Front matter for


With a foreword by Eiji Sekine

*PAJLS 4: Japanese Poeticity and Narrativity Revisited.*

Ed. Eiji Sekine.
PAJLS
PROCEEDINGS OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR JAPANESE LITERARY STUDIES

JAPANESE POETICITY AND NARRATIVITY REVISITED

VOL. 4
SUMMER, 2003

AJLS
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ISSN 1531-5533
JAPANESE POETICITY AND NARRATIVITY REVISITED

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

EIJI SEKINE ............ iv

KEYNOTE ADDRESS I
BEYOND HOME AND CITY: POEMS BY ISHIGAKI RIN AND SHIRAISHI KAZUKO

MIZUTA NORIKO ............ 2

KEYNOTE ADDRESS II
REWALKING ALONG THE WAY OF POETRY

YOSHIMASU GÔZÔ ............ 39

THEORIZATION OF POETRY AND NARRATIVE: TRADITION AND MODERNITY
NARRATIVE AND POETIC PROGRESSION: THE LOGIC OF ASSOCIATIVITY

REIN RAUD ............ 54

FROM THE PAGES OF CLASSICS TO THE FANTASTIC TALES:
KYOKUTEI BAKIN AND SEVEN RULES OF FICTION

AIKO OKAMOTO MAC PHAIL ............ 66
POETRY AND POETICS IN TENSION: KUKI SHŪZŌ’S FRENCH AND GERMAN CONNECTIONS
MICHAEL F. MARRA ............ 79

WAKA, BUDDHISM, AND THE MEDIEVAL COMMENTARIAL TRADITION
NOMORI NO KAGAMI AND THE PERILS OF POETIC HERESY
KELLER KIMBROUGH ............ 99

DOWN THE PRIMROSE PATH: ARIWARA NO NARIHIRA AS LOVE GOD IN MEDIEVAL POETIC COMMENTARIES AND NOH THEATER
SUSAN BLAKELY KLEIN ............ 115

POETICITY AND NARRATIVITY IN TOKUGAWA POETRY
YOSA BUSON AND HUMOR: SHINHANATSUMI (NEW ‘FLOWER GATHERING’) AND KOKKEI
CHERYL CROWLEY ............ 139

POETRY FIT TO SING: TACHIBANA MORIBE AND THE CHÔKA REVIVAL
ROGER K. THOMAS ............ 151

CANON FORMATION IN MEIJI LITERATURE
THE FORMATION OF ALLUSIVE RESILIENCE IN WAKA AND ITS RELEVANCE TO MEIJI SHINTAISHI
DEAN BRINK ............ 166

SKETCHING OUT THE CRITICAL TRADITION: YANAGITA KUNIO AND THE REAPPRAISAL OF REALISM
MELEK ORTABASI ............ 184

WOMEN AND TRANSLATION: SUBVERSIVE TEXTUALITY
OUT OF THE SHADOWS: APPLYING A FEMINIST FRAMEWORK TO TRANSLATION IN MEIJI AND MODERN-DAY JAPAN
JUDY WAKABAYASHI ............ 195

WHOEVER SAID SPRINGTIME WAS FOR BLOSSOM? KOKINSHU POETICS, AIHU ORALITY, AND CHIRI YUKIE’S PREFACE TO THE AIHU SHIN’YÔSHU
SARAH M. STRONG ............ 207
ASPECTS OF MODERN POETRY AND NARRATIVE: FEMINISM, EXPERIMENTALISM, AND VISUALITY
UNSEALING YAMAKAWA TOMIKO’S TANKA: CONSTRUCTION OF TOMIKO’S GENDERED IMAGE IN CONTRAST TO AKIKO’S TANAKA MITSUKO...........219

THE HERITAGE OF SYMBOLISM: THE “AESTHETIC” STYLE OF KITAHARA HAKUSHU AND MURAYAMA KAITA JEFFREY ANGLES............237

COLONIAL MANCHURIA IN THE SURREALIST IMAGINATION: THE POETRY AND PROSE OF KITAGAWA FUYUHIKO AS MODERNIST HISTORY ANNIKA CULVER..............264

POETICITY OF FEMININE SUBJECTIVITY: CONTEMPORARY WOMEN’S POETICS FROM TOMIOKA TAEKO TO SHÔJO MANGA KUMIKO SATO.............278

CONTEMPORARY INTERTEXTUALITY AND PRACTICES OF DECONSTRUCTIVE REWRITING WITH TRACES: THE ITERABILITY OF MEMORY AND NARRATION IN KANAI MIEKO’S YAWARAKAI TSUCHI O FUNDE ATSUKO SAKAKI.............296

PLAIN WATER WITH A TWIST OF LIME (STONE): MAGICAL REALISM IN MEJORUMA SHUN DAVINDER L. BHOWMIK............311

SHIFTING DISCOURSES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF NAKAGAMI KENJI’S STYLE TO THOSE OF TANIZAKI JUN’ICHIRO, MURASAKI SHIKIBU, AND WILLIAM FAULKNER MIKIKA IWAYA.............319

WAGAHAI WA NEKO DEARU SATSUJIN JIKEN AS A POSTMODERN SEQUEL IRENA HAYTER..............332
FOREWORD

After the exciting tenth annual meeting in Boston, we came back in 2002 to Purdue University, the location where our activities had started. Topic-wise also, we returned to the basics by highlighting the themes featured at our first and second meetings—uta and monogatari. The conference organizer solicited to revisit Japanese poetry and narrative with new approaches in mind, encouraging discussions of the topics that had been less elaborated so far; in particular, we called for papers that focused on topics such as issues of translation, the comedic/playful literary tradition, and examinations of critical writings. We accepted thirty paper proposals, which had responded to our call with a variety of topics and approaches. Revised essays of most of the presented papers are included in these proceedings. As you see, we examine a lot of topics—poetics and narratology, traditional texts and contemporary writings, translation and critical essays, as well as aspects of literary politics.

One thing I noted, with pleasant surprise, was the fact that the three keynote speakers we had invited all talked about poetry rather than novels and tales. Professor Kojima Naoko, who is known as an expert of Taketori monogatari and Genji monogatari, discussed a shintaishi poem from the early Meiji period. Professor Mizuta Noriko, who is known for her extensive critical reading of women novelists, examined two contemporary women poets, Ishigaki Rin and Shiraishi Kazuko. Professor Yoshimasu Gözō, a leading poet of gendaishi, shared his discovery of a way to enjoy modern tanka poems. When given the general idea of the conference as a return to the basics of literary studies, they all chose poetry and poetics as their topics. This coincidence interests and impresses me.

The majority of us, Japanese literature researchers today in this country, are students equipped with structuralist, post-structuralist and later theories. We are all familiar with critical analyses of canonical discourses, that is, criticisms of the master narratives that rule the cultural unconscious of different local communities at different historical moments. With Karatani Kōjin and Hasumi Shigehiko, we also have become accustomed to a critical eye to view monogatari as a Japanese equivalent of the canon production machine. Uta or poetry can be discovered in this context as an interesting genre of expression, which necessarily resists the formation and completion of monogatari’s symbolic/semanticist order. Our keynote speakers’ choice of poetry as the topic of their addresses seems to indicate their conscious or intuitive
interest in this subversive power of poetry as a foundational energy for literary creativity. The two keynote essays we include in this proceedings are inspiring to me in the sense that they both shed insightful light on the secret of poetic resistance by paying specific attention to the creative processes of different compositions.

As critical readers of literary discourses, we tend to automatically politicize literature by focusing attention on hegemonic conflicts that structure the discursive texts. Before engaging ourselves exclusively in these analyses of textual politics, however, it is worth pondering over what literature means for us personally and for literary studies in general. One of the essential questions we should ask is how to understand literature in terms of a relationship between individuals and society. Is literature written as a celebration of individual expressiveness or as a politically and morally charged message advocating social justice and goodness? The two essays provide us with remarkable answers to this basic question and help us reflect on what we really want to do with literature.

Professor Mizuta’s essay displays a well-balanced discussion on the individualities of particular poets and the political dimension of their works’ messages in terms of gender issues. At one level, this is an exemplary feminist essay, which finds in two contemporary women poets’ works keen criticisms of their gendered society from the outcast observers’ eyes. At another level, this essay delineates two individual poets’ particular and thorough soul-searching processes through their long and devoted expressive practices. The author praises the transcendental loneliness and peacefulness the two women artists have acquired at the conclusive stage of their creative enterprises.

Professor Yoshimasu’s performance during the conference was fascinating. He mixed his poetry reading with his wife, Marilya’s, dramatic singing performance, and then gave us a lecture that included cassette tape-recorded poetry readings by Saiō Mokichi and Yosano Akiko. The essay we include here corresponds to the lecture portion of Professor Yoshimasu’s conference presentation. We witness here in what a, say, nakedly intimate manner this creative writer interacts with the expressive nuances of different poetic languages. His essay implicitly claims that the original joy of reading poems resides in the endless processes of personal learning, and in the mysteries of different individual voices. Isn’t this a wonderfully fundamental message—thrilling and challenging—for a conference intending to return to the basics of literature and literary studies?
Our special thanks goes to the following sponsors that made the conference and the publication of this proceedings possible: The Toshiba International Foundation and the Northeast Asia Council of the Association for Asian Studies, and Purdue University’s Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, School of Liberal Arts Dean’s Office, Asian Studies Program, and the Conference Division. I would also like to personally thank my department head, Professor Paul Dixon, for his opening remark and faithful support for our association’s activities from its founding days, Ms. Nona Schaler from Purdue’s Conference Division for her excellent conference coordination, and Ms. Joyce Detzner from our department’s publication office for her devoted work for the publication of these proceedings. Lastly, I would like to express my special appreciation for Professor Yoshimasu’s generosity: He gave us the artistic poster/lecture notes he made for his conference talk and allowed each audience member to receive a photocopy. He also gave us permission to use it for this proceedings’ book cover.

Eiji Sekine
The 2002 AJLS Conference Chair