

# A Portrait in Poems: Professor Naoki Onishi

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It is an honour to celebrate, in this brief portrait, the career of our esteemed colleague, Professor Naoki Onishi. Professor Onishi will retire from ICU in March 2018, after a career at ICU that spans 37 years of teaching, research, and service. Professor Onishi has wide-ranging academic interests, from Puritan history to contemporary literature. It seems most fitting to reflect on his career by drawing on the words of some of the poets to whom he devoted his teaching and research.

## Education

But who I was, or where, or from what cause,  
Knew not. To speak I tried and forthwith spake:  
My tongue obeyed and readily could name  
Whate'er I saw. 'Thou sun,' said I, 'fair light,  
And thou enlightened Earth, so fresh and gay,  
Ye hills and dales, ye rivers, woods and plains,  
And ye that live and move, fair creatures, tell,  
Tell, if ye saw, how came I thus, how here!  
Not of myself; by some great Maker then,  
In goodness and in power pre-eminent.  
Tell me, how may I know Him, how adore,  
From whom I have that thus I move and live  
And feel that I am happier than I know!'

(Milton, *Paradise Lost* viii. 270–282)

Professor Onishi has a lifelong connection to ICU. He matriculated for his bachelor's degree at ICU in 1968. After graduation, he stayed at ICU to complete his MA, receiving it in 1977. Yet these years were not spent as a typical MA student; at the same time as working towards his Master's, Professor Onishi completed a second Bachelor's degree in English at Amherst College, Massachusetts. This time in the United States, made possible by an Uchimura Kanzo Scholarship, laid the foundations of Professor Onishi's academic interests in Puritanism, American literature, and New England history and culture. By the time he completed these degrees, Professor Onishi was already an avid book collector, winning a student award for his library. His interest in the greatest of Puritan poets, John Milton, opened the way to an intensive study of Puritan literature. Professor Onishi returned to ICU to complete his MA, then went on to write a doctoral dissertation on the 'Transformation of Typological Imagination in Puritan Literature' (1990). By the time he completed his PhD, he had already published his first articles on Melville, Hawthorn, and Jonathan Edwards.<sup>1)</sup>

## Teaching

While working on his dissertation, Professor Onishi began his teaching career at ICU, first as an instructor, and then as Assistant Professor.

Luck is not chance –  
 It's Toil –  
 Fortune's expensive smile  
 Is earned –  
 The Father of the Mine  
 Is that old fashioned Coin  
 We spurned –  
 (Dickinson F1360)

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1) Onishi Naoki, "The Custom-House" and "The Scarlet Letter" —Typological Imagination in Hawthorne's Historical Tales and Romances', 人文科学研究 (18), 189–204, 1984–05; 'The Grand Scheme —Typological Methods of Jonathan Edwards', 人文科学研究 (19), 133–149, 1985–11.

Professor Onishi was promoted to Associate Professor in 1991, and full professor in 1997. From his first lectures in 1981 to his years as Professor by Special Appointment (2014–2019), Professor Onishi has enthralled students with his wide-ranging and deep knowledge of literature and history. His work on Puritanism and poetry has developed into recent research on myths and myth-making, an engagement with the imaginative processes that sustain literature, history, and religion. Although he has devoted his whole career to ICU, Professor Onishi's passion for teaching and research has been recognised around the world, including at some of America's most prestigious universities. He was a visiting scholar at Harvard University's department of English and American Literature (1988–1989); then again at Harvard's Divinity School (1996–1997); and then at Columbia University's Center for Race and Ethnic Studies (2005). In this way, Professor Onishi's teaching has embodied the mission of ICU for almost four decades: he has enlightened Japanese students and academia on the subjects of Puritanism and English poetry from his extensive experience and research in America; and he has returned this gift of knowledge to America, by offering fresh insights, from an international perspective, on the works of Hawthorne, Melville, Winthrop, and above all, Emily Dickinson.

Therefore – we do life's labor –  
 Though life's Reward – be done –  
 With scrupulous exactness -  
 To hold our Senses – on –  
 (Dickinson F522, ll.25–8)

## Research

Or let my lamp at midnight hour  
 Be seen in some high lonely tower  
 Where I may oft outwatch the Bear,

With thrice great Hermes, or unsphere  
 The spirit of Plato to unfold  
 What worlds or what vast regions hold  
 The immortal mind that hath forsook  
 Her mansion in this fleshly nook;  
 And of those daemons that are found  
 In fire, air, flood, or under ground  
 Whose power hath a true consent  
 With planet or with element.

(Milton, *Il Penseroso* ll.85–96)

It is not possible in the limited confines of such an essay to comprehensively convey the research accomplishments of an academic career as long and distinguished as Professor Onishi's. When we began to work together from 2008, I understood that he was an expert on New England literature, but I had not imagined to what extent. Professor Onishi had already published two monographs: *Religion and Society in New England* (1997) and *A Myth Called Pilgrim Fathers* (1998), as well as editing a complete poetical works of Amy Lowell (6 vols., 2007). By this time, he had also edited or co-edited four other books, and had contributed the chapter on Puritanism to the *Oxford Handbook of Early American Literature* (2008).

From around 2010, Professor Onishi's research became intensively focused on the life and work of Emily Dickinson.

This was a Poet –  
 It is That  
 Distills amazing sense  
 From Ordinary Meanings –  
 And Attar so immense

From the familiar species  
 That perished by the Door –  
 We wonder it was not Ourselves

Arrested it – before –

Of Pictures, the Discloser –

The Poet – it is He –

Entitles Us – by Contrast –

To ceaseless Poverty –

Of Portion – so unconscious –

The Robbing – could not harm –

Himself – to Him – a Fortune –

Exterior – to Time –

(Dickinson F446)

I was fortunate to hear Professor Onishi lecture on Dickinson on several occasions, and follow the news of his research trips back to Amherst. This research resulted in half a dozen articles including a fine piece in the *Emily Dickinson Review* (2016); also, a translation into Japanese of *Wider Than a Sky: Essays and Meditations on the Healing Power of Emily Dickinson* (2012); and finally a third monograph, *Emily Dickinson: A Memory of Amethyst* (2017). From 2010–2014, based on these research efforts and achievements, Professor Onishi served as the President of the Emily Dickinson Society of Japan. Throughout these years, Professor Onishi inspired many ICU students and colleagues to take a fresh look at Dickinson's work.

Somehow, while writing all these publications, Professor Onishi found the time to complete eight other translations, most of them several hundred pages. And of course, while conducting all of this research and writing, he was also working tirelessly in the service of ICU, whether as Assistant Dean of the CLA, or running the American Studies Program, or (from the time I first knew him) working as Director of Public Relations. I have happy memories of him knocking on colleagues' doors and waving them down in the halls in order to exhort them to tell the public relations office about their latest books and awards. Yet despite this demanding work, Professor Onishi remained one of the most modest and good-humoured professors

it has been my privilege to work with. He constantly strove to promote the university and its professors in the international spotlight, while remaining humble about his own achievements.

The robin is a Gabriel  
 In humble circumstances –  
 His Dress denotes him socially,  
 Of Transport's Working Classes –  
 He has the punctuality  
 Of the New England Farmer –  
 The same oblique integrity,  
 A Vista vastly warmer –  
 A small but sturdy Residence,  
 A Self denying Household,  
 The Guests of Perspicacity  
 Are all that cross his Threshold –  
 (Dickinson F1520B, ll.1–12)

As for many who love their work, Professor Onishi's retirement will not be the end of his research and writing. Since around 2012 Professor Onishi has also been working on the Japanese poet and writer Yone Noguchi, whose immense influence on American, British, and Irish poetry and drama in the early twentieth century invites continued engagement. Professor Onishi was a charter member of the Yone Noguchi Society, from April 2012, and from 2016 has served as the society's president. This research will return to some of Professor Onishi's earlier interests, as it will engage with questions regarding the rise of Modernism in the west, and the roles played by Japanese literature in the development of free verse poetry, Imagism, and symbolist poetry and drama. I look forward to reading the society's future publications and learning more about Noguchi's interactions with authors including W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, George Bernard Shaw, and H. G. Wells.

## Meditation

A wise man,  
Watching the stars pass across the sky,  
Remarked:  
In the upper air the fireflies move more slowly.  
(Amy Lowell)

As if this were not enough to be getting on with, Professor Onishi has recently taken on the presidency of the Japanese Society of Percival Lowell (astronomer, and brother to the poet Amy Lowell), after being a charter member since 2002. Thus, I anticipate that Professor Onishi's retirement will be no more than a change of perspective, one of those periodic changes of scenery that provides fresh energy for, and insight into, lifelong intellectual pursuits.

## Conclusion

I would like to imagine that at some point while Professor Onishi was a visiting scholar at the Harvard Divinity School in 1996–7, he crossed paths in the streets of Cambridge with a scruffy young undergraduate who would later come to know him as a mentor and a friend. Yet although I did not meet Professor Onishi for another decade, in the time that I have known him he has exerted a similar influence on me as I have seen him exert on all of his students: inspiring them to engage more deeply with English and Japanese literature; introducing them to the work of authors and critics from the seventeenth century to the present day; and listening to and reading their work with patience, insight, and good humour.

The retirement of a distinguished professor is a cause for celebration—a chance to reflect on their contributions to their home university, and to the global academic community. Yet, for those of us he leaves behind, it is also a cause for a little sadness: knowing that we will not pass him in the hallway, or chat after a meeting, and have the chance to glean a quotation or an anecdote to add to our store of knowledge. Speaking personally, to say that

I will miss his presence in the university is an understatement. While it may be human instinct to mythologise our predecessors, Professor Onishi has demonstrated in his own work how this process of mythologizing springs from our desires to understand, organise, and reinvent ourselves through our pasts. The facts around which a myth forms may—as in the case of Professor Onishi’s fine *Curriculum vitae*—inspire us to diligence and virtue. Yet the facts may mean little to posterity without the warmth and colours of the myth. Poetry provides one set of forms to carry this warmth and these colours of human nature through time; therefore, it is fitting that the lines of poetry in these pages, so vivified by Professor Onishi’s teaching and research, should offer their words to honour his career. We thank him for his exemplary service to ICU and we wish him the best for his ‘escape’—the pleasures of retirement, and all his future endeavours.

Escape is such a thankful Word  
 I often in the Night  
 Consider it unto myself  
 No spectacle in sight

Escape – it is the Basket  
 In which the Heart is caught  
 When down some awful Battlement  
 The rest of Life is dropt –

’Tis not to sight the saviour –  
 It is to be the saved –  
 And that is why I lay my Head  
 Opon this trusty word –

(Dickinson F1364)