Overcoming Distance

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A recent book review reminded me once again of the strange things that can happen when alien cultures come into contact. The book being reviewed was a study of the *Rezeptionsgeschichte* (it sounds better in German) in Japan of the Japanese classic the *Pillow Book* (Jpn. *Makura no sōshi*), but the reviewer's main interest was not in fact the book in question but the *Pillow Book* itself and, by extension, its putative author, the Heian court lady Sei Shōnagon (966?–1017?). The reviewer had clearly found Sei Shōnagon herself a fascinating figure to such a degree that the editor of the highly respected journal in question had felt it appropriate to give the review the title “Shōnagon is Hot.” My heart sank, of course, but it is a good example of how reception and interpretation is always work in progress, whatever one might think of the direction of travel.

The *Pillow Book* has enchanted and engaged readers abroad ever since it was first translated into English by Arthur Waley in 1928. How can you not be drawn to a passage such as the following?

A night when the moon is very bright. You are crossing a stream and as the oxen tread along, water goes scattering through the air like a shattering of crystal—how magnificent!¹

A curious mélange of such descriptions, anecdotes, and vibrant vignettes of life at court, mixed in with a series of apparently random lists and catalogues, which recount likes and dislikes, annoying things, pretty things, the acceptable and the unacceptable, this work tells us much of life in the Heian court as seen through the sharp eyes of someone on the margins, a highly placed female companion/servant to an imperial consort. Almost inevitably, the disparate nature of the material—reportage, notes, a guide to manners—together with the disconnectedness that moves us this way and that at random, has always shifted the attention of the reader onto the character and personality of the implied author, and thence, with hardly a breath, onto the author herself as a historical figure.

1 Mark Morris, “Sei Shōnagon's Poetic Catalogues,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 40 (1980): 37.

Now there can be no doubt that Sei Shōnagon was indeed a real person. We know that she served in the entourage of Teishi (977–1000), the main consort of Emperor Ichijō (980–1011). But apart from one or two indirect and questionable references, the only substantial proof of her existence comes from the brush of her contemporary Murasaki Shikibu (973?–1014?), the author of the *Tale of Genji*, who in her diary had some rather unkind things to say of her. There are mitigating factors, for they were serving rival consorts and had a vested interest in being critical of each other:

Sei Shōnagon ... was dreadfully conceited. She thought herself so clever and littered her writings with Chinese characters, but if you examined them closely, they left a great deal to be desired. Those who think of themselves as being superior to everyone else in this way will inevitably suffer and come to a bad end, and people who have become so precious that they go out of their way to try and be sensitive in the most unpromising situations, trying to capture every moment of interest, however slight, are bound to look ridiculous and superficial. How can the future turn out well for them?²

In Japan today it is difficult to find anyone who has not heard of these two women, and for many they simply define the culture of eleventh-century Japan. By the same token, however, it is equally difficult to find anyone who has encountered either the *Pillow Book* or the *Tale of Genji* in the original Japanese, were it not for the fact that everyone is forced to struggle with one or two short extracts in one of the high-school language textbooks. Today, anyone interested in reading the *Pillow Book* will do so either in a purely modern Japanese translation, or in an edition encrusted with headnotes, footnotes, and a running literal translation along the bottom to aid comprehension. Fortunate indeed is the foreign reader who can pick up his or her translation into English, or Dutch, or French, or German, and read away. To this extent the English *Pillow Book* is and always will be far more approachable than the Japanese *Makura no sōshi*. The same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for the *Tale of Genji*.

Once we have accepted that Sei Shōnagon existed, what ties her to the *Pillow Book*? Unfortunately, the answer is very little. We must start with the knowledge that there are hundreds of different manuscripts of this work, the earliest of which does not predate the thirteenth century. Among these, scholars have identified four main variant textual traditions: two groups organized on a more or less logical basis, collecting lists with lists, and stories with stories;

2 Richard Bowring, trans., *The Diary of Lady Murasaki* (London: Penguin Classics, 1996), 54.

and two characterized by a sense of dislocation, randomness, and surprise. It has become accepted scholarly practice to argue that the more organized examples must necessarily have been of later provenance, representing a male attempt to edit and improve the work of a rather scatty woman. This is, of course, why translators always prefer to use an edition that comes from the random group. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that we have no way of knowing the truth of the matter.

The only other sign of a link between Sei Shōnagon and the *Pillow Book* is the following passage, which can be found at the end of some, but by no means all, manuscripts. The most recent translation handles it as follows:

Palace Minister Korechika one day presented to the Empress a bundle of paper. "What do you think we could write on this?" Her Majesty inquired. "They are copying the *Records of the Historian* over at His Majesty's court." "This should be a 'pillow,' then," I suggested. "Very well, it's yours," declared Her Majesty, and she handed it over to me. I set to work with this boundless pile of paper to fill it to the last sheet with all manner of odd things, so no doubt there's much in these pages that makes no sense."³

It may be of some interest to reveal some flavor of the raw material the translator is forced to work with. In the original it is presented as a single sentence:

Regarding some notepaper that the Minister of the Interior had given to Her Majesty—"What shall we write on this?" "Well, at His Majesty's they are copying something called the *Records of the Historian*," she said. "So let's making a 'pillow'!" "In that case, take it," she said, handing it over. How odd. What to do? In trying to fill this endless pile of paper, how many trivialities!⁴

The mention of a "pillow" here has provided endless fodder for scholarly debate. There are at least eight different theories as to what it might refer (only one of which has anything to do with a real pillow), the most likely being a word play on the *Records of the Historian* (Jpn. *Shiki*), which can also mean "bedding." Even so, the passage is proof of nothing, since it may have been

3 Meredith McKinney, trans., *The Pillow Book* (London: Penguin Classics, 2006), 255.

4 Matsuo Satoshi, et al., eds., *Makura no sōshi*, Nihon koten bungaku zenshū, vol. 11 (Tokyo: Shōgakukan, 1974), 463–464.

added by a later reader. We have absolutely no way of knowing. The sober fact is that any connection between Sei Shōnagon and the *Pillow Book* is tenuous at best and must remain a matter of conjecture, no matter how much this flies in the face of commonly accepted “truth.” A better approach would be to ignore both Sei Shōnagon (the historical figure) and “Sei Shōnagon” (the implied author constructed from inside the text). These figures merely exist as the product of a desire to bring coherence to an otherwise incoherent, unstable text, for such is the anxiety that a work like this engenders that the natural reaction is always to try and stabilize. One can do this using one of two strategies, both of which were, and still are, practiced by generations of readers, be they Japanese or (given the universality of such anxiety) foreign. Either one rearranges the work so that it appears more organized and “rational,” or one provides it with an authorial voice, the product of which it then becomes. In this sense, “Sei Shōnagon” is a fiction created to give the text a sense of structure and meaning that it may never have had.

Extra evidence for this emerges when we turn from the modern translation, be it into a European language or Japanese, to the classical “original.” Disconcertingly, the text immediately starts to float free, to the extent that “Sei Shōnagon” disappears almost without trace. I say “almost” because sheer force of habit makes it difficult for us to completely negate the presence of the implied author, even though the signs of that presence are nowhere near as obvious in the classical Japanese as they are in English. Translators, as we see in the above excerpts, can try and do clever things to avoid an excessive sense of personalization, to avoid the insistent “I” around which character tends to coalesce, by saying “you,” or by objectifying with the judicious use of the passive voice, but in the end Indo-European sentences will always be in need of a subject and, as should be clear from my own attempt at a literal version, the “I” is always screaming to get out. How does this happen? Not only is Japanese a language the syntax of which operates more on the basis of topic + comment than with subject + predicate, there has always been a strong preference for avoiding expressing subject wherever possible. A Japanese sentence can, when it wants to, lie like a boat without an anchor, and the genius of whoever compiled the *Pillow Book* was to take full advantage of this intentional indeterminacy.

The *Tale of Genji* presents similar problems, although here the question of how to represent realia takes on greater significance. Take for example, Waley’s 1935 translation of this lengthy tale. One of the aspects of Waley that stands out today is that he felt impelled to transpose the story into an essentially non-Japanese setting. Heian houses and mansions had few solid walls, the buildings were on low stilts, and rooms were divided off from the outside by blinds and a broad wooden veranda. Inside there was little more than a series of screens

and flimsy partitions. When inside, everyone spent most of their time at floor level, and women in particular had to take care they were not seen standing when men were present. How do you naturalize into English a scene in which Japanese architecture of the eleventh century plays a major role, when you cannot rely on any of your audience having the slightest idea of what it might have looked like? Later translators could rely on more knowledge and so, by and large, managed to avoid the problem, but Waley did not have the option. His answer was to use a small catalogue of words and phrases that eventually transposes us into a Mediterranean setting: there are “porticos,” “terraces,” a “loggia,” and “borders” and “moats” in the garden: people sit on “chairs,” look through “windows,” recline on “couches,” and retire into their “chambers.” “Genji flung himself onto a divan.” “He descended the long stairs.” “There was the clatter of hoofs in the courtyard.” And whenever someone writes anything, a desk with drawers invariably materializes. Yes, it brings it alive for us, but we end up at the wrong eye level and in the wrong environment. It is difficult, for example, to imagine from his translation that when a man stood outside by the veranda his eyes would have been level with the skirts of the lady kneeling on the floor of her room some four feet off the ground, with no “wall” between them.

I would now like to shift perspective for a moment, and go to the other end of the telescope. What must it have been like for those Japanese in the eighteenth century who suddenly found they had to come to terms with a West of which they knew little? Along with fear comes the fascination that drives youth to plough into the unknown. I began my academic career some fifty years ago with a study of the life and work of one such youth: the army doctor and eminent man of letters Mori Ōgai (1862–1922). Ōgai’s father was a doctor trained in traditional Chinese medicine, so it was natural for the son to study the new medicine, taught by those German medical scientists who had been invited to come and teach the best and brightest students in Tokyo. He later reminisced how difficult it was to deal with a father whose understanding of hygiene remained stubbornly limited and who, when finally persuaded that hands should always be washed in clean water, found him drying them on a dirty cloth. Ōgai was sent abroad for an extended period of study (1884–1888) and had the good fortune to conduct research in some of the most advanced universities in Europe, in Berlin, Leipzig, Dresden, and Munich. He happened to be in Munich when the eccentric Bavarian monarch King Ludwig drowned in mysterious circumstances in the Starnbergersee in 1886, an event that he later immortalized for Japanese readers in a romantic tale to which he gave the very Buddhist title “Utakata no ki” (A Tale of Transience). Given his official stipend as a government scholar, he was also in a position to mix in the highest

diplomatic and military circles, but above all he took full advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to absorb as much as he could. He read voraciously, and when he returned to Japan he led a double life, as an army doctor but also as a virtual conduit for the introduction of European literature, philosophy, and the arts. The timing was perfect, for the German Empire was only thirteen years old, in the middle of forging a nation-state out of a series of smaller states. It could hardly have escaped his attention that Meiji Japan was involved in a similar process, creating a nation out of a collection of previously disparate domains with different dialects, climate, and customs.

To understand the ideological underpinnings of European culture, there was an intellectual battle to be fought, a battle that involved language. Not so much the learning of a foreign language, but the far more difficult task of translation, of transferring into Japanese a whole vocabulary that covered not just everyday objects, but unfamiliar ideas such as law, liberty, love, literature, God, religion, and democracy. And when it came to translating stories and novels, there was a whole host of difficulties to be overcome, from the banal to the sophisticated. When describing a scene in a Bierkeller, for example, how could you give the reader some idea of what a *Stein* was? Ōgai's first attempt ended in periphrasis: "earthenware beer mugs, cylindrical in shape, the equivalent of four or five sake warmers, with bow-shaped handles and hinged metal lids." How could one render the speech patterns of a Russian female character in a story by Turgenev, a truly alien species, if she were "speaking" in Japanese? In the end you had to invent an artificial speech that would eventually become accepted but never lose the scent of translationese. In this never-ending battle, Japanese had one secret weapon up its sleeve that was not available to other languages but which proved to be surprisingly effective in speeding up the process of assimilation. This was not, of course, the first time Japan had been faced with the daunting task of absorbing foreign vocabulary. The first encounter with a written culture in the sixth century had been an even greater shock, the result of which had been the slow development of an extraordinarily complex method of writing Japanese. One trick to emerge from this nightmare was the judicious use of the word-gloss (*furigana*), the habit of writing down the pronunciation of an unfamiliar Chinese compound word next to it in a smaller syllabic *kana*. This resulted in a form of double writing, which often made for a very busy-looking page. In the early-modern period this technique was often put to good use by writers who wished to subvert the norm by attaching unusual readings to words in the interest of either comic or critical intent. One might consider this as little more than a game, but men like Mori Ōgai recognized its potential. The word-gloss could be used to show either that a new word was being used with a new meaning, or to give a meaning to a completely

unfamiliar compound, both of which had the effect of speeding up the process of naturalization. To take just one example. There was much discussion as to how to translate the dreaded word “nature,” which had such a long and complicated history in Europe. Which aspect did one choose? What was the context? Should one use 性 (a Confucian term signifying “human nature”), or 天然 (with connotations of Nature as opposed to Man), or 自然 (with connotations of naturalness, spontaneity, but also selfishness)? By the time of Ōgai, the consensus had hardened around the last of these but to make sure, to guide the reader to the correct interpretation, he decided to gloss it in *katakana* with the German *Natur*. There can be little doubt that the more writers adopted this technique, the quicker a new word might gain currency.

There are many other surprises in store for the student of language contact. Who would have thought, for example, that the process of opening up to the West would bring an explosion in the use of Chinese characters? One might have thought that something so redolent of all that was to be rejected would have been avoided. But there are some things about a language that cannot be changed. In much the same way that English (but not, as it happens, German) expanded its vocabulary by returning to Greek and Latin roots, Japanese, the core of which has always been highly resistant to change, expanded its vocabulary by having recourse to the vast reservoir of Chinese characters, creating neologisms and calques according to traditional Chinese word-formation. So successful indeed was this strategy that when China itself was forced to face the outside world, it “re-imported” much of this modern vocabulary from its Japanese neighbor. Japanese has continued to resist forming new words using purely native elements, although the outside resource has, of course, shifted from Chinese to English. Where will it end? Impossible to tell. And that is good news for those of us who are dedicated to doing what we can to overcome distance.