



IN MEMORIAM

Michael F. Marra
Professor of Asian Languages and Cultures
UC Los Angeles
1956 - 2011

Michael Marra passed away on February 23, 2011, after a protracted struggle against cancer. His many friends, colleagues, and students at UCLA will remember him most for his passionate dedication to excellence. The extraordinary self-discipline with which he pursued this ideal propelled him beyond the small village in northern Italy where he was born (and christened Michele Ferruccio Pio Marra) to Japan and to the United States where he became an internationally-recognized authority on Japanese literature and philosophy.

Marra's academic career began with a traditional education in Latin and Greek at Liceo Norbeto Rosa (Susa, Italy), a local school near his home. He went on to the University of Turin to specialize in the study of Asian languages, which in those days focused primarily on Sanskrit and Pali. The study of these Indic languages contributed not just to Marra's early appreciation of the links between literary forms and philosophical speculation but also to his life-long interest in Buddhist studies. Eventually he turned his attention to Japan, and in 1979 completed a doctoral dissertation on modern Japanese literature. Marra spent the following two years at the University of Tsukuba (Japan), researching Japanese classical literature. His academic experience in Japan led Marra to the realization that to achieve his goals he must come to the United States to redo his graduate training. Accordingly, he completed a master's degree (1983) at Washington University (St. Louis) and a doctorate (1988) at UCLA, where he studied Buddhism and medieval Japanese literature under the tutelage of Professor William R. LaFleur (1936-2010).

After completing his Ph.D., Marra first taught at the University of Tokyo (1988-1990) and then at the University of Southern California (1990-1993). During this period he established his reputation as a leading literary interpreter of Japan with two innovative books: *The Aesthetics of Discontent: Politics and Reclusion in Medieval Japanese Literature* (1991) and *Representations of Power: The Literary Politics of Medieval Japan* (1993). In these works Marra charted a new approach to the study of premodern Japanese literature by analyzing the intersection of religious doctrines, literary production, and political power. As he acknowledged, these two books constituted his response to *The Karma of Words* (1983), LaFleur's seminal study of the religious worldview of medieval Japanese literature. These two books also reflect Marra's conviction that scholarship always demands a conversation across various divides (such as past and present, weak and powerful, poetic and practical, etc.), which too often otherwise conflict with one another. Marra firmly believed that by bridging these kinds of divides, humanistic inquiry-- especially the study of literature and religion, poetry and philosophy-- could transform society and improve the world.

In 1993, Professor Marra moved from USC to UCLA. This year proved to be a turning point in his career, as he was introduced to the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo (also from Turin), who was to have a profound influence on Professor Marra's work. From this time onward, his research entered a new phase, moving away from the study of medieval literature and into the fields of Japanese aesthetics and hermeneutics, for which he played a pioneering role. Marra published a series of books that explored how the Japanese discipline of literary aesthetics was created by Japanese thinkers in dialog with specific European philosophical agendas. These works include: *Modern Japanese Aesthetics: A Reader* (1999); *A History of Modern Japanese Aesthetics* (2001); *Japanese Hermeneutics: Current Debates on Aesthetics and Interpretation* (2002); *Kuki Shuzo: A Philosopher's Poetry and Poetics* (2004); *The Poetics of Motoori Norinaga: A Hermeneutical Journey* (2007); and *Japan's Frames of Meaning: A Hermeneutics Reader* (2011). In the course of writing these works, Marra reviewed and analyzed the entire corpus of Japanese publications on aesthetics since the 1870s, a body

of work consisting of hundreds of essays now accessible only in obscure archives. He aligned the Japanese sources with contemporary European debates on aesthetic and literary issues, to show how the conventional Japanese vocabulary of literary aesthetics-- terms previously seen solely in light of traditional Shinto and Buddhist religious sensibilities--acquired new nuances to reflect modern philosophical concerns. No one else had ever conceived of this project, much less attempted it.

In 2008, Marra was diagnosed with sarcoma. In spite of undergoing eleven cycles of chemotherapy over the next two years, he continued to keep an active schedule of teaching, publishing, and attending conferences. In fact, in the three last years of his life he published four books and continued to teach undergraduate courses until the week before his death.

Marra's scholarship is truly interdisciplinary, combining literature, philosophy, and history in the most original and difficult ways, while spanning the divide between the premodern and modern worlds. He was extraordinarily prolific--more so in fact than any other scholar of his generation. He published fifteen books and more than forty articles during a life that was all too short. The courses he offered, such as Poetry and Philosophy and Japanese Aesthetics, are irreplaceable: no one else can teach what he taught. He is profoundly missed by his colleagues and students.

William Bodiford
Torquil Duthie
Seiji Lippit