Hagiwara Sakutarō (1886–1942) was probably elaborating too much on his scarce knowledge of the European avant-garde when, in the short article ‘Nihon ni okeru miraiha no shi to sono kaisetsu’ (Futurist Poetry in Japan and Its Explanation), he suggested that Yamamura Bochō was the representative of a Japanese ‘Futurist School’ that was even better than the Western one.¹

Bochō had a rather superficial knowledge of Marinetti’s movement and poetics, and so it is evident that the attribute of ‘futurism’ is incorrect in relation to his poetry.² This is also confirmed by an analysis of his poetry gathered in the controversial collection Seisanryōhari (The Saint Prism, December 1915), where it is very difficult to detect anything that can be associated with a preeminent assimilation of Futurist technical and expressive devices, such as

¹ In the magazine Kanjō (Sentiment), November 1916. The original can be read in KSGS shinbun zasshi hen, vol. 2: 24–29. Cf. Zanotti 2008 for a brief analysis of this article.
² In his texts of the period, up until 1916, collected in Yamamura Bochō Zenshū (thereafter YBZ), the word ‘futurism’ (miraiha) appears only once. Marinetti or other futurist artists are never mentioned. Nevertheless, we can reasonably imagine that Bochō gathered a good amount of information on Futurism via the articles and books (some of which were even published in the magazines to which he regularly contributed) that presented the Italian avant-garde to the Japanese public. In any case, Bochō’s writings show no direct meditation on futurist doctrines and aesthetics.
words-in-freedom, destruction of syntax, liberated onomatopoeia, and the like.³

Dance (Dansu)
Storm
Storm
Let there be light on the weeping willow
Bud of
A baby’s navel
Mercury hysteria
Spring comes
The sole of a foot
Softens the storm
Does the samovar of love
Sadden the oolong tea?
The storm is
Kicked to heaven⁴

But was Sakutarō so wrong in claiming that Bochō was the most advanced poet in Japan? And Bochō? Was he completely unaware of his position as a forerunner in the poetry scene? To phrase it more clearly: was Bochō really unaware of his being at the avant-garde?

Yamamura Bochō (real name Kogure Hakkujū, 1884–1924) was a curious proletaroid intellectual figure. Born to a peasant family in Gunma Prefecture, he had to struggle to obtain an education. The instability of his family’s economic situation prevented him from finishing elementary school, but he kept on studying and reading, educating himself to the point that when he was fifteen he obtained a teaching job in his former primary school. He later devoted himself to the study of English and converted to Anglicanism in 1902. Some scholars believe that Bochō, a fairly ambitious man, did so because he realized that that was the only way for him to get access to university-level education and improve his social condition (Wada 1976: 25–26, Nakamura 1995: 22).

In fact, thanks to his connections within the Church, he was admitted to Tsukiji Seisan Isshin Gakkō (Holy Trinity School), the institute that trained Japanese Anglican ministers (later merged into Rikkyō University), and from which he graduated in 1908. In Tōkyō, he began to cultivate his

⁴ Transl. by Leith Morton in Rimer and Gessel 2005: 299.