *turns* have had critical currency, copyright restrictions would limit one's corpus of searchable texts. The search itself, however, is imaginable, and the question is of potential interest to historians of literary and cultural criticism.

In closing, I would note that the use of distant reading in conceptual history appears to be in a nascent state. As recently as 2022, one could claim that "[t]he scholarship on digital concept analysis is small but developing rapidly," for instance.[73] One inhibiting factor is the difficulty of defining *concept* itself, as scholars attested long before distant reading came to prominence.[74] Another is the bagginess or polysemy of any given concept, as opposed to the potential specificity of a word search.[75] For the present paper, the recourse to a database was vital for establishing the topic's breadth; and the omissions or exclusions that I mentioned above were easy to compensate for by drawing upon a knowledge, as limited as mine is, of relevant topics in modern Japanese poetics. It should be emphasized that each methodological component of this paper—making tables, drawing upon databases, having a mental storehouse of remembered readings, analyzing poetry and critical texts closely—supplements the others and is supplemented by them; the intersection of all these techniques is the essential point. The method still admits of improvement, and it is gratifying to envision that techniques of distant reading will lead to developments in the historicization of concepts.

APPENDIX

The Appendix materials can be found at this URL: https://jll.pitt.edu/ojs/JLL/article/view/443/759.

NOTES

[1] In the initial search settings, one may choose to search the NDL, or "libraries throughout Japan" 全国の図書館, or both. One may also limit results to online sources. From the initial search window, a keyword search for the phrase 詩とは何か then delivers a list of outputs. These outputs, in turn, may be limited in a variety of ways: for example, by format (books, magazines, and so forth). One may also rank the outputs in any of several ways: by date of publication, by relevance, and so forth. Because chronology was important for my initial searches, I chose a chronological ordering by date of publication. I accepted results in all formats.

[2] It is not clear to me at present why the NDL's database includes descriptive information for some results but not others. In my recollection, descriptive information tends to be included for comparatively recent publications.

[3] I grant that titles, too, may reflect publishers' input rather than authors' preferences. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for emphasizing the point.

[4] Many other variations on the principal search strings are also possible. For example, truncating the question to *shi towa* 詩とは yields additional results that were potentially valuable. There are also other classical-sounding ways to pose the question: for example, *nani o ka shi to iu* 何をか詩といふ or other attested formulations. The present study makes no claim to completeness.

[5] "Over two hundred different writers" may seem fuzzy, but there are considerations that discourage proposing an exact number. For example, does every participant in a panel discussion (*zadankai* 座談会) on the question *what is poetry* "count" as an "author" of a work on the theme under investigation here? Translations, too, add complexity: should both the translator and the original author be counted, or only the translator, or only the original author? The topic merits further discussion: for example, Japanese translators sometimes impose a *shi towa nani ka* structure on an original title that has little to do with that question.

[6] https://jll.pitt.edu/ojs/JLL/article/view/443/759

[7] The present survey draws on texts no earlier than the Meiji period. However, poetry treatises from earlier eras also explicitly raised the question of what poetry is. One example is Motoori Norinaga's 本居宣長 (1730–1801) *Isonokami*

sasamegoto 石上私淑言 (1763), which begins: ある人問ひていはく、歌とはいかなる物をいふぞや. See Motoori Norinaga, *Ashiwake obune Isonokami sesamegoto: Norinaga 'mono no aware' karon*, with annotations by Koyasu Nobukuni (Tokyo: Iwanami, 2003), 157.

[8] There is one other result that is likely dated to the 1890s, as can be seen in the Appendix, but since its date is uncertain I focus attention on Noguchi's 1897 text.

[9] According to my findings in the NDL database, the modern form of the question, namely *shi towa nani ka*, appears as early as Ashiya Roson's 蘆谷蘆村 (1886–1946) *Waka haiku shintaishi shōhinbun shōnen sakuhō* (Tokyo: Ibunkan, 1912), which includes a chapter titled "Shintaishi towa nani ka" 新體詩とは何か, i.e., "What is *shintaishi*?"

[10] I hesitate to speculate about the origins of the question-answer structure as a means to present a topic. Certainly there are precursors—for example, Motoori Norinaga's *Ashiwake obune* (1756), a catechistic treatise on poetics. But earlier examples can also be found, such as Fujiwara no Kiyosuke's 藤原清輔 (1104–1177) *Ōgishō* 奥義抄, from the twelfth century CE. There might be much older precedents from the Asian continent, and these lie outside my specialization.

[11] Moriyama Kei, *Puroretaria shi no tame ni: igi, mondai no kentō, sahō* (Tokyo: Hakuyōsha, 1932), 9.

[12] Ibid., 9.

[13] Ibid., 9–10.

[14] For a recent summary of the transition in the nomenclature of *shi*, see Andrew Campana, *Expanding Verse: Japanese Poetry at the Edge of Media* (University of California Press, 2024), 3.

[15] Matthew Fraleigh usefully reprises the Meiji-era reaction to the neologism *kanshi*, including Noguchi Neisai's "angry dismissal of the recent neologism *kanshi*." See Matthew Fraleigh, "Taking Stock of a Tradition: Early Efforts to Write the History of Sinitic Poetry Expression in Japan," in *Rethinking the Sinosphere: Poetics, Aesthetics, and Identity Formation*, eds. Nanxiu Qian, Richard J. Smith, and Bowei Zhang (Amherst, New York: Cambria Press, 2020), 238.

[16] It is my impression that writers today will tend to specify *kanshi* rather than expecting a reader to interpret the word *shi* alone as meaning verse in Chinese. Take, for instance, Hirooka Morihiro's 廣岡守穂 (b. 1951) essay "Shi towa nani ka: bakumatsu no kanshi to meiji no shintaishi kara kangaeru," *Chūō Daigaku Seisaku Bunka Sōgō Kenkyūjo Nenpō* 21 (2017): 133–148. Hirooka's title

begins with the general question *shi towa nani ka*, but the subtitle then presents a bifurcation between *kanshi* and *shintaishi*.

[17] Shimaoka Shin, *Shi towa nani ka* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1998), [4] (unpaginated preface).

[18] I have not yet seen a persuasive account of this tendency toward formal specialization. And I immediately grant that there are dozens of exceptions, even famous ones—such as Ishikawa Takuboku 石川啄木 (1886–1912), who wrote tanka and *shi* but is known primarily for the former; Kitahara Hakushū 北原白秋 (1885–1942), whose output included *shi* and tanka; Ishimure Michiko 石牟礼道子 (1927–2018), who was known mainly as a prose writer but also wrote tanka and haiku of distinction; and Takahashi Mutsuo 高橋睦朗 (b. 1937), who is known mainly for his longer lyric poems but has been writing tanka and haiku for many decades. However, such exceptions, even dozens of them, are still in the minority, to be seen against a backdrop of single-form poets in their hundreds. My preferential reading habits might be causing me to overlook important evidence to the contrary, and I welcome correction.

[19] I searched for variants that accounted for different hiragana/kanji spellings and different stylistic registers for 歌 and 句 in manners similar to 詩 as spelled out in Table 1, with one wrinkle: since 歌 can be read as either *uta* or *ka* or *ga*, depending on its use, I included those hiragana spellings in the search strings. (I did not search for the *kai* of *haikai*.)

[20] Ayukawa Nobuo, "Gendaishi towa nani ka," *Ningen* 4.7 (1949): 36–43.

[21] Ayukawa Nobuo, "Gendaishi towa nani ka," *Arechi shishū 1951 shinsōban* (Tokyo: Kokubunsha, 1957), 130–198. Also available in *Ayukawa Nobuo chosakushū 2 (shiron 1)* (Tokyo: Shichōsha, 1973), 53–127.

[22] Karine Arneodo, "'Genzai,' Here and Now: Notes for a Reflection on the Values of the 'Present' in the Poetry of Tamura Ryūichi and Ayukawa Nobuo," in *Japan's Postwar*, ed. Michael Lucken, Anne Bayard-Sakai, and Emmanuel Lozerand and trans. J. A. A. Stockwin (London: Routledge, 2011), 121–143. For a recent dissertation on *Arechi*, see Justin Jack Robert Wilson, "Utopian Visions/Apocalyptic Anxieties: The Politics of Poetics in Postwar Japan" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California Los Angeles, 2025).

[23] Ayukawa 1973, 86.

[24] Ibid., 87.

[25] Ibid., 74.

[26] Ayukawa Nobuo, "Gendaishi towa nani ka," in *Gendai no shiron*, ed. Murano Shirō and Kinoshita Tsunetarō (Tokyo: Hōbunkan, 1954), 198–208.

[27] Ayukawa Nobuo, "Shi towa nani ka: Kōtarō, Sakutarō, Junzaburō ni tsuite," in *Gendaishi sakuhō* (Tokyo: Makino Shoten, 1955), 34–60.

[28] Ibid., 56.

[29] Ibid., 57.

[30] Yamamoto Kenkichi, "Shi towa nani ka," in *Bungaku nyūmon*, ed. Ara Masato (Tokyo: Shakai Shisō Sha, 1965), 202–221.

[31] Ibid., 207.

[32] Ibid., 202.

[33] Ibid., 206.

[34] Ibid., 206.

[35] Ibid., 203. Yamamoto's 1965 essay was a continuation of his earlier work on *self-awareness* (*jikaku*) in Japanese poetry: see Yamamoto Kenkichi, *Shi no jikaku no rekishi*, Nihon Bunka Kenkyū 9 (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1961).

[36] Izutsu Toshihiko, *Language and Magic: Studies in the Magical Function of Speech* (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Philological Studies, 1956), 67.

[37] Izutsu 1956, 66.

[38] Yoshimoto Takaaki, "Shi towa nani ka," *Shigaku* 16.8 (July 1961): 22–43.

[39] Ibid., 27.

[40] Ibid., 37.

[41] Yoshimoto Takaaki, *Gengo ni totte bi towa nani ka* (Tokyo: Keisō Shobō, 1965).

[42] For an explication of Yoshimoto's 1965 text, see Scott Mehl, "The Concept of Expression in Modern Japanese Poetics: Thought, Consciousness, Language" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 2013), 167–192. See also Patrick Noonan, *The Age of Disaffection: The Aesthetic Critique of Politics in 1960s Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2025), 52–70.

[43] Hagiwara Sakutarō, *Principles of Poetry*, trans. Chester C. I. Wang and Isamu P. Fukuchi (Ithaca: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 1998), 9. One widely available edition is the Shinchōsha paperback: Hagiwara Sakutarō, *Shi no genri* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1954), 17 for the corresponding Japanese of the quote given here.

[44] Hagiwara 1998, 10; Hagiwara 1954, 20.

[45] For more on Hagiwara's *Shi no genri*, see Scott Mehl, "Appropriations and Inventions: Hagiwara's Divided Poetics and James's Stream of Consciousness," *Japanese Language and Literature* 49.2 (2015): 269–276.

[46] Yoshimasu Gōzō, *Shi towa nani ka* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2021), 159.

[47] For more on Yoshimasu's text, see Campana 2024, 10–11.

[48] Chong Sungbak, "Shi towa nani ka," in *Zainichi korian shisenshū 1926–2004*, eds. Morita Susumu and Sagawa Aki (Tokyo: Doyō Bijutsukan Shuppan Hanbai, 2005), 74.

[49] Ibid., 74.

[50] I have not been able to determine whether Chong's poem is based on an incident in Kim's life, or even on a poem written by Kim. It is true that Kim himself wrote a 14-character poem about the stones and trees of a famous site (the poem is one of several titled 金剛山 and begins 松松柏柏岩岩廻). *Kimu Sakka shisen*, ed. Che Sogi 崔碩義, Tōyō Bunko 714 (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 2003), 71. Several of Kim's poems might almost be considered visual or concrete poems for their repetition of ideographs.

[51] Ōoka Makoto, *Shi towa nani ka* (Tokyo: Kōbunsha, 1985), 11.

[52] Ibid., 17.

[53] All but one of the poems titled "Shi towa nani ka" in Ōoka's collection are *lineated*: Ōoka's answer to the question, multiple as that answer is, may reside in formal considerations.

[54] Fujii Sadakazu, *Utsukushii koyumi o motte* (Tokyo: Shichōsha, 2017), 32.

[55] Fujii Sadakazu, "Uta/kotoba/nihonjin: hishi towa nani ka," *Kokubungaku kaishaku to kanshō* 41.15 (serial 534) (December 1976): 97. The term *kayōkyoku*, which I translate as "pop music," should be understood in a restricted sense: Fujii is alluding to a few specific genres of pop song. He notably focuses not on the singers but on the songwriters of the late Shōwa period (1926-1989).

[56] Hirata Toshiko, "Hachigatsu nanoka," in *Is It Poetry?*, trans. Eric E. Hyett and Spencer Thurlow (Dallas: Deep Vellum, 2024), 32.

[57] The works of Hoyt Long, sometimes in collaboration with Richard So and other authors, are indispensable in this regard: see especially Hoyt Long, *The Values in Numbers: Reading Japanese Literature in a Global Information Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021). In Japanese, see among others Hibi Yoshitaka 日比嘉高 (b. 1972), *Teikoku no shoten: shomotsu ga anda kindai nihon no chi no nettowāku* 帝国の書店―書物が編んだ近代日本の知のネットワーク (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2025).

[58] A useful (if brief) comment about meso-scale analysis is available at John Guillory, *On Close Reading* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2025), 71–72. Benjamin Mangrum summarizes Lev Manovich's statements about the

meaning of "big" in the phrase "big data." See Benjamin Mangrum, "Aggregation, Public Criticism, and the History of Reading Big Data," *PMLA* 133.5 (October 2018): 1222 note 3. Alison Booth has written about "mid-range reading" as a technique applicable to "a relatively small [*sic*] genre, some twelve hundred collections of brief female biographies by men and women, published primarily between 1830 and 1940." See Alison Booth, "Mid-Range Reading: Not a Manifesto," *PMLA* 132.3 (May 2017): 621. Franco Moretti should also be mentioned: in his own reflections on his 2013 essay collection *Distant Reading*, he observes that "only [one] piece […] includes work on a (medium-size) series" of texts. See Franco Moretti, "A Response," *PMLA* 132.3 (May 2017): 687. Famously, Moretti concludes a 2020 essay on distant reading with the assertion that "the middle road remains the only one that does not lead to Rome"—which, in context, is more (I would say) about methodology than about sample size, although these two features are related. See Franco Moretti, "The Roads to Rome," *New Left Review* 124 (2020): 136. In humanistic disciplines, it could be interesting to quantify the average number of works cited in essays versus monographs to determine whether distant reading techniques bring traditional (i.e., pre-digital methodology) monograph-sized evidentiary archives (or even larger) within reach of essay-length works.

[59] The NDL's Ngram Viewer may be accessed at https://lab.ndl.go.jp/ngramviewer/. A description of the Ngram Viewer is available at https://current.ndl.go.jp/en/e2533_en. It should be noted that, of all the NDL's holdings, only a relatively small proportion—still an enormous number of texts—has been digitized.

[60] The Aozora Search app is available via a link at https://textual-optics-lab.uchicago.edu/aozora. For recent work on Aozora using quantitative methods, see Long 2021, 69–127.

[61] Although not exactly about the use of search engines, Ted Underwood's study of keyword searches in large databases is stimulating. Ted Underwood, "Theorizing Research Practices We Forgot to Theorize Twenty Years Ago," *Representations* 127.1 (2014): 64–72. Underwood's oft-cited study is mentioned in Meredith Martin, *Poetry's Data: Digital Humanities and the History of Prosody* (Princeton University Press, 2025), 44 note 26.

[62] *Niikuni Seiichi shishū*, Gendaishi Bunko 243 (Tokyo: Shichōsha, 2019), 110–112.

[63] Haun Saussy, "Some Under Heaven: World Literature and the Deceptiveness of Labels," *Journal of World Literature* 9 (2024): 179.

[64] Seth Jacobowitz and Jonathan E. Abel, eds., *Modern Japanese Literary Studies* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2026), 12.

[65] Lisa Gitelman, "Searching and Thinking about Searching JSTOR," *Representations* 127 (Summer 2014): 80.

[66] For more about Irisawa's theory, especially as a rejoinder to Ayukawa's "Gendaishi towa nani ka," see Scott Mehl, "A Parody in the Ruins: A Translation of Irisawa Yasuo's *Waga Izumo, waga chinkon*," *Monumenta Nipponica* 72.1 (2017): 35–40.

[67] This claim must be qualified. The online catalog entry for a 2025 edition of Irisawa's text now includes in its extended description the phrase *shi towa nani ka*—and therefore this edition of Irisawa's study appears as a search result. But the earlier editions do not.

[68] Elías J. Palti, *Intellectual History and the Problem of Conceptual Change: Skinner, Pocock, Koselleck, Blumenberg, Foucault, and Rosanvallon* (Cambridge University Press, 2024) is an impressive history of intellectual history in its many schools. One area that Palti omits altogether is the field of historical semantics. Palti offers no reason for this omission, but I would surmise that historical semantics is too unpolitical, on the surface of it, for inclusion in a history of the politically oriented works of Skinner and Koselleck et al.

[69] Leo Spitzer, "Milieu and Ambiance," in *Essays in Historical Semantics* (New York: S. F. Vanni, 1948), 179–316.

[70] For histories of the *tertium quid* (sometimes rendered *tertium comparationis* in comparatist contexts), see Haun Saussy, "Comparisons, World Literature, and the Common Denominator," in *A Companion to Comparative Literature*, ed. Ali Behdad and Dominic Thomas (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 60–64; Ralph Weber, "Comparative Philosophy and the *Tertium*: Comparing What with What, and in What Respect?" *Dao* 13.2 (2014): 151–171; and Angelika Epple, Walter Erhart, and Johannes Grave, eds., *Practices of Comparing: Towards a New Understanding of a Fundamental Human Practice* (Bielefeld: Bielefeld University Press, 2020).

[71] Pierre Duhem, *To Save the Phenomena: An Essay on the Idea of Physical Theory from Plato to Galileo*, trans. Edmund Doland and Chaninah Maschler (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969). The French original was titled σῴζειν τὰ φαινόμενα: *essai sur la notion de théorie physique de Platon à Galilée* (Paris: A. Hermann et Fils, 1908).

[72] For *turns* in the field of international relations, see Jaakko Heiskanen and Paul Beaumont, "Reflex to Turn: The Rise of Turn-Talk in International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations* 30.1 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661231205694. International relations is certainly not the only field in which "turns" are frequently attested.

[73] Michael Boyden, Ali Basirat, and Karl Berglund, "Digital Conceptual History and the Emergence of a Globalized Climate Imaginary," *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 17.2 (Winter 2022): 98. Other papers in this area of inquiry include Jaap Verheul, Hannu Salmi, Martin Riedl, Asko Nivala, Lorella Viola, Jana Keck, and Emily Bell, "Using Word Vector Models to Trace Conceptual Change over Time and Space in Historical Newspapers, 1840–1914," *DHQ: Digital Humanities Quarterly* 16.2 (2022), at www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/16/20/000550/000550.html; and Peter de Bolla, Ewan Jones, Paul Nulty, Gabriel Recchia, and John Regan, "Distributional Concept Analysis: A Computational Model for History of Concepts," *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 14.1 (Summer 2019): 66–92.

[74] Surveys of the literature are available at Verheul et al., 2022, paragraph 4, and de Bolla et al., 2019, 67.

[75] Boyden et al., 2022, 109; de Bolla et al., 2019, 71.