

Graeme Wilson

Five Poems From the *Kokinwakashu*

This group of five Japanese poems comes from the First Imperial Anthology (the *Kokinwakashu*), which, though its Preface is dated 905, was probably not finally completed until about 922. At all events, the anthology of some 1,111 poems is of enormous importance in Japanese literary history, for it established the poetic criteria by which Japanese poetry would be judged throughout the subsequent millenium. The style of its poetry reflects Chinese influences, but it still retains much of the "drive" and energy of the earlier Manyo style of poem (8th century) and has not yet degenerated into the tinselled frivolity of later Heian work: indeed its vocabulary, which limited the words available for poets' use in the writing of all subsequent *tanka* to some 2000 words, is all of non-Chinese origin. Although, (in Waley's words) I would not put myself forward as "the only tailor in the street", there has been very little satisfactory translation into English of the extraordinary contents of the *Kokinwakashu* (Ancient and Modern Collection).

G. W.

Loving

My love has no arrival-plans,
Not even ends in view:
I cannot think one thought beyond
The thought of seeing you.

—*Oshikochi no Mitsune* (859-907)

Shamefast Love

Even in dreams I turn from him
Shamefacedly to fake
A shrinking modesty.
What other
Cover can I take,
Who face the mirror's ugly truth
Every day I wake?

—*The Lady Ise* (9th century)

Keepsake Sky

Of course the sky can't be a keepsake.
 Yet, if it can't, then why,
 Whenever in my loneliness
 I think of her, do I
 Find myself with my face turned upwards
 Staring at the sky?

—*Sakai no Hitozane* (-931)

The Grasses of Forgetfulness

Would that on her heartless heart
 The kniving hoar-frost lay
 That the grasses of forgetfulness,
 Withering away,
 Might free her to remember
 So much as yesterday.

—*Minamoto no Muneyuki* (-939)

Habit

We live by habit. Though it well
 May kill me, I must try
 To see if, while not seeing her,
 I somehow still get by;
 To learn the knack of lacking her:
 To learn it or to die.

—*Anonymous* (c. 880)