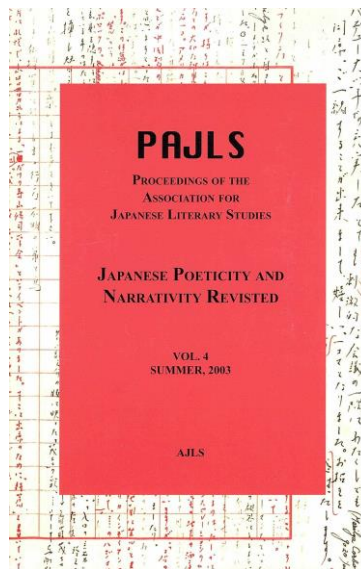


“Narrative and Poetic Progression: The Logic of Associativity”

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**NARRATIVE AND POETIC PROGRESSION:
THE LOGIC OF ASSOCIATIVITY**

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Let me start by establishing a theoretical perspective. A text is always a sequence of signs, and one of its necessary conditions is the existence of a set of principles by which the signs are ordered. These principles must be recognised both by the producers and the recipients of the text—it does not matter if both of them are perhaps unable to formulate them distinctly. These principles operate on different levels: syntactical, paratactical, hypotactical, i.e. organising signs into utterances, utterances into texts and texts into textualities, discourses and literary cultures. They are also of different order, for example, institutionalised norms may prohibit the use of some signs in some situations, and stylistical considerations may prompt some sign repertoires to be preferred to others for aesthetical effect.

What we will be concerned with here is what could be called the *logic* of texts, i.e. the principles that give the order of signs comprehensibility. We would normally call a text logical, or coherent, when its first parts provide us with all the necessary material for understanding latter ones, or define and actualise the resources we should use for their interpretation. A logic of a text need not be logical in the strict sense of the word—there exists a certain logic also in the theatre of the absurd, for instance, because otherwise it would not be intelligible to us at all. But while it is customary to use the word ‘logic’ predominantly to characterise the coherence of a text regarding the organisation of textual units—so that a plot, an argument, a narration can be logical or illogical—I would like here to use the word for any aspect of a sequence of signs that produces or reduces comprehensibility, thus a logically constructed description would be one that helps us to imagine the thing that has been described, and images of a film may follow each other according to a certain visual logic that has little to do with the events shown.

The relevance of this qualification becomes immediately clear when we turn to the Japanese literary tradition and the formation of its classical ‘high’ genres during the Heian period. The genres of Heian literary prose developed more or less simultaneously and under reciprocal influence, and in interaction with the re-emerging poetic “system” of *waka*

anthologies, family collections and public events. Instead of separating them strictly one could rather imagine a gradient, starting with a few works of almost pure prose and ending with liminal cases one can treat either as poetry collections with long comments on each poem or prose texts saturated with poetic interruptions. There are also two kinds of logic at work in these texts: the causal logic of events that organises story lines into coherent wholes, and associative logic, closer by nature to poetry, but actively present in the *uta monogatari*, texts such as the *Makura no sōshi*, and also at places in narrative texts that otherwise follow the conventions of prose. But we can also find both logics at work in poetic texts such as the *Kokinshū* as well, at the places where poems have been provided with *kotobagaki*, or prose introductions that do not only clarify the circumstances of their production, but sometimes also provide logical causes for the appearance of certain images in the poem.

The causal logic makes explicit how and why certain narrated events appear in a certain sequence, while the associative logic does the same for ‘subjective’ moods and mental images. On the plane of expression causal logic tends toward excessive verbalisation, but the logic of associativity prefers an elliptical style that omits references to all the circumstances that are irrelevant from its point of view. Thus, for instance, in the *Taketori monogatari* we mostly find causally logical narrative passages such as the following:

The Minister of the Right Abe no Mimuraji was a man of abundant wealth and possessed a large dwelling. On the ship that was to return to China that year, he sent a letter to a man called Ookei saying "Buy and send me a thing called fire-rat skin"; among his servants he chose a loyal man called Ono no Fusamori, whom he dispatched to deliver [this letter]. Having arrived, he gave money to Ookei who was then in China. Ookei opened the letter, looked at it, and wrote an answer. (NKBT 9: 41–42).

The passage is clearly overdetermined: it would seem superfluous to say that Ookei was in China if the letter was delivered to him by a man who took the boat to China, nor is the name of the messenger of any relevance. This overdetermination reaches the level of detail: Ookei opened the letter, because otherwise he could not have seen it, looked at it, because otherwise he would have not known its content, and then wrote an answer. This narrative style presents a striking with the *Ise*

monogatari, dating approximately from the same period, which abounds in phrases like

Mukashi, otoko, Ise no kuni narikeru onna, mata eawade, tonari no kuni e iku tote, imijiu uramikereba, onna, [poem]

Long time ago, a man, without again being able to meet a woman in the Ise province, about to go to the neighbouring province, in overwhelming grief, the woman, [poem] (NKBT 9: 153)

The prose only presents us with the minimally necessary, and not always sufficient data and it is sometimes difficult to understand precisely what is going on. In a certain sense we could say that the two logics constitute the limits of literary language: for the causal logic, the grammatical apparatus is not sufficient and the sequential structure of events needs to be bolstered with additional factual material, while for the associative logic the usual grammar is too verbose and cumbersome, therefore to be overridden whenever needed. Leaving irrelevant references out of the utterance is more or less equivalent to dropping the use of *keigo* in poetic speech: keeping the full repertoire of honorific particles and special vocabulary in place would make poems clumsy and destroy their expressive force, although the information conveyed by the *keigo* was equally, if not more relevant for the Heian Japanese context as those grammatical blocks that the *Ise monogatari*, the *Makura no sōshi* and other texts frequently neglect to insert in expected places.

The associative logic has been available to the literary consciousness through the structure of the classical Japanese language, in particular, due to the nature of thematic constructions, exploited to their fullest by Sei Shōnagon in the lists of the *Makura no sōshi*. Even the strictest grammatically possible proposition still cannot be formally stronger than 春は曙 *haru wa akebono*, ‘in spring, the dawn’ (NKBT 19: 43). The link that connects the two sides of the proposition is not a statement of identity, but of associative relevance, and all logical constructions of higher order necessarily have to rely on building blocks of such stability. What is even more important is that the associative link cannot be grounded in objective circumstances, but has to be recognised subjectively, individually and more or less intuitively, thereby integrating the personal gaze into the logical perspective, the point of view from which utterances are or are not meaningful.

What should be noted here is, on the one hand, the individual character of associations, and the possibility of them being ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ on the other. In dan 319 of the *Makura no sōshi* Sei Shōnagon asserts that she “calls good what people disdain and bad what they give praise to” (NKBT 19: 331–32) and the judging standards of the *Makura no sōshi* indeed often seem idiosyncratic, yet the book reports many an occasion where certain utterances or moments of her behaviour have earned high marks for their associative adequacy, and this clearly is her normal purpose. Dan 100 is a typical example:

When we were residing in the officials’ quarters, on a clear moonlit night in the second decade of the eighth month, Her Majesty sat on the edge of the verandah and listened to Ukon no naishi playing the lute. Other women were chattering among themselves and occasionally laughing, but I leaned to a pillar and kept quiet. “Why are you so silent?” Her Majesty asked. “Say something. You depress me.” “I am only looking at the heart of the moon,” I replied. “This is precisely what you had to say,” she mused (NKBT 19: 155–56).

We can see that the interaction of the associative logic with other sociocultural mechanisms has produced several results at once: it has become a token of aristocratic sensitivity, and thus a source of symbolic prestige in the Heian court; therefore, it becomes something that those not naturally gifted are eager to learn, which in turn generates a necessity to standardise, to codify and to set the norms of correct associations that can be used and recognised without fail. Since these will in due time start to function almost as mechanically as the texts that are held together by causal logic, the associative thinking starts to evade the codified ground and to move on, toward less immediately obvious linking mechanisms that will then erect new standards of sensitivity. This can be explained partly by the fact that the Heian literary system did not distinguish between reading and writing competence: each courtier, or, in fact, any other person, who was educated enough to be able to read and enjoy the texts of court culture was, at least in theory, also expected to be able to produce new texts when occasion required. While some people may have enjoyed reputations of outstanding poets and most of the time literary skills could considerably advance a person’s career, for a long time there was no such status designation as a ‘poet’—for the better part of the Heian period, one remained primarily an official, a lady-in-waiting or a

monk regardless of one's accomplishments in the literary field. Sensitivity was a human, not a professional quality.

Kamo no Chōmei reports in the *Mumyōshō* how the new schools of poetry of late Heian times had attained greater depths of poetic feeling than their predecessors:

For example, in autumn twilight there might be no particular colour in the sky, nor sound to be heard, no particular motive whatsoever to be thought of, but all of a sudden your tears begin to flow. Shallow people would find nothing remarkable here, because they are only able to be moved by cherry blossoms and maple leaves that one can see with the eyes (NKBT 65: 87).

However, this new sensitivity also soon enough became another mark of distinction and the ideals of the 12th century innovators were replaced by normative practices that claimed to be based on their theoretical writings. This distinction of dynamism and formalisation is always inherent in associative logic, while its claim for relevance lies not on its capacity to explain the world, but its origins in the deep sensitivity of the culturally accomplished human mind.

In other words we can say that the elements of an associative sequence are not simply signs that point to a reality, objective or textual, but they have to be personally related to. The signs are not 'cold', they are 'warm'. We can easily conjure up mental images of the situations Sei Shōnagon lists as examples of *kokoro tokimeki suru mono* "things that makes one's heart throb":

To feed baby sparrows. To pass a place where children play. To burn good incense and lie down alone. To notice that the Chinese mirror has become a bit darker. When an elegant man stops his carriage and asks for directions. To wash the hair, to powder up, to put on a dress imbued with fragrance. Especially when there is no one to see, it feels remarkable in the mind. On the nights when there is someone to wait for, even the sound of the rain, the rustle of the wind get to you by surprise (NKBT 19: 72).

This passage is comprehensible precisely because we can empathetically understand the associative link between the mood and the examples, but the same kind of logic is most probably at work in lists like *dans* like 22, "for houses", a simple enumeration of 15 buildings of the capital with no

further comment (NKBT 19: 58). Sei Shōnagon's contemporary with sufficient sensitivity may perhaps have been able to feel why these houses, and not others, are special, or at least s/he should have been capable of imagining a personal perspective from which precisely these houses define the 'house' ideal. Thus, even when a sign ostensibly only refers to 'objective' reality, it will still be 'warm' and not 'cold' if it is to function in the framework of associative logic.

This allows us to draw a rather important conclusion: apart from elements of a narrative sequence, events or situations, we can distinguish in a Japanese literary text also emotional units, signs that point to certain moods and states of minds, and these have not just an accompanying role, but can function as constitutive structural units of the text. A particular text can thus consist of narrative units or emotional units or, as it is usually the case in prose, of both. Emotional units may form sequential structures as clear and strict as narrative ones, although they are somewhat less clearly discernible because they eschew complete verbal formulation. It is true that moods can be the causes and results of acts in any narrative logic, but in most literary cultures it is the acts or other objective events that carry the weight of narrative progression. In the Japanese model, this hierarchical distinction is not necessarily made, and therefore, as Esperanza Ramirez-Christensen writes,

...the narrative progression is curiously diffuse. It is constantly interrupted by the evocation of momentary impressions or frozen into static scenes which specify a particular mood, emotion, or thought. Its climaxes are not those in which the hero commits the fatal irretrievable act that unleashes the forces of destiny. They are rather those moments of heightened emotion in which outer and inner worlds are fused together in a transfiguring metaphor or pattern of images¹ (1982: 21).

Usually these moments are marked by poems, that is, utterances where language comes closest to its limits and sometimes even transcends them in order to convey 'warm' meanings that the 'cold' causal logic of normal prose narrative is unable to engage. We might even think that this is the primary criterion of poeticity: textual segments in the *Kojiki* and the *Nihongi* that are called poems usually correspond to these moments,

¹ "The Operation of the Lyrical Mode in the Genji Monogatari", in *Ukifune. Love in the Tale of the Genji*, ed. by Andrew Pekarik, Columbia University Press, New York 1982, p. 21.

while they lack regulated poetic form nor are they clearly marked by distinctive vocabulary or rhetoric conventions, for instance

KJK 49

*Susukori ga
kamishi miki ni
ware einikeri
kotonagushi
egushi ni
ware einikeri*

Susukori has
made this fine brew
and I am drunk
this brew that chases evil away
this brew that keeps the spirits high
and I am drunk (NKBT 1:284–85)

Poems, when they appear as one typical kind of structural element in a prose text, also ‘legalise’ passages that are poetically vague and not necessarily consistent in causal terms. On the other hand, it is also inevitable that the strategies of narrative logic affect the decoding of associative sequences to some extent. Particularly the standardised associations that can be learned, such as all kinds of *engo* and *utamakura* and also intertextual associations, act as an interface between the two logics, providing an analogy to causal connections in texts rich in associativity. Heian prose contains many such instances, thus, for example, in the *Izumi Shikibu nikki* we find a typical case: “On a moonlit night when she had lain down and was gazing out, she muttered to herself ‘truly to be envied’ and then sent [a letter] to the prince” (NKBT 20: 411–12). A few lines later, the prince has arrived to see her and is waiting in the garden to be let in. “He was walking around in the delightful garden, and the phrase ‘my love, just like the dew on the grass and leaves’ came from his lips” (NKBT 20: 412). Shikibu’s phrase ‘truly to be envied’ is identified as a quotation from a poem by Fujiwara no Takamitsu (SIS VIII 435) and the prince’s ‘my love, just like the dew’ similarly echoes an anonymous poem (SIS XII 761). These poems, or actually just elliptical hints to them, represent moods that in turn may function as motives for actions, and we are able to trace their logical connection: gazing the moon evokes a poem that actualises the nostalgia for an estranged lover, and the prince’s identification of his own feelings while waiting in the garden with a pre-existing textual equivalent prompts a tender and loving mood to him.

But while the associative logic has at times influenced and penetrated narrative structures, the converse is also frequently in evidence. Most of the time, poetry blends with prosaic surroundings more or less seamlessly, but it also happens that causal logical frames imposed on poetic texts are artificial and inadequate. In dan 60 of the *Ise*

monogatari there appears a popular and much-quoted anonymous *waka* from the *Kokinshū*:

KKS III 139	
<i>satsuki matsu</i>	waiting for the fifth moon
<i>hanatachibana no</i>	the blossoming mandarin
<i>ka o kageba</i>	feeling their fragrance
<i>mukashi no hito no</i>	it is the fragrance of the sleeve
<i>sode no ka zo suru</i>	of the one from long time ago

Quite obviously, the poem refers to mandarin blossoms, whose fragrance reminds the author of a former lover. The time of the poem is early summer, as its position in scroll III of the *Kokinshū* helps to make clear, and codally the ‘fragrance’ 香 of blossoms as paired with their ‘colour’ (=love) 色 refers to reminiscences and thoughts of love, or yearnings of the past. These are the associations most frequently exploited by the authors who allude to this text in their own poems. But not in the *Ise monogatari*, which contextualises the verse as follows:

Long time ago there was a man. He was so busy with court service and also not very true in his heart that his wife got attached to a man who said ‘I shall love you truly’ and went away with him. Our man was once sent as an envoy to the Usa shrine and heard that she is the wife of the official responsible for his lodgings in a certain province. ‘Let the hostess offer me the cup’, he said to him. ‘Otherwise I shall not drink’. When she took the cup and offered it to him, he took a mandarin fruit for a snack and said: [poem]. She remembered everything, became a nun and went to live in the mountains (NKBT 9: 143–44).

We might perhaps accept that the behaviour of the protagonist is here described as clumsily rude, but what is incompatible with the moods of the poem is that the *hanatachibana* has matured into fruit and is not a blossom any more. On other occasions, such as dan 25, the *Ise monogatari* has joined together into an exchange two independent poems that just happened to stand side by side in the *Kokinshū*, thus mistaking associative logic for the causal one (NKBT 9: 128–29). Neither case nevertheless seems to have disturbed the Japanese reception very much.

But the impact of causal logic to associative structures is not restricted to such blunders. Just as the associative logic of poetry has influenced prose, has also the logic of narrative discourse left its mark on

poetic production. The tendency toward integrated cycles with some internal coherence is a mark of that, and the practice of *honzetsu* (that included allusions to prose texts) enabled poets, especially during the late Heian period to develop a technique that could be called “underlying non-existent narrative”, the creation of an atmosphere in which the poem seems to hint at a story that remains untold. A *honzetsu* poem normally points to a narrative element rather clearly:

SKKS 1334 Shunzei-kyō no musume	
<i>furinikeri</i>	now it has rained
<i>shigure wa sode ni</i>	the drizzle on my sleeve
<i>aki kakete</i>	the autumn is there
<i>iishi bakari wo</i>	I was waiting only because
<i>matsu to seshi ma ni</i>	this is what you said

The poem draws on dan 96 of the *Ise monogatari*, where a woman asks a man to wait for her until the autumn, because she has skin disease and the hot summer is uncomfortable for her. Her brothers did not let her keep the appointment and this poem also echoes the feeling that the author is let down, and it alludes to the narrative which we have to imagine if we do not recognise the allusion. But some other poems which do not have an underlying narrative at all convey a rather similar atmosphere:

SKKS 1312 Jakuren	
<i>sato wa arenu</i>	the village is deserted
<i>munashiki toko no</i>	and in my empty bed
<i>atari made</i>	the autumn wind blows
<i>mi wa narawashi no</i>	nothing much if only I
<i>akikaze zo fuku</i>	could get used to it

This poem also clearly seems to have come out of a story, or perhaps refers to a previous exchange of poems, although it does not seem to be addressed to anyone in particular. The nonexistent story is produced precisely by the expectation of an intertext, and whenever we think there is one we do not know, we have to invent it. In a sense, the narrativity is produced by strategies that rely on associativity.

Not unexpectedly, major innovations frequently emerge in the meeting points of the two logics, where narrativity melts into poeticity and vice versa. A new quality is added to the balance with the appearance of Zen and its stress on personal realisation that establishes a direct analogy between associative logic and spiritual emancipation, not just

delicate sensitivity. We find frequent discussions of the problem in theoretical treatises of *renga* poetry and also of *Nō* drama.

Associativity constitutes the foundation of the genre of *renga* and one of the linking techniques that join separate verses together, the vague operation of *kokorozuke*, linking by mood, again raises associative logic to the status of a poetic skill that has to be developed and cultivated. We can say that in hananomoto *renga* associative logic becomes, for the first time in Japanese literary history, institutionally certifiable, because it has to be not only recognised and accepted by the other members of the *za*, or composing group, but also validated by the presiding *renga* master, who could decide on the inclusion of the verses in the text and whose authority was accordingly even stronger than that of the sensitivity arbiters or poetic judges of the Heian court. This quickly led to the tendency to formalise certain associative conventions to the point that they became almost mechanical and available to less skilled practitioners as a fallback in ready-made form, which made them lose their ‘warm’ character. Already Nijō Yoshimoto has criticised this:

Linking should follow the style of the author and not previously established patterns. It is quite possible to link a verse of forgetting to one of love, or rain to the moon, or blowing wind to flowers. All of these combinations are normally avoided, but if they correspond to the style of the verse and are executed skillfully, the result will be interesting. [...] Again, even if there is no association, no direct match between the words and the connection depends solely on the mood, or just one of two characters without any further correspondence, it is still possible to establish a good link. There are so many styles and moods for doing this that it is impossible to describe or enumerate them all - this is something that one must realise independently, relying on one’s own mind. (*Renri hishō*, NKBT 66: 49).

Here, as in many other places in his theoretical writings, Yoshimoto has stressed the Zen-related individual intuition of the author to counter the formalisation of the aesthetic practice, which, he feared, might suffocate *renga* when it attained ‘high’ status. Again we see how the tendencies of standardisation and unregulated expression oppose each other, this time in the context of defining *renga* as a practice of ‘high’ culture. Yoshimoto’s experience in the *waka* world, where he was part of the more conservative Nijō lineage, may have prompted him to oppose the already growing inclination of *renga* practitioners to codify norms of

association in a similar manner, which would guarantee them the symbolic power associated with the practice and keep its development in the hands of a more or less closed group of renga teachers, disqualifying outsiders of criticising them. In the last chapter of *Jūmon saihishō* Yoshimoto has directly expressed his worry that excessive concern for rules might hinder the artistic development of a renga poet (NKBT 66: 116) and similar sentiments are voiced by Zeami in his *Yūgaku shūdō fūken* in a section where he speaks about the actor who has mastered all techniques to perfection:

Nevertheless, he is subconsciously aware of what is ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, and therefore he can occasionally make mistakes. When this awareness is no longer there and highest perfection is in everything the actor does, it can indeed seem that he acts unusually, but it is still interesting. At this level there is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, ‘good’ or ‘bad’ any more. [...] When ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are both interesting, the distinction between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ is needed no more, nor is the subconscious awareness necessary (NKBT 65: 444).

Zeami has in the *Kyūi* treatise famously defined his aesthetic ideal with the Zen phrase ‘In Silla, at midnight, the Sun shines brightly’ (NKBT 65: 448) i.e. the highest artistic achievement surpasses the rules of ordinary logic and allows opposites to merge. On a more practical level, he describes the synthetic effect in the *Sandō* treatise:

What we call ‘opening the ears’ is the moment where the two threads of the narrative and music become one. The logic of the narrative on which the *Nō* is based is written down and addresses the minds of the spectators, and when the words that express the story and the music converge, the story and the music become one indivisible sensation that will earn the unrestrained praise of the audience (NKBT 65: 478).

What is noteworthy here is that Zeami is not just advocating *Nō* authors to write so that the mood of music would correspond to the narrative—no, the narrative and the music should fuse at a certain specific point, where the audience should suddenly realise their unity with a surprise effect. This analogy is, on the whole, valid also for the successful combination of narrative and associative logics in a verbal text: it is precisely their mutual interaction, their ability to support each other that

gives classical Japanese texts much of their distinctive character and produces a form of narrativity that can join events and moods, facts and emotions into integral wholes.

ABBREVIATIONS

KJK	Kojiki
KKS	Kokinwakashū
NKBT	Nihon koten bungaku taikei
SIS	Shūiwakashū
SKKS	Shinkokinwakashū