"Is the Pen Mightier Than the Mouse?
Phenomenology of Japanese Word Processing"

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PAJLS 7:
*Reading Material: The Production of Narratives, Genres
and Literary Identities*.
Ed. James Dorsey and Dennis Washburn.

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Phenomenology of Japanese Word Processing

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As Unicode was about to achieve a virtual monopoly over the representation of non-alphabetic characters in the 1990s, eclipsing the autonomy of the coding system of Chinese characters originally set by JIS (Japanese Industrial Standard), many individuals and organizations claimed that Unicode could not do justice to the diversity of Japanese transcription. Anticipating the advent of digital libraries and publishing in Japan, concerned authors, publishers, academics, and bureaucrats participated in the resulting debates. The interests represented ranged from nostalgic defenses of the Sino-centric scriptural tradition to progressive calls for eradication of the practice of handwriting to voices of anti-Americanism, anti-capitalism and anti-globalization.

While many of the contentions have since been resolved technologically, some questions raised en route by major advocates, about the materiality of texts and the corporeality of the act of writing, remain relevant. Does word processing significantly affect the pace and duration of the physical act of writing? Does it shape or constrict the author's literary style by requiring a specific method of input and dictating, to a great degree, a set of characters to be used and a manner of punctuation? How do computer-processed texts transform the relationships between the author, the editor/publisher, and the reader? Does word processing shrink the existential distance between handwriting a text and reading it in print, thus depriving the author of unique access to the original? Does it fail to deliver the calligraphic diversity of handwritten script and diminish the image of the writer in the reader's eye? Does the author's increased capacity to restore and erase texts affect the role of memory in the creation of a text? Does the author's choice between pen and computer transform the relationship with the editor and the printer to the extent that the end product and its representation may be altered? This paper reconsiders implications of these outstanding phenomenological issues.

Dennō baibuntō sengen (Declaration of the Cybernetic Text Venders' Party), published in 1997 and edited by Shimada Masahiko, among others, is a collection of dialogues and round-table talks on the subject of word processing. Shimada, once an advocate of the "Kanji o sukue! Kyanpên" [Save Chinese Characters! Campaign], was concerned with the streamlining of Japanese script by Microsoft-led word processing because it fails to accommodate certain

specifics of non-alphabetic scriptural practices.[1] Among the oft-cited omissions in word-processing character sets are the "Ō" in Mori Ōgai 森鷗外 and the "ken" in Uchida Hyakken 内田百間.[2] In this volume, Shimada who, at least at the time of his book's publication, continued to write his works by hand, hears from those who are conversant with word processing, such as Yanase Naoki, who translated James Joyce's *Ulysses* into Japanese; Katō Kōichi, who hosts Horagai, a Japanese cultural website; and Kasai Kiyoshi, a science-fiction writer.

At one point in this volume, Shimada and Katō discuss the old practice of established publishers (such as Iwanami shoten) of letting authors use *genkō yōshi* (writing pad with printed grid for typically either 200 or 400 characters) with the inscription of the publisher's logo in the margins as a ritual with which to endow the authors with symbolical privileges.[3] By the time of Shimada's book, however, computers had relegated this custom to the past, along with the special esoteric bonding it promoted between publisher and author. The mass-produced and distributed commodity of floppy disks has displaced the "exclusive," privileged and priceless *genkō yōshi*, which are highly esteemed as artifacts by archivists, museum curators and the reading public.

Another effect of the shift to word processing is that the editor's role has grown less significant, and in some cases even irrelevant. Kasai Kiyoshi, who writes with a computer, remarks that since he has taken the burden of typesetting off the copy editor's shoulders, he deserves to be compensated for his labor, since this service would otherwise have cost the publishing house.[4] Indeed, on the Internet, in the first stage of the digital library, the keying in of texts (*uchikomi*) was considered not only wage-worthy labor but also a copyright-worthy creative act for which the typists earned attribution. Yanase Naoki's casual suggestion of publishing the "Complete Works of Mori Ōgai typed by Shimada Masahiko"[5] is an indication that the authorship of a text has been divided into two stages of textual production, one of them involving the physical and material labor of computerization.

While Kasai gives positive value to the act of word processing, Tawada Yōko seems skeptical of its significance. In "Tawada Yōko Does Not Exist," the paper she presented at the 2004 Association for Asian Studies annual meeting in San Diego, Tawada rightly envisions a

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[1] For a critique of this campaign and Shimada's part in it, see Kanai Mieko, "Dennō bunka to teinō baibungyō: 'Kanji o sukue!' kyanpēn o megutte," *Yuriik*a 30, no.6. May 1998, pp. 199-206.

[2] As I type this text, I realize that the former character has since been made available, while the latter ("ken" in "Uchida Hyakken") still remains absent.

[3] Shimada Masahiko, Kasai Kiyoshi, Inoue Yumehito, Yanase Naoki and Katō Kōichi, *Dennō baibuntō sengen* (Ascii shuppan, 1997), p. 136. Incidentally, Abe Kōbō whom I shall discuss at some length later in this paper used *genkō yōshi* with the Shinchōsha's logo (Romanized as SHINCHOSHA) for *Hako otoko* (1973; trans., *Box Man*,), in a curious way: he rotated the grid for 90 degree and wrote the script horizontally rather than vertically as the *genkō yōshi* stipulates. See *Kobo [sic] Abe as Photographer* (Tokyo: Wildenstein, 1996).

[4] Shimada, Kasai, Inoue, Yanase and Katō, p. 67.

[5] Ibid, p. 134.

computer-processed manuscript as a copy without an original—a concept comparable to simulacra in the words of Jean Baudrillard:[6]

> In the past, the trace of a brush on paper formed one face of the author, but we no longer see manuscripts written by hand. With a handwritten manuscript there can be but one single original (which can later be copied, of course), whereas in the case of a computer, there is no original at all, in the strictest sense. One writes on the computer, gets tired of it and stops halfway, and turns off the computer. On the following day one boots up the computer and what was written yesterday appears anew. That is, what I wrote yesterday re-appears in the same form and the electric currents allow me to see it again. But there it ends: the body of the text, the style in the form of scars and traces etched like ditches onto the paper, is gone.[7]

Unlike handwritten manuscripts, texts stored in computers obliterate revisions, which used to be mythicized as markers of the author's exclusive right to the text. This ownership stemmed from the process of "creation," an isolated, confined and secretive relationship between the author and his/her work. Even aside from the aestheticizing of the author's *hisseki* or "trace of the brush," holographs still attest to the author's corporeal presence over time.[8]

Tawada further differentiates the traditional mode of inscription from word processing by identifying the etymological origin of writing 書く as scratching 掻く. She then expresses a slight uneasiness with the lack of scratching (or leaving visible traces) in the act of word-processing: "[I]n Japanese *kaku*, the word used for writing with a fountain pen or computer arose from the same source as *kaku*, the word used for digging trenches, when scratching and scraping ditches."[9] There is no trace of scratching, Tawada suggests, in texts preserved in and retrieved from computers. She reminds us that one of the functions of the computer is to erase. While skilled at preservation, the device is also efficient and effective in overwriting older versions if so commanded, to the extent that, not only are they invisible, but also their erasure is invisible. The elusiveness and intangibility of text in the computer vaguely troubles Tawada, who seems to set store on the irreducible presence (if not existence) of the author.

Many have spoken either positively or negatively of the release of the text from the author's control, made possible by the use of computer. In "Kureōru bungaku no sōsei" (Genesis of Creole Literature), the dialogue on Abe Kōbō's act of word processing, between anthropologist Imafuku Ryūta and East European literature scholar Numano Mitsuyoshi, Imafuku suggests point-blank that word processing a manuscript is in effect a denial of the

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[6] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan P), 1994.

[7] Tawada Yōko, "Tawada Yōko Does Not Exist," translated by Doug Slaymaker for a volume of essays on Tawada Yōko, under review. Quoted here with the translator's permission.

[8] Komori Yōichi, for one, challenges the authority of printed text by drawing our attention to traces of struggles with writing, such as tear drops, coffee stains and blood stains on *genkō yōshi*, in "Shōsetsu gengo no seisei" (Generation of the Discourse of the Novel), in Komori, *Kōzō to shite no katari* (Tokyo: Shin'yōsha, 1985), p. 6.

[9] Tawada, "Tawada Yōko Does Not Exist," trans. Doug Slaymaker.

originality of the holograph.[10] Numano's position is slightly but decidedly different from Imafuku's. He begins with a sticky point that also concerns Tawada, though from a distinct perspective:

> *Numano:* We say, insouciantly, "We write with a word processor." Indeed, we are not "writing," but we can only identify the act through the metaphor of the old act of writing. Come to think of it, switching from handwriting to word processing is not just a matter of convenience; it has transformed the mode of expression and thus could trigger changes in thought and discourse.[11]

Numano's statement is provocatively ambivalent. On one hand, he rightly reveals the persistence of the old mode of textual production (writing) in the age of the new (word processing) in our language. The analogy dictates our mindset, comparing word processing to the act of inscription even in the age of digital cognition. On the other hand, Numano also stresses that the rupture between the two modes has potential to transform thought and discourse.

The focus of the dialogue between Numano and Imafuku, Abe Kōbō, is said to have been among the first to use word processing in Japanese. He began using an NEC word processor around 1983. Imafuku points out that Abe expressed almost complete indifference about the choice of handwriting or word processing.[12] Imafuku is alluding to the 1985 interview of Abe conducted by Kobayashi Kyōji, the author of several novels and short stories including *Shōsetsuden* (Legend of a Novel, 1986) that evolves around the longest novel ever written, posthumously discovered on floppy disks, raising questions as to the history of the publishing industry, the social function of the mass media, and the fate of the genre of the novel.[13] When Kobayashi admits that he has never handwritten his work, and asks Abe about the effects of word processing on his fiction, Abe declares that "there is no essential difference" between the two modes of textual production, except for saving time by word processing that would otherwise have been wasted.[14] Numano offers a commentary on Abe's remark that is worth heeding:

> Conservative writers hold as gravely important the distinction between word processing and handwriting. In contrast, Abe Kōbō said, "[W]hether one writes with word processor or by hand, it's no big deal." And yet he switched to word processing, which is quite significant.[15]

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[10] Numano Mitsuyoshi and Imafuku Ryūta, "Kureōru bungaku no sōsei," *Yuriika*, 26, no.8, August 1994, p. 191.

[11] Ibid, p. 207.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Kobayashi Kyōji, *Shōsetsuden* (Tokyo: Fukutake shoten, 1986).

[14] Abe Kōbō with Kobayashi Kyōji, "Hametsu to saisei" (Extinction and resurrection, 1985), collected in Vol. 28 of *Abe Kōbō zenshū* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 2000), p. 271. Numano highlights this section of the interview by quoting it in "Furoppī disuku no naka ni hakken sareta tegami: Abe Kōbō saigo no messēji" (A letter found in a floppy disk: Abe Kōbō's last message), *Kikan Herumesu* 46, November, 1993, p. 77.

[15] Numano and Imafuku, p. 207.

If, however, there is no big difference between handwriting and word processing by computer, as Abe claims, then why would he invest so much money and effort in switching to word processing? And why would he stick to the new practice for the rest of his career? He must have found a significant advantage in it. Numano seems to be intent on theorizing the switch beyond the simple reason of convenience that Abe notes in passing in the above-cited interview.

Indeed, in another interview, with Tsutsumi Seiji (poet, president of Seibu Department Store, and founder of Seibu Theatre, where Abe Kōbō Studio, Abe's own performance group, often performed), Abe commends word-processing rather passionately. This interview took place in 1983, shortly after Abe switched to word processing (in fact, the transcript is the first piece of writing that is confirmed to have been formatted by Abe on computer). He is in part responding to those whom Numano would call "conservative writers" for their false belief that word processing would stigmatize literature. Abe also welcomes, however, the improved option of eliminating what is unnecessary at the time of revision, as opposed to having to trim sentences in the first draft when handwriting. Thus, he suggests that word processing allows a faster pace of work and more intensive concentration on elements that cannot be pre-programmed.[16] Abe is known to have rewritten his manuscripts doggedly, and his physical struggle with *genkō yōshi* was obviously overwhelming and distracting.[17] Abe rather appreciates the computer's function of erasing, which concerns Tawada.

Numano is perceptive enough to note limitations to Abe's adoption of word processing, and where the limitations of the benefit lie:

> Before he started using a word processor, there must have been a painful process involving revision after revision. I think the use of a word processor was a godsend for him. Still, he could not completely rely on a word processor, even in the last days of his life. He scribbled on scrap papers, origami—you name it—and pinned them, many of them, on the board around his desk.[18]

Instead of envisioning the word processor as an eraser of the author's originality, whether positively or negatively, Numano tries to grant the act of word processing as much physicality as possible. He chooses to appreciate the complexity of the act, highlighting its material side as well as its coexistence with conventional note-taking by hand.

Unlike Tawada or Numano, Ōtsuka Eiji, a *manga* creator turned literary historian, uses the outcomes of word processing to review the premises of the author's identity and the

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[16] Abe Kōbō and Tsutsumi Seiji, "Sōsaku ni okeru wāpuro" (Creative Production and Wordprocessor, 1983), collected in Vol. 27 of *Abe Kōbō zenshū* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 2000), pp. 136-141.

[17] Abe's wife had to differentiate used *genkō yōshi* that Abe had wad up and thrown away for good and those which he may possibly resurrect later, depending upon the firmness of paper balls. Abe Neri, ed., "Nise geppō," an insert in Vol. 25 of *Abe Kōbō zenshū* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1999). Yata Shōhei at Shinchōsha who edited *Suna no onna* (1962; trans., *Woman in the Dunes*, 1964) has attested to the fact that when Abe hand-wrote his texts, he would revise so drastically in the stage of galley proofs by physically cutting and pasting paper that the original version literally disappeared. See Tani Shinsuke, ed., *Abe Kōbō hyōden nenpu* (Tokyo: Shinsensha, 2002), p. 69.

[18] Numano and Imafuku, p. 193.

authenticity of his/her style. What should not be missed is that he emphasizes the gravity of the shift from handwriting to word processing without having crossed the bridge to newer technology himself. Ōtsuka's position thus constitutes a chiasmic opposite to that of Abe who, while quickly switching to the use of a word processor, declared there to be no significant difference between the two writing methods. Ōtsuka demonstrates his keen sensibility on paradigmatic changes that took place in the mode of textual production as follows:

> Once upon a time, when the word-processors began to circulate, people were passionately engaged in a debate for a short while on whether or not the novelist's style would change by wordprocessing. Then, as everyone got accustomed to writing with word-processing software, a conclusion was drawn for no reason that there was no change. However, when I write "however" (keredomo), I—and I do not use a wordprocessor myself--cannot imagine how there could be no difference between the composition by keyboard, involving the process of Romanization of "ke/re/do/mo" if only on the level of subconscious, and the way the mind works when it envisions four Japanese characters for "keredomo."[19]

Indeed, in the above-cited volume edited by Shimada Masahiko and others, it is casually said that word processing had not affected authors' individual styles, as some had anticipated. Noa Azusa, a science-fiction writer who is also an avid reader of Abe Kōbō, has similarly dismissed any suggestion that the choice of tool (word processing or handwriting) affects the style of the author. Such conclusions, however, have generally been quickly drawn and submitted without logical explanation. Ōtsuka is correct in pointing out that this wide-spread conclusion was not theoretically drawn but arrived at empirically, as writers simply grew accustomed to word processing and felt as though there had been nothing novel about the practice once it was normalized. Indeed, it may only have been a reaction to the old-school writers who insisted that word processing would degrade the aesthetic value of literature, and yet the renunciation of handwriting did not form a theoretically rigorous argument, either.

Ōtsuka would be the last person to re-aestheticize literature. As the author of a controversial essay, "Furyō saiken to shite no bungaku" (Literature as bond of bad investment) he is known to have promoted the marketability of literature. He even devised an annual garage sale of literary publications called "Furima"—a Japanese abbreviation of "flea market"—much to the dismay of some traditionalist authors (most notably Shōno Yoriko, a fierce defender of *junbungaku* [belles lettres] without regard to market value). Ōtsuka has established cognitive discrepancies between handwriting and word processing without assuming an aesthetic hierarchy between the two. He argues that the romanization of Japanese words and the typing of words using a keyboard must affect the thought process, which had previously been anchored by the handwriting of *hiragana*, *katakana* and *kanji*.

Obviously, Ōtsuka's argument touches upon another issue that is specific to word processing of non-alphabetic languages such as Japanese, where input involves romanization and typing, two processes which were non-existent in the pre-computer age. By contrast, in

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[19] Ōtsuka Eiji, "'Zanteitekina bungaku' tachi ni" (For Conditional Literature), *Waseda bungaku* 29, no.5, September 2004, p. 108.

alphabetic languages, texts had always been romanized and typing had long been an established practice before the advent of computers. Once you become a typist, it's much faster to enter a Japanese text by alphabet, although the conversion (*henkan*) from alphabetic letters to *hiragana* and/or *kanji* could take additional time and could also accidentally produce incorrect characters, given the number of homophones in Japanese. Attempts at preventing or resolving this second problem can interrupt the flow of work. One might try to hit the conversion key as frequently as possible to reduce the possibility that the machine chooses to conjoin sounds differently than intended and turn them into incorrect scriptural letters. Another strategy would be to type in a different reading of the intended Chinese character, a reading that allows fewer homophones, namely, *kun'yomi* (semantic reading) rather than *on'yomi* (phonetic reading). *On'yomi* is more problematical in this context, as it derives from the original pronunciation in Chinese—a language that is rich in homophones to begin with, and that also differentiates words by way of tonation (an aspect that Japanese does not have)—rendering all the differently toned words that share the same consonants and vowels as homophones. While these little tricks might expedite word processing, they are diversions from the formation of discourse and thus reveal the chasm between text as an imaginary entity and text as a material entity.

Ōtsuka, however, differs from Tawada on one crucial account. Word processing, in his view, cannot crush authorial identity, since such identity is illusory. Instead, word processing helps us realize that styles are not unique to individual authors but are for anyone to imitate and reproduce, being nothing more or less than various combinations of many identifiable text-forming habits:

"The intrinsic nature" of a given "literary style" consists of a certain outstanding rate of frequency of words in use, the degree of likeliness that a certain word and another are found next to each other, preference for words of a certain number of syllables, probability of a number of words in a given sentence, and regularity in punctuation and paragraphing. Seen this way, however, the intrinsic nature of the style of a genre as well as that of a certain author's style becomes measurable. (…) Just as it is not so difficult to develop software to translate standard Japanese into a dialect, it is possible to narrate in a given style simply by modifying word choices and suffixes as prescribed by a program.[20]

Ōtsuka's point is clear: he criticizes the way the notion of style has been exploited and enshrined by literary journalism as an identity marker of a given author. Instead, he suggests, we should renounce the possibility of locating authenticity in style because it is only formal and thus programmable.

A question that can be teased out of Ōtsuka's argument is whether there are any recognizable stylistic differences between word processing authors as a group and handwriting authors as a group. Kondō Kazuya, who designed the Shinchōsha version of *Abe Kobo Zenshû*, makes a relevant observation: "Personally, I think Abe Kōbō is very much suitable to hypertext. The structure of the route of his thought, or the mode of composition and transposition, can be

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[20] Ibid, p. 117. The "program" Ōtsuka refers to at the end of this quotation is an imagined one, edited in light of demographic elements that would affect the use of language.

minutely proven to be hyper-textual."[21] Noa Azusa identifies hypertext rather than word processing as a radical break in the history of discourse:

It has become news in literary journalism that Abe Kōbō's posthumous work was found stored on a floppy disk. But this is merely a matter of little significance, just a little change in writing tool. The essence of the novel does not change at all, if the fountain pen is replaced by a word processor, or if the *genkō yōshi* is replaced by a floppy disk.

One would have to wait for hypertext to correctly attribute the evolution of the mode of representation to a technological development.[22]

Does the literary style dictate the mode of (material) production, or vice versa? Are there some authors, such as Abe, whose style according to Kondō is suited for hypertext, or does hypertext nurture a certain kind of style? To verify Kondo's hypothesis that Abe's style is suited to hypertext, we must review the discrepancy between the word-processed text (that sits in one computer or is printed out of it) and the digitized text (which travels across cyberspace, proliferating and generating new versions).

But this constitutes entry into a new chapter, and an exit from this one.

Acknowledgments

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[21] Kondō Kazuya and Takahashi Seori, "Abe Kōbō to shashin" (Abe Kōbō and photography), in *Abe Kōbō: bōdāresu no shisō*, *Kokubungaku kaishaku to kyōzai no kenkyū* 42, no. 9, August 1997, p. 131.

[22] Noa Azusa, "Nazukeenu kaibutsu" (Unnameable monster), *Yuriika* 26, no.8, August 1994, p. 68.