“Semiotic Aspects of the Refined Expression in Classical Japanese: Language and Literature”

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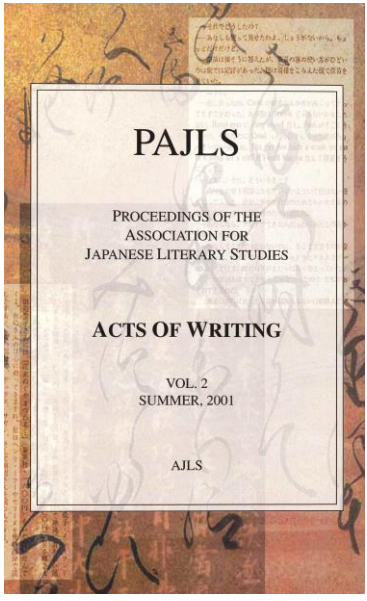

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SEMIOTIC ASPECTS OF THE REFINED EXPRESSION IN CLASSICAL JAPANESE: LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

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Semiotic criteria applied here to help with analyzing the "Refined Expression in Classical Japanese" are of two mutually related types, one dynamic and one static. The dynamic aspect has proved useful for describing functional differences between poetry and prose in general, while the static aspect has served the purpose of correctly clarifying particular concepts of *miyabi, aware* and *karumi*. The two complex criteria are depicted in extended contexts in Pictures 1 and 2 respectively.

The term "classical Japanese" refers either to the Nara, Heian and medieval (*chûsei*) texts, or to the whole corpus of premodern texts in Japanese up to the Meiji Restoration in 1868. In this treatise the term is used to convey the second, broader meaning. Classical genres like *waka, haiku, zuihitsu* and *nikki* have essentially survived until our modern and postmodern time. Their marginal (?) position and their changes within the mainstream of modern Japanese literature represent an interesting line of study, but from the point of view of understanding the premodern Japanese mind we must concentrate on those symptomatic features of Japanese classical texts that had almost disappeared by the time the Meiji Restoration took place.

One such remarkable characteristic is the symbiosis of lyrical poetry and prose.[1] *Uta monogatari* (verse-and-prose story) is the most obvious example, but poems exist together with prose also in *tsukurimonogatari* (fiction), *rekishi monogatari* (historical novels), *gunki monogatari* (heroic military novels), as well as in *nikki* (diaries) and *zuihitsu* (miscellaneous writings). The tradition of juxtaposing the language expressions with and without metrical structure continued until the end of the Edo period (1603-1867) when its termination was marked by the appearance of probably the last

[1] The fact that "poetry and prose were not thought to be alien media" has been explained in historical context by Miner, Odagiri, and Morrell, 32.

important *haiku-haibun* text, *Ora ga haru* (My New Year) by Kobayashi Issa (1763-1824) in 1819.

While in case of later *monogatari* or the combination of *haiku* and *haibun* (in, for example, *kikôbun)* we can speak about the presence of poetry within prose texts, the presence of *dai* ("topic") or *hashigaki* ("introduction") in *wakashû* ("collections of poems") represents an earlier stage of the poetry-prose symbiosis.

In the case of *Genji monogatari*, for example, poems included in the narrative transcended the story and elevated it to a mythical language imbued with *kotodama* ("the spirit of a word"). In case of *shû* (for example, *Kokinwakashû*), the *dai* or *hashigaki* prose units accompanying some poems functioned as anchors keeping poems safely bound either to semantic indicators like "rain" (*ame*), "chrysanthemum" (*kiku*), "insects" (*mushi*), or to certain recurrent events like "the coming of spring" (*risshun*), "dedicated to a woman" (*onna ni tsukawashikeru*), or to a particular event like "when Master Saigyô invited people to read one hundred poems."[2]

In both above cases, however, we would be unable to understand the quality of the poetry-prose symbiosis without having a clear idea about the essential difference between the functions of the two genres, regarded as two language-related ways artists have chosen to communicate, in the most general terms, ideas about the operations within the universe (existential concerns), all living beings' lot (ultimate concerns), and the fatal coexistence of all creatures and things (mutuality concerns).

On the most simplified level, the functional difference between the "ways" of poetry and prose would be symbolized by the distinctive meanings of the terms "phoneme" and "grapheme," the former suggesting in this particular context poetry's predominant significance as sound, the latter prose's predominant significance as script.

With recitation, the sound reverberates outside; a poet's word (a meaningful entity) is absorbed by the surrounding world, thus bringing about a chance for an immediate response. With writing, the script (a sense making entity) resolves inside; an author's word is primarily absorbed by his or her mind, and hidden in a resulting object (scroll, letter, book, etc.), and has to wait for a reader in order

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[2] "*Saigyô hôshi, hitobito ni hyakushu uta yomasehaberikeru ni.*" *Shinkokinwakashû*, 254, no. 1196, preceding a poem by Fujiwara Teika (1162-1241).

to communicate its meaning. On the practical level, it seems that those who prefer reciting and listening to recited lines love, in the first place, the sound of words. Those who prefer to write and (silently) read written lines seem to enjoy musing over the script.

Artists of old Japan preferred combining the above activities. By binding verses to prosaic texts the artist might be expressing his or her firmly implanted yearning to invigorate prose with a poem's rhythm.[3] In other words, the symbiosis was not motivated by the desire to display one's personal capabilities, but to reveal the deep-seated sense of evolutionary hierarchy of the two genres through a creative act. In short, the "sound" poetry occupies a position above that of painstaking script. (Thirteen centuries ago, the utterance in English that "a poet speaks up while a novelist writes down" would very likely be comprehended by Japanese not as an idiomatic expression referring to stereotyped activities but rather as a statement relating a substantial meaning of speaking and writing).

The scheme in Picture 1 illustrates the idea of a "journey of the word" from "being" (*ari*) to "non-being" (*nashi*), i.e. from the mighty loud invocation to the dangerous autistic silence. At the beginning of this "journey" the word is addressed literally "to whom it may concern." It appeals not only to fellow human beings but also to gods, plants, birds, rocks, etc. The verbal communication can be directed to all of them, because in the so-called traditional (premodern, ancient) Japanese mind all natural beings were involved in calling and paying attention, i.e. in the ever-changing and continuous functional process of semiosis. However, there is a pitfall at the end of the word's (gesture's, expression's) "journey." It may get lost when a mind is cornered with "noise and twaddle"[4] and may lose the power to convey substantial meanings (*kotogara*) and to make essential, true sense (*makoto*).

Here, however, we are interested mainly in positive aspects of the coexistence of poems and narratives. In the relevant sequence

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[3] Writing about the tradition of reciting *kanshi* (poems composed by Japanese poets in Chinese) Iida Rigyô has expressed his idea about the healthy (sound) rhythm: "In the rhythm of a poem there is a latent potential to activate the deep layers of human psyche (...). When we restore the life of beautiful words of a written poem by reciting it, the rhythm will provide us with the same stance that was adopted by ancient poets and we shall be able to feel their breath." Iida, 14.

[4] "Noise and twaddle" symbolize all oppressive means that have ever been used to silence people.

of the suggested scheme (Picture 1), the two subsequent genres are preceded by "prayer" and followed by "drama" in order to imply that in a moment of reading a poem, an individual is closer to fellow human beings than in a moment of saying a prayer, and in a moment of writing a story he or she is less tied to an audience than in a moment of staging a play. Thus the space filled with poems and stories seems to be devoid on the one end of the danger of excessive awe and fear and on the other end of the danger of similarly excessive attentiveness and deference. The downward direction from live word disseminated in the open air to a closed (non-communicating) mind represents the descent from real trees, seas and animals to their projections on screens. The whole picture indicates the "*soto-uchi*" kind[5] of oscillations in the human mind, and the shortening swings of the imaginary pendulum imply the dying out of movement towards the final standstill. The full and broken lines, depicting the "to and fro" swings respectively, symbolize the intensity and patent character of expression, and the reluctant and latent character of reflection. Old Japanese poets and writers were probably attracted by the combination of prose and poetry exactly because the tie between the two is less patent than are the ties between prayer and poem or narrative and drama. But a poem would contain religious grace and a narrative would contain poetical affection in the same way drama would contain narrative's tension. It is a matter of course that besides these principal features characterizing the symbiosis of prose and poetry, there have also always been additives of amazement and ecstasy (in the course of poetry) as well as additives of excitement, rapture, craze, withdrawal and hallucination (in the course of prose). In premodern Japanese literature we find ample evidence of all of these distinctive characteristics.

Excellent works combining poetry and prose were written in Fujiwara Japan and again in Tokugawa Japan. The earlier production of this kind was associated mostly with women writers, while the later *haiku-haibun* texts remained the domain of men. The best works in this line speak for authors who actually lived the symbiosis of poetry and prose. Their texts reflect dynamic, active minds which, by means of rhythmical and euphonic poems lifted to heaven their most sublime ideas, but instantly came down to the earth via the *sanbun* (prose passages), heavy with mundane affairs.

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[5] See Bachnik and Quinn, 247-294.

Fortunately, the genuine quality of these authors' vibrating perceptions is transmissible through a refined expression, and any inspired recipient who identifies with the "words" of a poet can acquire the kind of inner comfort of being at the same time true to himself or herself and outwardly responsible to his or her time and environs. Every instance of such "comfort" can be viewed as a proof of a listener's and reader's appreciation of perfection corresponding with a poet's and narrator's striving for completeness.

The unknown author (or group of authors) of *Ise monogatari* (The Tale of Ise), an *uta monogatari* from the beginning of the 10th century, succeeded in recreating the world of *miyabi* ("brilliance") where refined expression with a kind of esoteric touch was highly esteemed. Of all classical works constructed of poetry and prose, *Ise monogatari* is probably the most symbiotic in the sense of the mutually beneficial association of the two genres. One hundred years later Izumi Shikibu made in her diary (*Izumi Shikibu nikki*) a significant shift of accent from *miyabi* to *aware* ("anxiety") implying uncertainty of her position, life and mind. Her diary is presumably the most effective example of the symbiosis of poetry and prose in Heian literature, because it palpitates and therefore lives on the *uchi/soto* principle not only on the formal, genre level (poem-narrative rhythm), but also on the structural, text level (monologue-dialogue rhythm) and on the semantic, image level (dream-reality or *yume-utsutsu* rhythm).

Almost seven hundred years after *Izumi Shikibu nikki* was written and read, Matsuo Bashô (1644-1694) reached for the ideal of *karumi* ("loftiness") in his *Oku no hosomichi* (1702, The Narrow Road through the Provinces), representing the idea of free, dignified and highly "refined expression" coherent with the elevated mind of the poet to the extent that it cannot give offence regardless of to what or whom it refers. To produce a *haiku* on a serious matter in a light tone sounds easy, "but it took Bashô a whole life of struggle to reach in his work those categories" (i.e., *hosomi, karumi, shibumi*).[6]

Bashô's "narrow road" reflects, besides his own "way of sublime beauty" (*fûga no michi*), also the atmosphere of Genroku era (1688-1704) when (Neo-)Confucianism took over Buddhism and then competed with national learning (*kokugaku*) in the struggle for the dominant position in the minds of the Japanese people.[7]

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[6] Líman, 12-13. (Trans. from Czech Z.S.)

The degree of apprehension the ailing poet had about the hardships of this journey at the beginning only amplified his relief at the end. Bashô was on the road "through the Provinces" more than one hundred and fifty days. Yet as retrospective, he managed to compress this experience into mere fifty brief passages. When he decided to recapitulate his pilgrimage and recreate it as a work of art, he apparently had a clear idea about what was to be restored from the numerous notions deposited in his memory. The poet's complex mind made equally complex choices, and the resulting text revealed Bashô as a pragmatic, spiritual, and intellectual personality equally sensitive to nature's beauty, the attractiveness of culture, and the delicacies of human interactions, as well as to his own individual tastes, thoughts, and reveries. *Oku no hosomichi* was his response and gift to the world that could satisfy all his senses. The resulting literary picture of "provinces" is a highly refined poetical apotheosis of Bashô's homeland that had been humanized from the time of mythical gods.

The most frequent type of word appearing in *Oku no hosomichi* is the proper name. Bashô went to great lengths to identify not only a considerable number of places (towns, villages, rivers, mountains, waterfalls, etc.) but also many persons and personified beings, ranging from ordinary people (friends, pilgrims, monks, officials, farmers, etc.) to historical and legendary heroes, saints or supernatural gods. In two cases Bashô even tried to explain the origin of some place names by speculating about the meanings and combinations of characters denoting them.[8] These attempts emphasize a special attitude toward proper names, which are not understood only as geographical marks necessary for orientation, but as messages from time immemorial carrying essential information about every place Bashô was recalling.

Scenery was by no means the only source of Bashô's inspiration. His encounters with objects and creatures were no less imposing, be it the pair of sandals with blue ribbons he had received

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[7] See Bashô, e.g. Chap. 23 (*Shiogama no Myôjin*). This passage was clearly meant as a tribute to local governor who had the Myôjin's shrine reconstructed and thus prepared a new dwelling for the spirits of ancient Japanese gods (*"shinrei aratani mashimasu koso,"* 40).

[8] Bashô, 60 (*Haguroyama*) and 78 (*Nata*).

as a *Tango no sekku*[9] present or a seashell, a fishermen's catch, horses and fleas, a man cutting grass, etc.

A typical episode in *Oku no hosomichi* begins with a short but impressive introduction of a place whose name has been stated in its title. We learn about important sites in the vicinity, and sometimes also about historical or legendary incidents connected to that place. Then we get an actual report on the atmosphere of the place, often including information about the weather conditions that produce an effect on the traveler's mood. This, consequently, exercises influence on the quality and quantity of the following presentation of natural images which are gradually becoming less distinguishable from the poet's own mental images.

Bashô's rather austere diction characterizing the introduction of every new site remains untouched by the embellishments (respect language or probability modifiers) typical of the Japanese language. The same austerity also marks the second, internal part of a typical episode. The shift from the terse description of outside conditions to a similarly terse presentation of the scenery inside the poet's mind is hardly noticeable except for the smooth change of the language from prose to poetic measure. It means that the clauses in a sentence start having regularly four to eight morae, but mostly five and seven in accordance with the basic (*go-shichi*)[10] poetic meters of *waka* poems. The next step in the development of the text within an episode is a poem (*haiku*). In the poem, the poetic diction reaches its peak. In more than half of the episodes in *Oku no hosomichi* such a peak coincides with the end of the text unit, but there are also *haiku* (the "peak") located in different parts of episodes. In several episodes this peak is missing.

In a short episode called *Shirakawa no seki*[11] the rhythm changes approximately in the middle of the six-line text unit when the matter-of-fact references to certain contextual circumstances shift

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[9] One of the five (*Go sekku*) festivals celebrated on the 5th day of the 5th month of the lunar year. The various symbols of this festival include also *ayamagusa* (iris, blue flag). Hence the symbolic "blue ribbons" Bashô appreciated as the expression of fine sensitivity of one of his many hosts.

[10] *Go-shichi* = 5-7 morae; lines of five and seven morae are the basic constituents of many types of stanzas known in classical Japanese poetry.

[11] Bashô, 26.

to a kind of poetical reflection, and what follows is a poem in prose (a true *haibun*). The second half of the sentence in question has been divided to rhythmical units corresponding with grammatical units:

u no ha na no	5 morae	(attribute)
shi ro ta he ni	5 morae	(indirect object)
i ba ra no ha na no	7 morae	(subject)
sa ki so hi te	5 morae	(predicate 1)
yu ki ni mo ko yu ru	7 morae	(attribute)
ko ko chi zo su ru	6 morae	(predicate 2)[12]

By the use of *"shiro"* ("whiteness") and *"koyuru"* ("to cross") the poet discretely refers to the name and function of *Shirakawa no seki* and intensifies its meaning as a critical point on his road underlined by a historical allusion at the beginning of this episode. This particular episode ends with a *haiku* by Bashô's companion Sora,[13] who follows up on the same allusion.[14]

Such rhythmical prose passages as the one mentioned above can be viewed as bridges connecting the indicative beginning of an episode with its elated end. The model of an episode as a unit comprising the sequence of objective-subjective-transcendent parts applies to many episodes in *Oku no hosomichi* and reappears in different formal, functional, and semantic variants throughout the text. As such it attests to Bashô's sense of completeness plainly seen in the way he conceives an idea, his capacity to be inspired, and his ability to express profoundly a recreated past experience—aesthetic, emotional, spiritual, physical, intellectual, and verbal (see Picture 2).

Many *haiku* in *Oku no hosomichi* would lose their basic meaning without the preceding introductory passages containing proper names associated in the poet's mind not only with commonly

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[12] *Ibid.* "Flowers of *ibaranohana* are blooming (and thus adding more beauty) to the whiteness of *unohana*. That is why I feel as if I am crossing a barrier of snow."

[13] Kawai Sora (1649-1710), a disciple of Matsuo Bashô (1644-1694).

[14] Bashô, Chap. 12 (*Shirakawa no seki*), 26. The allusion refers to the 10th century poet Taira no Kanemori (d. 990) who composed a famous farewell poem when he reached the Shirakawa Crossing on his way to the northern parts of the country.

shared knowledge of, for example, a historical event, but also with a number of private ideas, fixed or elusive, but more or less relevant in a singular moment of an act of creation. Thus when we hear the *haiku* on a chirruping cicada hidden under a precious part of an ancient warrior's attire—a helmet:

muzan ya na
kabuto no shita no
kirigirisu[15]

we may fully appreciate the contrast between the most natural activity of a little creature and the bestial motives symbolized by the metallic object associated with humankind's art of provocation and violence. When we interpret this *haiku* outside the context of the episode in *Komatsu*, we may appreciate the vague idea about the lively, daring (*muzan*) insect making noise next to a costly antique. But we would be unable to feel the energy Bashô needed to lift the theme with such a lightness (*karumi*) until we read the little story preceding this *haiku* about the general Kiso Yoshinaka who offered the helmet and the entire outfit of the defeated rival Taira no Sanemori to the Tada shrine.[16] Here the symbiosis of this particular story with the above-quoted *haiku* makes readers sense the power of Bashô's poetical language. Having gained strength from a historical source, the poet instantly begins playing with the theme in verse. Triumphantly he removes the most precious symbol of men's valor from prose to verse only to reduce its value to nil by setting it against the song of a cicada. It is as if Bashô himself joined in this song, thus making known his own opinion concerning the waste of precious metal on an object involved in killing.

One possible keyword indicating what *Oku no hosomichi* may have in common with *Izumi Shikibu Nikki* is "apprehension." Yet the refined expression of anxiety mediated in both cases by the symbiosis of poetry and prose seems to refer to an opposite rather than to a similar state of mind in the two poets. Bashô relates the story of an itinerant poet who addresses rocks and waters and in doing

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[15] *Ibid.*, Chap. 42 (*Komatsu*), 72.

[16] Bashô here commemorates the battle of Kurikara in 1183 when Minamoto (Kiso) Yoshinaka (1154-1184) defeated his former clansman Minamoto no Sanemori (111-1183) who defected to the rival Taira clan.

so step by step rids himself of his fears. Izumi Shikibu on the other hand writes about a poet who keeps communicating with her lover[17] (mostly by exchanging letters) shut in a secluded place (at home or in a monastery). In concentrating on her dilemmas, she misses her chances to alleviate her sorrow. Gradually the fears weigh more heavily upon her mind and the final decision to succumb to her fate (*sukuse ni makasete*) and move to her lover's quarters suggest not alleviation but prolongation of her anxiety.

Izumi Shikibu nikki was written as a memoir, a survey of past events and experiences by a narrator deeply involved in both. In the so called "diary," Izumi Shikibu presents two protagonists, a poet, who is her alter ego, and Prince Atsumichi, the poet's lover, who has his counterpart in the real historical personage. The text consists of poems, letters, dialogues, contemplative prose passages, and descriptions of actions, all connected to either attempted or realized meetings of the lovers. The oblique allusions, hints, and doubtful and suspicious remarks in these poems, letters and conversations outnumber straightforward questions and answers. The narrator is shifting the stage of the story from the rooms the lady knows by experience to Atsumichi's rooms of her imagining. Her own thoughts mingle with presupposed thoughts of her prince.

The constant exchange of poems and letters attached to them make up the actual "inside" story of one very passionate and complicated love affair encompassed by the prosaic "outside" story about the circumstances hindering the consummation of this love. Izumi Shikibu arranged the text so that poetry and prose make a unit of two mutually irreplaceable functions. Thus, in the "act of writing" she managed to attain the perfect union she was unable to attain in life. But such substitution of art for life seems to bring about melancholy, disillusion and spiritual anxiety or *aware*. Unlike *karumi* in *Oku no hosomichi*, *aware* imparts to the refined expression of Izumi Shikibu a trace of low spirits.

Madoro made
Aware iku jo ni
Narinuramu
Tada kari ga ne wo

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[17] Izumi Shikibu's lover was Prince Atsumichi, son of emperor Reizei (950-1011) and half-brother of a former lover of Izumi's, Prince Tametaka, who died in 1002.

Kiku waza ni shite[18]

("How many sleepless, melancholy nights are still ahead? Attention to the cries of geese is my vocation.")

Much less involvement in, and much more investigation of the theme of love can be found in the *Ise monogatari.* Metaphorically speaking, it is a text where poems resemble running water in a swift creek and prosaic lines resemble embankments confining this natural, wild current. *Aru otoko* ("certain man") and *onna* ("a woman") are symbols of the man/woman differentiated roles in the unit called "a pair." One hundred and twenty five short episodes either relate or just suggest how difficult it is to make the simple equation M + W = P real. In the *Ise monogatari*, poems are the prime vehicle demonstrating this difficulty. The very first of its two hundred and nine poems is a good example of the expressive quality of poems that are the indisputably dominant element in the structure of this work of art:

Kasuga no no
Wakamurasaki no
Surigoromo
Shinobu no midare
Kagiri shirarezu[19]

"White flowers from Kasuga plain dyed my skirts deep purple. The strain of my restraint is boundless," sings a teenaged hunter who caught a glimpse of pretty girls. The narrator ends this episode by declaring that "people of old times were steadfast in creating such beauty"[20] or *miyabi.* "Steadfast" is a deficient translation of the old Japanese adjective *ichihayashi* which derived its meaning from "itsu" ("almighty") and signified an immediate human response to an instance of a *kami*'s (god's) demonstration of its majesty. Such a kind of mysterious momentary communication can be compared to the spark gap where a word is ignited as a spark. Where Bashô's refined expression was magnanimous and Izumi

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[18] *Nihon koten bungaku zenshû 18*, 115.

[19] Watanabe, 13.

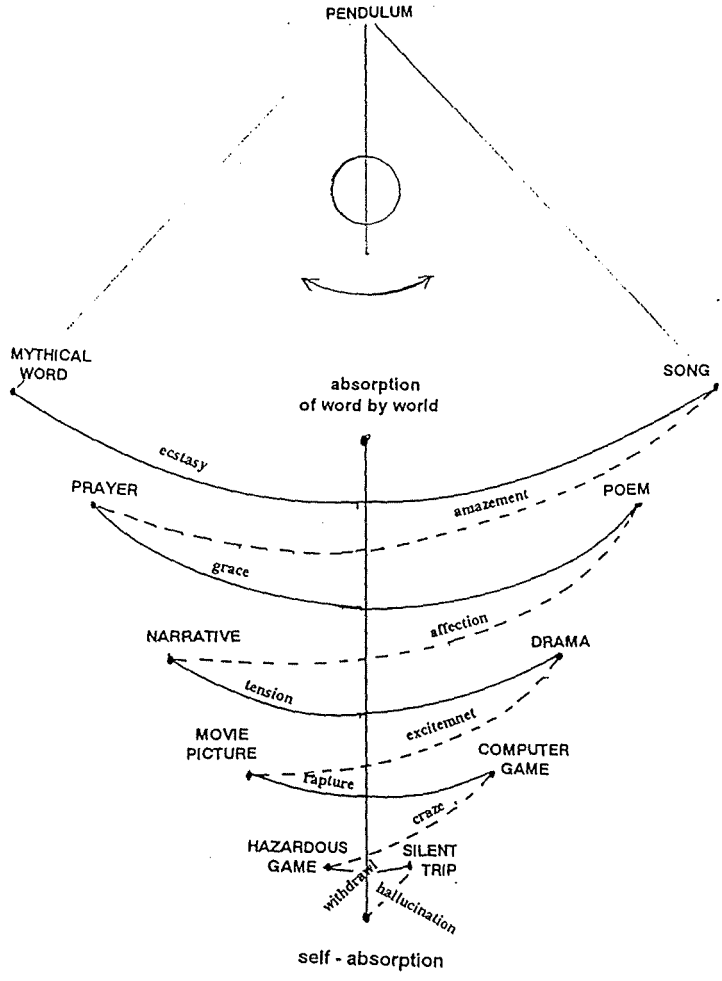
[20] "*Mukashi hito wa, kaku ichihayashi miyabi wo namu shikeru.*" Ibid., 14.

Shikibu's gloomy, the refined expression of *Ise* can be described as sparkling.

The difference between *miyabi, karumi*, and *aware* can be explained in terms of differing accents within the frame of sensory operations (Picture 2). A symbiotic "poetry-prose" text characterized by *miyabi* would most prominently oscillate between natural and verbal experience; the vibrations of a text characterized by *karumi* would be most strongly felt between the poles of emotional and intellectual experience, and the throbs of the text marked by *aware* would be generated by tension between spiritual and physical experience. If the "Model of Sensory Operations" (Picture 2) has been structured correctly, the anxiety designated by *aware* would be based mainly on intuition as the inner operation of the sense of smell on the one side, and on *naraioboe* ("manners," "habits," "customs") as the inner operation of the sense of taste on the other side. The loftiness designated by *karumi* would be based mainly on the polarity of two "outside/inside" complements represented by the paired senses touch/feeling and hearing/heed. Finally, the brilliance of *miyabi* would be based mainly on vision and cognizing on the one side of the "spark gap" and on speaking and wit on the other side of the same arch.

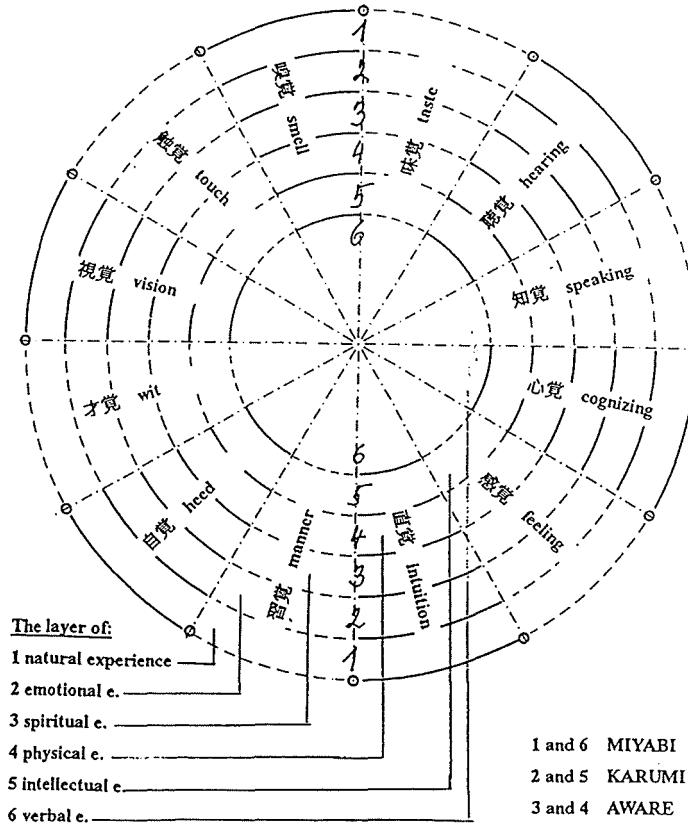
Let us conclude that the refined expression in classical Japanese has been a brilliant, lofty and anxious child of the happy couple—poetry and prose.

A Scheme
of extinction of the *kotodama* quality
in the process of words' loosing substantial referential background
(provided by the outside and inside reality)
in a world of overwhelming virtual reality



Picture 1

An Image of Interpretant as a Model of Sensory Operations
and as a Base for Semiotic Analysis



Picture 2

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