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# Praying Hands: Poetry and Pictures in Sakutarō Hagiwara's *Howling at the Moon*

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## abstract

This paper discusses the correspondence of poems and pictures in the book of poems, *Howling at the Moon* (『月に吠える』, 1917), in which the poems of Sakutarō Hagiwara (萩原朔太郎) are accompanied by the illustrations of Kyōkichi Tanaka (田中恭吉) and the designs of Kōshirō Onchi (恩地孝四郎). This is achieved through an examination of the images of praying hands that appear frequently through the book. These images will first be compared with other Japanese images of praying hands and then their specific characteristics and meanings will be profiled. Although previous critics have appreciated the harmonious correspondence of poems and images in the book, this study finds there are clear differences between Sakutarō's praying hands, as expressed in his poetry, and those of Kyōkichi, expressed through images. In Sakutarō's poems, praying hands are notional or idealistic, frequently repeating useless movements, and touching is in vain, while Kyōkichi's illustrations of praying hands clearly express his wish to live longer and to transmigrate after death. This difference creates a tension for the viewers. It is suggested that Sakutarō's work expresses the anguish of young people in the modern era, while that of Kyōkichi expresses the human desire for eternal life and to be liberated from suffering. This study argues that this difference is apparent in how they express their artistic essence. Sakutarō said that he was a man of letters and that he "transcribed" his inspiration into written poems. It would appear that Sakutarō was less aware of the creative power of hands, while Kyōkichi used his hands extensively in his creative work because, as an artist, he also painted, carved, and made woodblockprints. Thus, two types of prayer are found in *Howling at the Moon*: one expresses the desire to escape from the worry and agony of the modern era, while the other illustrates the wish to live and to seek the divine and is based on a universal understanding of human nature. This study finds that the interaction and correspondence of poems and illustrations in the book creates conflict and tension, although with a subtle balance. *Howling at the Moon* is an elaborate artistic endeavor formed out of this very balance.

## Introduction: Images of praying hands

A famous Latin phrase says *Ut pictura poesis*, which literally means "as is painting, so is poetry". Poetry and pictures sometimes resemble each other. In our modern times, they can co-exist in a book or magazine (maybe even on a web page). We tend to think that the main body of a book is formed by the words and sentences. But the pictures, the illustrations, or even the design of the book, will

sometimes define how we read that literary work. Think about when you first read *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. I'm sure you still have John Tenniel's images in your mind; or when you recall reading *Salomé*, the images of Aubrey Beardsley will surely come to mind.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, especially in western countries, new movements in art and literature inspired one another. Books became the stage for interactions and correspondence between

art and literature. These western books and magazines were introduced into Japan, and we can identify their influence there.

This essay examines how poems and pictures interact in a Japanese book of poems, *Howling at the Moon* (1917), which contains Sakutarō Hagiwara's poems together with Kyōkichi Tanaka's illustrations and Kōshirō Onchi's designs. This essay focuses on the images of praying hands and analyzes the interaction between the poems and pictures in this book. Prayer is still meaningful today, and hands are central to the creation of art works. Indeed, we touch the world with our hands, and we transform our artistic inspiration into art works with our hands.

## 1. Modern prayer and hand



Figure 1. Kōtarō Takamura, *Hand*, 38.6×14.5×28.7cm, bronze, 1918  
The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo

Figure 1 shows a sculpture of a hand by the Japanese artist Kōtarō Takamura, made in 1918. He wanted to create an even greater sculpture than that of Auguste Rodin. This hand is modeled on one of Buddha's hands, namely, the Abhaya Mudra, which means "you don't need to be frightened, relax". The Abhaya Mudra is originally a right hand, however in Kōtarō's sculpture, it is a left hand. In addition, the thumb inclines backward and the middle finger is stretched out. The back of the hand is sinewy, and the sculpture's surface is rough. If you try to create this position with your own hand, you will realize that it takes special muscular effort to achieve it. As Kōichi Watanabe says, Kōtarō's hand represents a

human hand that is neither supernatural nor gentle like the Buddha's hand.<sup>1)</sup>

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Japan's official art education underwent extensive change. Kōtarō received this new art education and learned of the artistic movements in western countries. He showed both his artistic talent and his modern self-awareness through his art, and especially in his creation of modern sculptures. Kōtarō's sculpture of a hand represents both his self-realization and his admiration for human creativity. The sculpture declares his artistic inspiration in believing in himself, rather than in relaxing and protecting the watcher as the hands of Buddha do.

Kōtarō identifies himself as a sculptor. In his essays, he says that the most important sense is the sense of touch.<sup>2)</sup> For him, as well as for many other sculptors, hands are the fundamental organ by which to transform artistic inspiration into art works. Sculptors touch stone, wood, clay, and other materials directly with their hands. They feel the textures, the temperature, and the weight with their hands before they transform the raw materials into great artworks.

## 2. Praying hands in *Howling at the Moon*: Sakutarō's poems

Sakutarō Hagiwara, the author of *Howling at the Moon*, was a contemporary of Kōtarō Takamura. Sakutarō's poems had a new rhythm that was different from previous poems in Japan, and his poems express unique nuances of meaning through his words. *Howling at the Moon* is considered one of the first collections of Japanese colloquial free-verse poetry. The book includes 55 poems, some essays, and 11 illustrations by Kyōkichi Tanaka as well as three woodblock prints by Kōshirō Onchi. Sakutarō wanted to create a book like *Salomé* by Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley. He aimed to make his first

book of poems a collaboration of works by the poet, the illustrator, and the book designer. And, as he hoped, the book was much admired by many experienced poets and artists for the harmony of its poems and illustrations.

*Howling at the Moon* contains 22 descriptions of hands, indicating that hands are an important theme in this book. Previous studies have discussed several characteristics of these hands from a general perspective.<sup>3)</sup> First, Sakutarō describes hands as “metal that sends out light.” His images are of hands that are sick or damaged. One example that represents sickness is of hands that are divided like roots. Second, his hands are portrayed as moving without purpose, such as digging the ground recklessly or breaking a skylark’s egg. Third, the hands bring to the author erotic healings and cures. Fourth, his hands can be a container that holds lives. Finally, his hands also represent guilt and they pray for atonement or resolution. This last image of Sakutarō’s hands as expressing guilt is the most important for my discussion. Here Sakutarō’s interpretation of prayer is based on a sense of guilt and distress.

This is how he describes praying hands in two of his poems in *Howling at the Moon*:

Hands of Sentimentality – Sakutarō Hagiwara  
Translated by Hiroaki Satō 1978<sup>4)</sup>

My sex, its sentimentality,  
laments the numerous hands,  
the hands always dance overhead,  
gleam and grieve on the chest,  
but summer slowly weakens,  
returning, the swallows as soon leave their  
nests,  
and barley is cooled.  
Ah, oblivions of the city,  
I no longer play the Chinese fiddle,

my hands turn to steel,  
gloomily dig the earth,  
my pitiful hands of sentimentality dig the  
earth.

In this poem, “Hands of Sentimentality,” Sakutarō expresses a sense of guilt, although he had committed no crime. He was expressing the anguish experienced by many younger members of the intelligentsia in Japan in those days. Their anguish was based on the fear that the world was crumbling. Young members of the intelligentsia tended to worry about their future and the purpose of their lives instead of being focused on guaranteeing their daily livelihoods.<sup>5)</sup> Many of these anguished young people accepted Christianity because of an exotic longing for the advanced status of the West, and so did Sakutarō. However, Sakutarō’s prayer and atonement were not based on authentic Christianity, rather, they were an expression of the enlarged self-awareness experienced in modern Japan.

On the other hand, Sakutarō was trying, as a poet, to grasp the essence of the world. For him, writing poems was a way to understand the world and to organize the world and his inner self-awareness. In his words, he calls this integration “sentimentality” or “sentimentalism”. In this poem, the line “gloomily dig the earth, my pitiful hands of sentimentality dig the earth” indicates his prayer and struggle to reach a place of peaceful integration between himself and the world. However, it is as if his hands dig the earth again and again, but he cannot find anything of value. In the poem “Seedlings”, he looks for “seedlings that do not grow”, and in “A Sad Distant View”, he finds only “soot-dark silver snuff-wrappers” and “sweet violets’ bone-dry bulbs”. In his poems his prayers are never answered.

Chrysanthemum Gone Rancid– Sakutarō  
Hagiwara

Translated by Hiroaki Satō 1978<sup>6)</sup>

The chrysanthemum has gone sour,  
the chrysanthemum aches and drips,  
a pity what a pity, in early Frost Month,  
my platinum hand wilts,  
as I sharpen my fingers,  
hoping to nip the chrysanthemum,  
the chrysanthemum lest it be nipped,  
in a corner of glittering heaven,  
the chrysanthemum is ill,  
the rancid chrysanthemum aches.

In this second poem, “Chrysanthemum Gone Rancid,” the hand is made of “platinum” so that it lacks the warmth and softness of real human hands. A previous researcher said that the chrysanthemum symbolized the eros of woman and the image of a hand “hoping to nip the chrysanthemum” refers to making love.<sup>7)</sup> However, both the chrysanthemum and the hand are ill, and “lest it be nipped” indicates that the hand cannot touch the flower, indicating a setback to love.

Sakutarō’s expression of the hand in this poem is very abstract. Here neither the hand nor chrysanthemum has any materiality or reality. I understand that this was because Sakutarō’s love was not only physical but also spiritual, and he was afraid to love and to be loved in reality. The failure to nip the chrysanthemum also indicates his unquenchable thirst for love. In this poem, he prays for spiritual love in vain. At that time, Sakutarō was under the delusion that he had committed adultery with the spirit of a plant, and he felt serious guilt.<sup>8)</sup>

A critique by Hideto Tsuboi says his consciousness was based on an excessive and repressed desire to create poems. Moreover, Tsuboi suggests that, for Sakutarō, touching means creating poems, and the failure to touch, or the hand becoming ill, implies that his fear of writing poems

stems from his fear that his poetry might destroy the very objects of the poems.<sup>9)</sup> Sakutarō expresses the pain of his love in his descriptions of prayer.

### 3. Praying hands in *Howling at the Moon*: Kyōkichi’s artworks

Kyōkichi Tanaka was a student at the Art College in Tokyo. He and friends published the coterie magazine, *Tsukuhae*, which contained creative woodblock prints and poems. Sakutarō saw Kyōkichi’s works in this minor magazine and chose him as an illustrator for his first book. When Sakutarō was discussing his publication plans with Kyōkichi, Kyōkichi was already under medical treatment at his home in Wakayama.

Kyōkichi was suffering from serious tuberculosis and his desire was to recover and to live longer. He could no longer make woodblock prints so he was challenged to draw his illustrations, and he devoted the remainder of his life to this work. After his death, his closest friend, Kōshirō Onchi, selected some of his illustrations for *Howling at the Moon*.

Kyōkichi hoped that he would be reborn after his death. His illustrations show the prayer of a universal longing for eternal life. This wish for regeneration is based on the idea of transmigration of the soul in Buddhism and a Japanese traditional view of nature. Some images show a combination of the human body and plants, and they may be similar to works by Edvard Munch or Aubrey Beardsley.

While Sakutarō described the hand on its own, Kyōkichi drew his praying hands as a part of the whole body. The young man’s body reflects Kyōkichi’s own sick, thin body. His illustrations tell us of his distress, his tension, and his desire to live longer (see figure 2). I can imagine that those who are suffering from a serious illness will sometimes try to kill themselves to escape from their pain, but he did not try to do this. He was longing to return to

Tokyo and to publish magazines again with his friends. When he could not make woodblock prints, he kept writing and sending poems for *Tsukuhae*. He never lost his desire to recover and kept his creative spirit alive.

However, Sakutarō interpreted Kyōkichi's work as expressing a sexual or erotic dimension. For example, the image in figure 3 was drawn during Kyōkichi's dying days, and Sakutarō insisted that this picture shows a hand touching a woman's sex organ.<sup>10</sup> Sakutarō considered Kyōkichi's images of hands to be similar to his own poems. His interpretations show us the extent of his obsession with sexual issues.

I would say that this picture shows Kyōkichi's final prayer. The hand and the arms imply his last wish before his death, and the distorted squares represent the sky or heaven seen through a window. Here, Kyōkichi's languishing hand reveals the fading of his prayers toward the end of his life.



Figure 2. Kyōkichi Tanaka, *Remorse 1*, 15.2×10.7cm  
(From the first edition of *Howling at the Moon*)

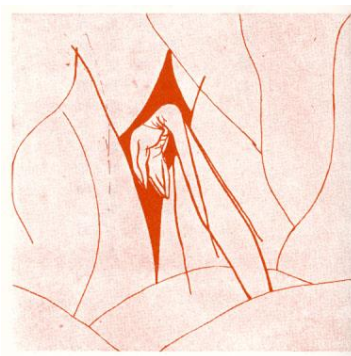


Figure 3. Kyōkichi Tanaka, *Study 1*, 11.3×11.8cm  
(From the first edition of *Howling at the Moon*)

#### 4. The artistic value of the book

Kōshirō Onchi, who was a book designer, an abstract woodblock artist, and a poet, also played a key role in creating the book by enabling the interaction and correspondence between Sakutarō's poems and Kyōkichi's illustrations. Kōshirō was the stage director for the book and he was the best friend of Kyōkichi. Kōshirō shared with Kyōkichi in his impending death by keeping up an exchange of letters after Kyōkichi had left Tokyo to undergo medical treatment.

Kōshirō selected illustrations from Kyōkichi's work after his death and arranged them for Sakutarō's book. Some of Kyōkichi's illustrations that Kōshirō used came from a private collection that he had given Kōshirō. To ensure that the illustrations were well printed, Kōshirō chose the best paper for the book and negotiated with a printing office. Sakutarō's work in selecting, modifying, and arranging his poems and Kyōkichi's work in creating illustrations during his terminal days both increase the artistic value of book. In addition, Kōshirō's design work presented new possibilities for the book to be enjoyed beyond its original context of poems and illustrations.

After his achievements with this book, Kōshirō came to play an important role in the world of Japanese book designers.

## 5. Hands and creativity

As Henri Focillon said in his essay “Éloge de la main,” hands are fundamental for all artists, because not only do hands create artworks but hands also make the creative artistic spirit.<sup>11)</sup> Of course, for Kyōkichi, hands were important because he was a woodblock artist. Making a woodblock print requires at least three processes: first a design is drawn, then it is engraved on a woodblock, and then it is printed. Traditionally, as was the case with Hokusai’s prints, the three processes would be divided among different specialists, but a new movement in creative woodblock prints required the artist to perform all the operations. In the modern era, woodblock prints had changed from being mere reproductions to art. Kyōkichi would have understood the importance of hands throughout the complicated process of creating woodblock prints.

In contrast, Sakutarō was a poet. He regarded his hands as a transcription machine for his poetic inspiration.<sup>12)</sup> Poems and other literary works go through a long process before they are published. Literary works go through many hands, with editing, proofreading, and printing through type-setting. Artworks, such as paintings and sculptures, show evidence of the artists’ hands, but poems in a book do not do so.

### Conclusion

In *Howling at the Moon*, two types of praying hands are shown. One type represents the prayer of modern self-consciousness, running away from the anguish of youth. It reflects the distortions of modern Japan. The other prayer expresses a wish to live longer and for transmigration. It is natural prayer for ill people to pray. Sakutarō considered hands to be the tools of transcription and the hands in his poems are abstract, although they convey vivid feeling.

Kyōkichi was familiar with the creative power of hands and his illustrations show his serious desire to live.

*Howling at the Moon* has long been admired for the harmony of its poems and illustrations. But I argue that their successful collaboration was not only created by harmony. Rather, I suggest that the interaction and correspondence between the poems and illustrations create conflict and tension, but they still achieve a subtle balance that raises the artistic value of this book.

### Notes

- 1) WATANABE, Kōichi (2000), A Study Concerning “Hand” by Kotaro Takamura: Significance and Possibility of Expression thought a “Hand.” *Journal of Artistic Anatomy*, 5/6, 9-17, p. 13.
- 2) TAKAMURA, Kōtarō (2010 [1928]), Shokkaku no sekai. Takamura Kōtarō shūsaku hihyōbunshū: *Bi to semei zenpen* (pp. 152–159). Tokyo: Shoshi Shinsui.
- 3) ELLIS, Toshiko (2018), Modanizumu noshintai: 1910 nendai -30 nendani Nihon kindai shi no tenkai. Institute of Cultural Sciences, Chuo University (Ed.), *Modanizumu o hukansuru* (pp. 239–282). Tokyo: Chuo University Press; KISHIDA, Toshiko (1986), *Hagiwara Sakutarō: Shiteki imēji no kōsē*. Tokyo: Chūsekisha; KIYOOKA, Takayuki (1966), Yubisaki no kakuzatō: Hagiwara Sakutarō “konote ni kagiruyo,” *Te no hengen* (pp. 49–76). Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppan-sha; KOGA, Hiromi (1988), Hagiwara Sakutarō kenkyū: Tsuki ni hoeru ni okeru te. *Kashiigata*, 34, 45–55; TSUBOI, Hideto (1989), “Hikaru te” to “itameru te”: pure “Jōzaishihen” no ichisokumen, *Hagiwara Sakutarō ron: Shi o hiraku*. (pp. 34–53). Osaka: Izumi Shoin; TSUBOI, Hideto (2006), Yubisaki no shigaku: Hagiwara Sakutarō toshintaihyōshō. *Kankaku no kindai: koe,shintai,hyōshō* (pp. 127–136). Nagoya: The University of Nagoya Press; ISHIKAWA, Ikuko (1988), Tsuki ni hoeru niokeru imejarii: gyōko to yōkai. TSUBOI, Hideto (Ed.), *Hagiwara Sakutarō: kanjō no shigaku* (pp. 106–133). Tokyo: Yūseidō.
- 4) The original title of this poem is “Kanshō no te.” HAGIWARA, Sakutarō (1976), *Hands of Sentimentality*, (p. 16). *Howling at the Moon*:

*poems of Hagiwara Sakutarō* (SATŌ, Hiroaki, trans.). Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press.

- 5) See below for details about anguished youth in Modern Japan.  
HIRAISHI, Noriko (2012), *Hanmonseinen to jogakusei no bungakushi: seiō o yomikaete*. Tokyo: Shin'yōsha; KATŌ, Jun (1989), An Essay on the Conceptual Transition of Youth in the Course of Japanese Modernization: A Methodological Perspective for the New Type of Young Men Emerged in Late Meiji Era, after 1905. *Journal of Nagoya Women's University*, 35, 41–51; KATŌ, Jun (1990), An Essay on the Conceptual Transition of Youth in the Course of Japanese Modernization: Discovery of the conception of “Youth in the late Meiji Japanese.” *Journal of Nagoya Women's University*, 36, 63–72; KATŌ, Jun (1991), The Transition of Anguished Youth in the Course of Japanese Modernization: A critical Study of *Kangenroku* by Soma Gyofu. *Journal of Nagoya Women's University*, 37, 73–85.
- 6) The original title of this poem is “Suetaru kiku.” HAGIWARA, Sakutarō (1976), Chrysanthemum Gone Rancid, *Howling at the Moon: poems of Hagiwara Sakutarō* (SATŌ, Hiroaki, trans.). p. 8. Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press.
- 7) TSUBOI, Hideto (1989), Sakutarō no kiku: “suetarukiku” o chūshin to shite, *Hagiwara Sakutarō ron: Shi o hiraku*. Osaka: Izumi Shoin.
- 8) Sakutarō confessed his anguish in a letter to his older cousin on 16th December 1914. (HAGIWARA, Takashi (1979)), *Wakakihi no Hagiwara Sakutarō*. (pp. 195-196). Tokyo: Chikumashobo.)
- 9) TSUBOI, Hideto (1989), *Hagiwara Sakutarō ron: Shi o hiraku*, (p. 52). Osaka: Izumi Shoin.
- 10) *Howling at the moon* was nearly suppressed because two poems were judged too obscene. As Sakutarō said later, when he heard the news, he suddenly understood that the reason was Kyōkichi's illustration was too erotic. HAGIWARA, Sakutarō (1976), *Shidan ni detakoro. Hagiwara Sakutarō zenshū*, 9. (pp. 237–246). Tokyo: Chikumashobo.
- 11) FOCILLON, Henri (1969 [1939]), *Éloge de la main; Te no raisan* (SUGIMOTO, Hidetaro, trans.). *Katachi no seimei*. (p. 204). Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.
- 12) HAGIWARA, Sakutarō (1976), *Nōto 2, Hagiwara*

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