# Modesty as Modality
# Toward Appreciation of the Fragment in Japanese Literature

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The pendulum swings in the study of any literature, although perhaps more slowly in the case of Japanese. The overall assessment of the possibilities for form in that national literature have changed more noticeably in the West, with its limited acquaintance, most often via translation, than in Japan itself. Even there, however, it is not unusual to encounter indictments of the fragmentary and presumably under-developed nature of much of the writing that has come down to us. What are critics to make of certain tendencies in Japanese literature that have been criticized both inside and outside the country and led to its virtual dismissal, in some quarters, from consideration as a great inheritance ? In this post-deconstructionist, postmodern age, perhaps the elliptical, centripetal literature of Japan will finally be appreciated, even as the substantive canonical works of other traditions fragment into multiplicities of inconsistent meanings. If this is to happen, however, it will require a renewed attention to actualities of Japanese literature and its histories, not just an application of postmodernist theory.

For many years it was felt that traditional Japan had produced a literary output of scant proportions, characterized by the preciousness of individual works. Even people who devoted themselves to its study, such as Frederick Dickins or Basil Hall Chamberlin, did not hesitate to say how light they found this literature, and how lacking in resources for organization or sustained emplotment.[1] It was a given that Japan had no literary monuments worthy of the name, no epics or extended oeuvres. The exceptions,such as the fifty-four chapter *Tale of Genji (Genji monogatari)* from Murasaki Shikibu or the twenty-book long court anthologies of poetry were explained as not much more than the sum of their parts. The chapters of the Genji monogatari struck some early Western scholars as separable parts, not at all well integrated. Long works such as Takizawa Bakin's (1767-1848) 106 volume *Nanso satomi hakkenden (A Tale of Eight Dogs)* were dismissed as monolithic and repetitive. Anthologies were of course mere cobblings together of poems,organized rather crudely, it seemed,

by topic. The height of Japanese aesthetic accomplishment, the haiku form, was in its seventeen syllables symbolic of the strong points in the Japanese literary imagination—spareness, shortness, and pith (which also made it limited, repetitive and constricted, according to the devil's advocates).

The present generation, influenced by studies beginning in the mid 1960s, is comfortably settled into a different view of Japanese literature. In this estimation, *Genji monogatari* is a complete work by a single author, deserving of book-length studies that speak to its wholeness. The anthologies are interwoven by means of association and progression, techniques of linking that give them a rhythmic, theme-based flow. Many more full works, such as the twelve book martial tale—*Tales of the Heike (Heike monogatari)* or the extensive history *Okagami. The Great Mirror* are available in translation, and we recognize their substantiality and comparability to Western analogues. Even pieces that are produced on the spur of the moment, without predetermined schemes, such as linked poetry *(renga)*, are open to analysis of their links as contributions to an overall artifact.2

In the past decade, a counter-movement to this valorization of Japanese literature for its lengthy and well articulated achivements has reemerged. Konishi Jin'ichi's important history names brevity as a chief characteristic of the literature, without implying any disapproval (13). An excellent consideration of linked poetry by Gary Ebersole reminds us that its main aim was not to cohere but to change as each new stanza was added, the constant shifting of topic and imagery being truest to the impermanent nature of the world (50-53). H. Mack Horton has argued that the best intentions of literary creation in group settings were sometimes underout by actual practitioners, whose notions of fullness could not be met on every occasion due to squabbles and other external factors (480-85). These current reassessments differ from earlier understandings of the literature in making no pejorative remarks. They are based on an acceptance of Japanese poetry and prose largely on its own terms, and tend to avoid the suggestion that Western standards of monumentality, continuity, narrative focus and the like are the sole measures for good or successful literature. In that sense, they adequately address many of the difficulties inherent in looking at another culture's production.

Realizations that there are different kinds of structuring principles and various levels of accomplishment in other literary worlds move our discussion to a new plane where unfavourable comparison is not a foregone conculsion. Have we gone far enough yet towards comprehending traditional Japanese literature as it is?

I would like to suggest that we have not, and probably cannot until we modify a typical concomitant of our role as readers, which is the search for unified meaning. The reading process compels to us engage in "consistency-

building," a subconscious plotting of continuity in a text that according to Wolfgang Iser precedes the finding of pattern in what we have read (53). Such consistency-building leads to a too quick assumption about what should result, and unfair standards about well-structured literature, since that literature that helps us achieve the most in terms of developing a coherent pattern is seen as the most sophisticated in conception and composition. It may be, and I would argue sometimes is the function of a work not to lead us to easy confirmation of the structured nature of the universe, as seen in the result of a clear, comprehensible design, but to allow us to experience precisely that part of nature that is not tidy and neatly regulated. Not all literary art is a centrifuge,in other words; some of it wants to blow apart our ordinary tendency to homogenize the world. The Japanese literary tradition is especially well supplied with examples of this kind of orientation in writing.

If a work of literature were truly random, the best interpretation of it would preserve its randomness. Studies of perception indicate, however, that objects and events are usually interpreted by the perceiver as having some arrangement; indeed, it appears that there is no perception without the imposition of some kind of structure.[3] Since we are unlikely to be able to suppress the search for pattern during the enactment of reading, it behooves us to focus as much as possible on authors' strategies. Once we recognize what a writer has done and told us to destabilize our usual perceptions, we may be able to fight the tendency to search for pattern, and thus comprehend the work in its fragmented form. Here we enter a realm of contradictions, however, due to certain aspects of the nature of interpersonal communication in the Japanese context. For many works, we are faced with writers who hesitate to state the vision of the writer-reader interaction that they anticipate. They refuse to make any gesture that would tell us how to behave as readers, or even refuse to identify themselves as holding a position of authority. Foreseeing the possibility that their readers will be above them in social rank, or inhibited by the fact that they do not have official sanction or patronage, these writers retreat into a modest mode that finds them making statements to deny the efficacy, intention, and even right to existence of their works. Typically, they will claim to have put brush to paper without forethought, written with no attention, and have meant to tear up the work upon finishing it. Opening their pieces with humble disclaimers of this sort, or offering self-deprecating asides throughtout, they often choose to produce what look like disorganised fragments with no artistic design. The most extreme cases are identified as a genre, the *zuihitsu*, literally "following the brush," or miscellany. Defined as a piece or series of pieces that record the author's encounters, beliefs, observations randomly and in no set fashion, *zuihitsu* seem to place no burden on either producer or consumer to take them seriously or to try to understand their purpose. To take such writers'

disclaimers at their face value, nevertheless, is to miss a dimension of deliberate authorial design that may be lurking behind or in the margins around the disclaimer. Critics who assume that the only potential relationship between an author and such a work is the unmediated transcription of personal feelings, opinions and experiences, tend to reduce many different kinds of works to identically inspired imprints of their author's mental makeups. This procedure results in ignoring or downplaying the unstated aims of authors to contribute to the enrichment of knowledge or taste in their culture. And it personalizes a body of literature that is too vast and too valued by its culture to all be private writing in the strict sense. So much Japanese literary output falls into the *zuihitsu* category, and it is read and appreciated so enthusiastically, that it would be absurd to call it all as useless and disposable as its authors do.

Before assuming that the modesty of an author is a real, unmotivated attitude requiring that we fulfill the dictates of any humble preambles, we need to investigate the history of this mode, where and why it appears in certain writing, and whether its overt aims and claims fit with the illocutionary force of the pieces for which it is typical. The first thing to note is that disclaimers of the usefulness of writing are not unique to Japan. Chinese and Korean writings that often served as models for Japanese are full of similar statements. Lines dismissive of a text as play, as the product of idleness, and as without merit are endemic to miscellanies in both those traditions. Peter H. Lee renders one from the Korean miscellany by Yi Chenhyon (1287-1367) this way:

> The logograph for "oak" contains *nak* as its phonetic. It can be said that if a tree which cannot be used as lumber can be far away from harm, it is a joy to the tree: hence I follow the reading *nak* ["joy"]. Once I was an official but left office to "enjoy obscurity." Hence I styled myself Nagong, hoping that a tree that would not make number might live long. The logograph *p'ae* contains *pi* as its phonetic. Looking into its meaning, I see that the millet is lowly among grains. When I was small, I knew how to read books; but in the prime of my life I gave up learning. and now I have become old. Upon reflection [ I see that ] I have gladly jotted down miscellaneous, confused writing, devoid of substance and lowly like the millet. Therefore I call my record *pisol* (4).

The author struggles mightily to convince the audience that his writing is useless, yet the very fact that he does conceive of a readership betrays his motive, which is to purchase latitude for unorthodox treatments of subjects. The reader does not have to be too sensitive to gather that something of the sort is Yi's intention.

Modesty also obtains as a mode for Western medieval authors, hesitant to offend their god by displays of pride. "The Author's Apology for his BOOK" from John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress from this World to That which is to*

*Come* is a case in point:

> but yet I did not think
> To shew to all the World my Pen and Ink
> In such a mode; I only thought to make
> I knew not what; nor did I undertake
> Thereby to please my Neighbor; no not I,
> I did it mine own self to gratifie.
> Neither did I but vacant seasons spend
> In this my Scribble; Nor did I intend
> But to divert my self in doing this,
> From worser thoughts, which make me do amiss (1).

Such an apology is plainly aimed at establishing rules for the interaction between author and reader, in this case perhaps inoculating against any rejection of the text on the grounds that the writer has been un-Christian by devoting so much time and energy to spinning a profane work.

As the Bunyan example suggests, the modest disclaimer does not constitute a denial of meaning. In apologizing for his "Scribble," the writer does not mean to imply that the work has no message, or that it should not be read with an eye toward discerning that message. While he may ask for latitude in judgment of his outcome, and attempt to deflect responsibilty for any shortcomings he has unwittingly displayed, if we were to take him entirely at face value and conclude that *The Pilgrim's Progress* was a mere personal diversion, we would do a disservice to ourselves and to English literature. The aspect of individual diversion must remain a factor in our interpretation of the text, but it cannot become a rationale for disregarding the spirit of the work, which includes exploring in great depth a passage to spirituality. By the same lights, when Japanese authors apologize for their words and invite the audience to deposit them in the nearest litter receptacle, we must look to the rest of the work for some other sense of what it was meant to accomplish.

The earliest example of an humble disclaimer in Japanese literature occurring in a work that is identified with the *zuihitsu* genre is found in the so-called *Pillow Book (Makura no soshi)* of sei Shonagon.

> It is getting so dark that I can scarcely go on writing; and my brush is all worn out.
> Yet I should like to add a few things before I end.
> I wrote these notes at home, when I had a good deal of time to myself and thought no one would notice what I was doing. Everything that I have seen and felt is included.
> Since much of it might appear malicious and even harmful to other people, I was careful to keep my book hidden. But now it has become public, which is the last thing I expected . . . . . .

After all, it is written entirely for my own amusement and I put things down exactly as they came to me. How could my casual jottings possibly bear comparison with the many inpressive books that exist in our time ? (267-68)

Sei's ambivalence about her writing is very much in evidence in her statement. While she belittles herself and her talent, and describes the text as consisting of "odd facts, stories from the past, and all sorts of other things, often including the most trivial material" (267) she is plainly also aware that she has already been well received, and that her humility is not completely necessary. It is, however, socially requisite for a woman of her low rank at court to maintain a decorous pose in her presentation to the outside world. Her larger motivation, we can gather, was to describe and praise the manners and taste of the court salon to which she belonged. Since she was writing in the service of the Imperial Consort Teishi, she could bask in that glow and admit to a certain elevation of purpose, as in the central passage of her apology:

One day Lord Korechika, the Minister of the Centre, brought the Empress a bundle of notebooks. 'What shall we do with them ?' Her Majesty asked me.

'The Emperor has already made arrangements for copying the "Records of the Historïan."'

'Let me make them into a pillow, 'I said.

'Very well,' said Her Majesty, 'You may have them.' (267)

Here we see Sei Shonagon implicity comparing her "jottings" to the compilation of an official history on the distaff side of the court. If we read her *Makura no soshi* in the light of this comparison, we will have to come up with rather different explanations for the schemes of arrangement that link the text. The form of the work is plainly not a simple reflection of her temperament, as some have said, but rather might tell us something about the way women organized information and cultural evaluations around the year 1000. Unfortunately, it is not entirely possible to pinpoint these schemes for *Makura no soshi,* as it exists in four different textual lines with radically diverse styles of organization.

We are in a slightly better position when it comes to the early fourteenth century work *Essays in Idleness (Tsurezuregusa).* Here the humble disclaimer thoroughly rejects the reader:

What a strange, demented feeling it gives me when I realize I have spent whole days before this inkstone, with nothing better to do, jotting down at random whatever nonsensical thoughts have entered my head (3).

This message is a challenge to the audience to question the value of the text, the sanity of its author, and by extension its own sanity in bothering to read such nonsense. The segments of the text themselves, however, while they veer among many different modes of lyric, didactic, expository, and personal,

are full of messages that fourteenth century readers would have viewed as worthwhile, and that the author himself, the lay priest Kenko (c. 1283-c. 1352), displays strong feelings about. Here modesty serves as a strategy to concentrate the reader on the task of finding meaning by denying messages just where they are obvious—immediately following the disclaimer, the writer launches into a discussion of what is most desirable in life. The overall organization of the text similarly offers repeated notions of what is valuable and important, only to undercut them in succeeding passages by focusing on the shortness of life and its unpredictability. The unstructured structure of the work functions to constantly confront the reader with inconstancy and Buddhist impermanence.

To understand such a piece of literature, it is incumbent upon us to remain open to kinds of organization and literary standards other than the typically Western. I may now modify my earlier suggestion that we need to move away from the usual search for unified meaning through reading. It is not enough simply to say that some writers may have hoped to provide a reading experience that highlights something other than patterned structure. It is rather the case that we must redefine the object of our gaze as not necessarily conventionally ordered. We need to see fragmentary works not as deviant, but as different. The fragment, itself, and its way of colliding with other fragments, have roles to play in speaking to us of the nature of phenomena. Until we are able to appreciate the fragment and its own logic, we will still tend to judge some literary traditions outside the West with unfair and indeed bankrupt expectations of rigid architectonics.

## Notes and References

1. Dickins entitled his turn of the century study *Primitive and Mediaeval Japanese Texts*, but he seems to have thought "primitive" was the operative word.
2. Studies of *Genji monogatari* include that by NOrma Field and one by Haruo Shirane. The linking techniques of association and progression were uncovered by Konishi Jin'ichi and reported to the English-reading public. *Renga* links are the object of analysis in Earl Miner's book.
3. To quote Nelson Goodman: "Perceiving motion, we have seen, often consists in producing it. Discovering laws involves drafting them. Recognizing patterns is very much a matter of inventing and imposing them. Comprehension and creation go on together" (22). Heisenberg's uncertainty principle guarantees us the same outcome.

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