

A LITERARY-MEDITATIVE GLOSSARY AND SEVERAL ROMANTIC-POETIC ANNOTATIONS: SEI SHŌNAGON, *THE PILLOW BOOK* (枕草子 ▪ *MAKURA NO SŌSHI*, 1002?)

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Abstract The present study aims to emphasise the particularities of the unique literary style used by Sei Shōnagon in the classic masterpiece *The Pillow Book*, a prose genre (*zuihitsu*) that combines the journal-memoire type notes and the catalogue-type lists with poetry and anecdotal recounts. As a miscellanea of contemplative meditations triggered by day-to-day experiences or by uncensored associations of random ideas, *The Pillow Book* reveals Sei Shōnagon as the *author* of the narration and as a direct *participant* in the recounted events. By using an unprecedented narrative technique, *The Pillow Book* contains approximately 300 paragraphs of different lengths (*dan*), some bearing separate subtitles, in a rhythmic three-part structure that transforms this type of prose into a dynamic text in which the imperial court, the individual and nature are, for the writer, a spectacle that needs to be revealed in and through words. Our analysis aims to argue the particular means by which Sei Shōnagon continuously explores not only the individual creativity, but also the (direct or indirect) *poetic* potential of the word, by revealing the miraculous presence of the word, in its multiple valences, in the representation of the universe: the word as a decorative element, but also as a world creator (*utamakura*, *makura kotoba*, *kotodama*).

Keywords Sei Shōnagon, *The Pillow Book*, *Zuihitsu* prose, *Utamakura*, *Makura Kotoba*, *Kotodama*.

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At times when I'm beside myself with exasperation at everything, and temporarily inclined to feel I'd simply be better off dead, or am longing to just go away somewhere, anywhere, then if I happen to come by some lovely white paper for everyday use and a good writing brush, or white decorated paper or Michinoku paper, I'm immensely cheered, and find myself thinking I might perhaps be able to go on living for a while longer after all.¹

Having already become part of the universal literary heritage, *The Pillow Book* (枕草子・*Makura no sōshi*, 1002?) by Sei Shōnagon 清少納言 (966?-1024?) and *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari* 源氏物語, 1008?) by Murasaki Shikibu 紫式部 (978?-1016?) are the classical masterpieces of the “golden age” of Japanese literature from the Heian period (794-1185).

In *The Pillow Book*, by combining several stylistic registers (journal-memoir notes, poetry, anecdotal accounts, catalogue-type lists) Sei Shōnagon foreshadows the prose literary genre *zuihitsu* 随筆 (or “running brush”), which imitates a diary but contains random notes, bestirred by the spur of the moment and with no regard for chronology.

However, as opposed to the diary genre itself (*nikki* 日記), *zuihitsu* contains impressions triggered by the author’s personal fantasy at late hours of the night, – which could explain the juxtaposition of the words “bound notebook(s)” (*sōshi* 草子) and “pillow” (*makura* 枕) in the book’s epilogue –, like a miscellanea of contemplative meditations triggered by the events of the day or uncensored associations of random ideas.

Regarded as the literary work with the most numerous versions of all works of classical Japanese literature,² *The Pillow Book* can be interpreted both as a reflection of an individual *psyche*³ and as the expression of a voice that alternates between honest, flamboyant, romantic, ironic or sarcastic. The voice belongs to the aristocracy of the Heiankyō (“peaceful/tranquil capital”) imperial court, which reveals Sei Shōnagon as the *author* of the narration, as a direct *participant* in the recounted events. Having used a unique narrative technique, *The Pillow Book* contains 300 paragraphs of different lengths, with or without titles, in a tripartite structure. One narrative part focuses on the events taking place at the imperial court, which are in fact the author’s personal experiences. Another part contains her thoughts and feelings on different themes and subjects, while the third part makes up the famous 164 lists that comprise everything from mountains and flowers to celebrations, from comely things to unsettling things, to collections of poetry, short stories or diseases. The prose’s rhythmic

¹ Sei Shōnagon, *The Pillow Book*, transl. from Japanese by Meredith McKinney (London: Penguin, 2006), 258.

² Gergana Ivanova, “Re-Gendering a Classic: ‘The Pillow Book’ for Early Modern Female Readers,” *Japanese Language and Literature* 50 (1): 108.

³ Naomi Fukumori, “Sei Shōnagon’s *Makura no sōshi*: A Re-Visionary History,” *The Journal of the Association of Teachers of Japanese* 31 (1): 2.

style thus transforms *The Pillow Book* into a dynamic text (*dōtaiteki* 動態的),⁴ in which the imperial court, the human being and nature are, for the writer, a spectacle that needs to be revealed in and through words. Sei Shōnagon reveals the miracle of the word in the representation of the universe by activating and developing its multiple valences: the word as both a decorative element and a creator of worlds.

Sei Shōnagon enters the imperial court as a lady in waiting for Empress Fujiwara no Teishi (Sadako) 藤原定子 (975-1000) around the year 993. In 990, Teishi had become the consort of cousin-Emperor Ichijō (980-1011), the 66th sovereign of Japan, who was 10 years old at that time. However, in 995, Empress Teishi's father, Fujiwara no Michitaka (953-995), regent (*kampaku*) between 990-993 and chancellor (*daijō daijin*) over the following two years, died in a pandemic context, and the political reins were immediately taken over by the rival faction, led by Michitaka's brother, the ambitious Fujiwara no Michinaga (966-1027). Until the disappearance of the father figure, Empress Teishi enjoyed all of the Emperor's favours, after the appointment of Michinaga's daughter as the second Empress. However, Teishi then lost her influence and social privileges and the political disgrace had tragic consequences for her own destiny, as well as the destiny of her entourage. Having been removed and left helpless, Empress Teishi thus died at the age of 24, during the 12th month of the year 1000, upon the birth of the child, and her entire salon of ladies in waiting and servants would suffer extreme hardships.⁵ Sei Shōnagon, who was approximately 35 years old at the time the Empress died,⁶ witnessed the downfall of her mistress and her replacement with Shōshi and her new entourage, which was made up of ladies of great literary reputation, as was prose writer Murasaki Shikibu and poet Izumi Shikibu 和泉式部 (976-1030?).

Sei Shōnagon began writing *The Pillow Book* at the time of the ascension of Fujiwara no Michinaga, Empress Teishi's uncle, subtly making occasional and indirect references to the current political state of the court.⁷ Nonetheless, the author presents Teishi in all her splendour and sophisticated glory, as an Empress in the midst of her court,⁸ albeit with some exaggeration. Similar to a chronicle of daily life at the imperial court, Sei Shōnagon describes the court formalities (*hare no ba*) with all that the festivities and rituals entail. The writing, however, also contains the direct or indirect expression of the author's own erudition with respect to the Chinese and Japanese classical literature through sparkingly intelligent remarks, noted in *The Pillow Book* with more or less false modesty. Thus, the journal-memoire type passages contain descriptions of the events that had taken place between 967 and 1000.⁹ The

⁴ See Ivanova, 109.

⁵ See Fukumori, 5-6.

⁶ See R. Keller Kimbrough, "Apocryphal Texts and Literary Identity: Sei Shōnagon and 'The Matsushima Diary'," *Monumenta Nipponica* 57 (2): 133.

⁷ See Mark Morris, "Sei Shōnagon's Poetic Catalogues," *Harvard Journal of Asian Studies* 40 (1): 34.

⁸ Jeffrey Angles, "Watching Commoners, Performing Class: Images of the Common People in 'The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon'," *Japan Review* 2001 (13): 34-35.

⁹ See Kimbrough, 134.

final datable episode recounted in the text is connected to the fifth month of the year 1000, a moment that can be placed chronologically at least four months before Empress Teishi's demotion from the rank of favourite consort. However, the literary representation prevails in the face of the historical truth. The *incongruity*¹⁰ between the journal-type notes and the historical moment of the day favour the literary *notes* that record life at the imperial court of that time and the behaviour of a lazy aristocracy clustered around a child emperor who leaves the matters of state to the administrative council led by the Fujiwara noble family, so he could focus on poetry and the arts. The conditions are thus entirely in the favour of the formation of a universe enclosed in its own world, with an aristocracy that takes refuge inside a castle that is socially isolated by both the imperial fences and attitude. As such, Sei Shōnagon's focus is drawn only by the high society (*yoki hito*) of which she herself is part, while other people are either unworthy of attention (*tadabito*) or suspicious (*ayashi*). The subtle observations made by a highly scrupulous narrator-onlooker and a brilliant spirit thus make her a skilled portraitist as well. By deliberately ignoring the historical present and by not following the chronology of the recounted events, the use of the present tense in *The Pillow Book* become the obvious expression of an *immediacy* made explicit through a spontaneous commentary on the lived experience. The temporal past will, in fact, be invoked and outlined in the text by the author only through references to poems or legends of old, in order to construct a royal atmosphere, through allusions to the poems already mentioned in the book or through direct references to the historical past, in order to ensure the continuation of a glorious present with a majestic tradition.¹¹

Revealed through a surprising narrative technique, the contents of the book can be divided into three types of *dan* 段 or passages (paragraphs), each written in a concise, laconic, supple, allusive style, perfectly adapted to the interpreted style.¹² Thus, one type of *dan* reminds one of a journal or a memoir that revives the years spent by the author at the imperial court, in the service of the Empress. Another type of *dan* is marked by the sequences in the essayistic register, which contain the author's observations and descriptions of not only the social and individual behaviour of the retinue of courtiers or of the immediate entourage, but also the passing of the seasons or of man's passing through the world. The final type of *dan* covers a third of the book and represents a series of lists, similar to those of an inventory catalogue, which Sei Shōnagon almost transforms into a *subliterary genre*¹³ that probably represents the most... particular feature of the book. The purpose of the special technique used in the narrative construction is to create an original atmosphere, since some of the lists are poetic in a strictly formal sense,¹⁴ seemingly derived from the organisational schemes of the linguistic material (encyclopaedic compendiums and lexicons) in the Chinese poetry

¹⁰ See Fukumori, 1.

¹¹ See Fukumori, 14-15.

¹² See Morris, 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

anthologies that had been adapted to the local tastes in the Japanese poetry anthologies that preceded *The Pillow Book*, while others are poetic in the evaluative-affective sense.

As origins of more or less aesthetic sources of emotion, isolated from the rest of the book, the lists that cover many sections of the book could be categorised¹⁵ as *mono-dan* lists and *wa-dan* lists. Presented as passages that generally stand alone, the *mono-dan* lists (*mono* meaning ‘thing, object, being’) are the ones that “animate the soul” (*aware naru mono*), as is the case for *Infuriating things*, *Things That Make Your Heart Beat Fast*, *Things That Arouse a Fond Memory of the Past*, *Things that just keep passing by* etc. The *wa-dan* lists, such as *Mountains*, *Markets*, *Flowering Plants*, *Celebrations*, *Verses*, *Topics of Poetry* etc., however, exploits the topic marker function of the *wa* postposition, in order to provide easily accessible information in the form of pseudo-guides of social knowledge addressed to the noble elite. They configure what can be regarded as the imperial court “culture”¹⁶ into an irreproachable illustration of the nobility (*yasashisa*), or the poise and refinement. However, what seems to be, at a first glance, a mere listing of mountains, as is, for instance, *Dan 13: Yama wa* 「山は」, or *The Mountains*, in the English translation, upon more careful consideration proves to be an outright poetic list. In fact, the aforementioned *wa dan* is not merely a list of toponyms, but an inventory of the names of famous places from the poetry anthologies *Manyōshū* (*Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves*, 8th century), or *Kokinshū* (*Collection from Ancient and Modern Times*, 10th century), known as *utamakura* 歌枕 (poem-pillow).

Similar to a door permanently open towards the past, *utamakura* are the poetic words that revive the *waka* tradition (the 31-syllable poem), used to deepen the mystery and the depth of the verses. By sometimes ignoring the way in which the word is usually written, *utamakura* are used in a poem due to the potential given not only by homonymy, homophony and syntax, but also by the possible historical associations, which create a thesaurus of poetic diction.¹⁷ Thus, the sequence of mountain names from *The Pillow Book*, which is seemingly merely a stale list, is interrupted by the author with rhetorical questions regarding, for instance, the significance of a particular name. One such example would be *Kasatoriyama* 笠取山¹⁸ (which literally translates to *The mountain that put on a bamboo hat*): *koso wa ika naram(u) to okashikere* (*I wonder what Kasatori actually means... given its name. How amusing.*), which is, in fact, a mountain from the aristocratic capital Kyoto famous for viewing the charming colours of the autumn maple leaves. However, other toponyms are imbued with literary associations, as is the case of the name of Mount Ogura, thus challenging the reader’s erudition. Thus, the Ogura toponym can facilitate a subtle wordplay: usually written as 小倉山 (小 ‘small’ + 倉 ‘depository’ + 山 ‘mountain’), the mountain name can be understood as ‘small

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 8-10.

¹⁶ Gergana Ivanova, “Re-Gendering a Classic: ‘The Pillow Book’ for Early Modern Female Readers,” *Japanese Language and Literature* 50 (1) (April 2016), 105-154.

¹⁷ See Morris, 13-20.

¹⁸ In other editions, the name of the mountain appears as *Katasariyama* (*The shy mountain*). See *Makura no sōshi*, Ikeda Kikan (ed.) (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1981), 34.

depository mountain.’ However, by exploiting the homophonic game, the second stage of a glossary-type analysis shows that the name *Ogurayama* could be reassessed as: *o* (小) ‘small’ + *kurashi* (暗し) + *yama* (山), ‘mountain,’ and its meaning would thus become ‘slightly glum, misty mountain,’ which exploits the epithetic connotation from a poem authored by Ki no Tsurayuki (872-945), in the anthology *Manyōshū: yuudukuyo/ Ogura no yama ni* [...] (Moonlit dimly/ The Ogura Mountain [...]). Sei Shōnagon undoubtedly explored and processed the world of words and appears to have invested it with self-awareness. Thus, the reader is somewhat compelled to acknowledge it, in order to enter this world, either by recalling their own traditional poetic vocabulary, or by enriching their knowledge through the active participation in the creation of meaning, aided by the passages containing the author’s intelligent and ironic commentaries which, at times, defy the primary associations or usual metaphors.

Naturally, the book’s division into the three types of *dan* is arbitrary, given that the styles of each particular *dan* somewhat blend into a single section, as the beginning of the book shows. The volume starts with a manifest of the aesthetic code shared by the entire imperial court (*Dan 1*), and the first three chapters (*Dan 1*) *In Spring, the Dawn*, (*Dan 2*) *Times of Year*, (*Dan 3*) *On New Year’s Eve* became representative examples for the intersection of different styles, where the effect created by the adjective *okashi* (‘wonderful, splendid, charming, great, good’)¹⁹ is emphasised by through its repetitive use. If *Dan 1* is representative for the essayistic style, the *wa-dan* type can be found in *Dan 2*, while the *mono-dan* type is in *Dan 3*. The style differences seem imperceptible and gradual, rather than strictly typological. Despite the fact that it does not apply to the entire book, this narrative technique seems to suggest the dynamics of a short-long-short type flow, namely a concision-expansion-contraction:²⁰

Dan 1.

*Haru wa akebono. Yō yō shiroku nariyuku, yamagiwa sukoshi akarite, murasakidachitaru kumo no hosoku tanabikitaru.*²¹

*Primăvara – ceasul zorilor: cerul pălind încet, zarea munților abia luminată, norii subțiri, vineții, zăcând deasupra...*²²

[In spring, the dawn—when the slowly paling mountain rim is tinged with red, and wisps of faintly crimson-purple cloud float in the sky.²³]

¹⁹ The adjective *okashi* can also be used with the following meanings: ‘strange, unusual, eccentric,’ ‘suspicious,’ ‘wrong, inappropriate.’

²⁰ See Morris, 13.

²¹ Sei Shōnagon 清少納言. *Makura no sōshi* 枕草子 [The Pillow Book] (Tokyo: Kadokawagakugei shuppan, 2001), 12.

²² Sei Shōnagon, *Însemnări de căpătâi* [The Pillow Book], transl. by Stanca Cionca (Bucharest: RAO International Publishing Company, 2004), 35.

Natsu wa yoru. Tsuki no koro wa sara nari, yami mo nao, hotaru no ōku tobichigaitaru. Mata, tada hitotsu futatsu nado, honokani uchihikarite yuku mo okashi [emphasis ours]. Ame nado furu mo, okashi [emphasis ours].²⁴

Vara – noap̄ile. Luna plină, firește, dar și întunericul în care zburătăcesc de-a valma licuricii ori pâlpaie slab câte-o luminiță-două, ici și colo. [Este amuzant!] Frumoase [emphasis ours] sunt și noap̄ile cu ploaie.²⁵

[In summer, the night—moonlit nights, of course, but also at the dark of the moon, it's beautiful when fireflies are dancing everywhere in a mazy flight. And it's delightful too to see just one or two fly through the darkness, glowing softly. Rain falling on a summer night is also lovely.²⁶]

Aki wa yūgure. Yūhi no sashite yama no ha ito chikōnaritaru ni, karasu no nedokoro e yuku tote, mitsu yotsu, futatsu mitsu nado, tobiisogu sae aware nari. Maite kari nado no tsuranetaru ga ito chiisaku miyuru wa, ito okashi [emphasis ours].²⁷

Toamna – amurgurile. Sub razele piezișe parcă se-apropie munții. Corbii care își cată cuiburile, zburând repeziți, câte doi, câte trei, câte patru, și iar câte doi... Mă cuprinde dorul ... Și-apoi cârdurile de găște sălbatice înșirate pe cer, atât de mărunte! [Este amuzant!] După asfințit rămâne doar șuierul vântului și-un țârâit de găze.²⁸

[In autumn, the evening – the blazing sun has sunk very close to the mountain rim, and now even the crows, 1 in threes and fours or twos and threes, hurrying to their roost, are a moving sight. Still more enchanting [emphasis ours] is the sight of a string of wild geese in the distant sky, very tiny. And oh how inexpressible [emphasis ours], when the sun has sunk, to hear in the growing darkness the wind, and the song of autumn insects.²⁹]

Fuyu wa tsutomete. Yuki no furitaru wa iubeki ni narazu. Shimo no ito shiroki mo, mata sara de mo, ito samuki ni, hi nado isogi okoshite, sumi motewataru mo ito

²³ Sei Shōnagon, *The Pillow Book*..., 1.

²⁴ Sei, 清少納言. *Makura no sōshi* 枕草子..., 12.

²⁵ Sei, *Însemnări de căpătâi*..., 35.

²⁶ Sei, *The Pillow Book*..., 1.

²⁷ Sei, 清少納言. *Makura no sōshi* 枕草子..., 12.

²⁸ Sei, *Însemnări de căpătâi*..., 35.

²⁹ Sei, *The Pillow Book*..., 1.

*tsukizukishi. Hiru ni narite, nuruku yurubi moteikeba, hioke no hi mo shiroki haigachi ni narite, waroshi.*³⁰

*larna – dis-de-diminează. Îmi plac nespus ninsorile, dar și chiciura albă ori câte un ger strașnic. Să se-aprindă în grabă focurile, să fie aduși cărbunii încinși prin odăi, așa cum se cuvinte la vreme de iarnă. Mai încolo, către amiază, se moaie frigul și focul moare jalnic sub cenușa albicioasă.*³¹

[In winter, the early morning – if snow is falling, of course, it's unutterably delightful, but it's perfect too if there's a pure white frost, or even just when it's very cold, and they hasten to build up the fires in the braziers and carry in fresh charcoal. But it's unpleasant, as the day draws on and the air grows warmer, how the brazier fire dies down to white ash.³²]

Dan 2.

*Koro wa shōgatsu. Sangatsu. Shigogatsu. Shichihachigatsu. Kyūjūichigatsu. Jūnigatsu. Subete ori ni tsuketsutsu hitotose nagara okashi [emphasis ours].*³³

*Mă-ncântă luna întâi, luna a treia, a patra, a cincea. Lunile a șaptea, a opta și-a noua îmi plac și ele – fiecare cu rostul ei. Tot anul e frumos [emphasis ours].*³⁴

[Times of year – The first month; the third, fourth and fifth months; the seventh, eighth and ninth; the eleventh and twelfth – in fact every month according to its season, the year round, is delightful.³⁵]

Dan 3.

*Nanuka, yukima no wakana tsumi, ao yakanite, rei wa sashimosaru mono no mejikakaranu tokoro ni mote sawagitaru koso, okashikere [emphasis ours].*³⁶

*De Anul Nou, când cerul limpede se acoperă de cețuri gingașe și ies oamenii gătiți cu mare grijă să aducă urări stăpânului și celor de-o seamă – zău că e frumos [emphasis ours]!*³⁷

³⁰ Sei, 清少納言. *Makura no sōshi 枕草子*..., 13.

³¹ Sei, *Însemnări de căpătâi*..., 35.

³² Sei, *The Pillow Book*..., 1.

³³ Sei, 清少納言. *Makura no sōshi 枕草子*..., 16.

³⁴ Sei, *Însemnări de căpătâi*..., 35.

³⁵ Sei, *The Pillow Book*..., 2.

³⁶ Sei, 清少納言. *Makura no sōshi 枕草子*..., 17.

³⁷ Sei, *Însemnări de căpătâi*..., 36.

[On the first day of the year, the sky is gloriously fresh and spring mists hang in the air. It's quite special and delightful the way people everywhere have taken particular care over their clothing and makeup, and go about exchanging New Year felicitations.^{38]}

Paying the inherent tribute of the re-rendition of the original in a foreign language, given that the omission is probably fully justified in the cohesion and coherence of the *target-text*, the adjective *okashi* is twice absent from the Romanian translation of the first passage (*Dan 1*): once from the paragraph dedicated to summer and once from the one dedicated to autumn, absences which we filled in through the exclamation [*E minunat!* "Marvellous!"]. Through the multiple use of the adjective *okashi* in the *source-text*, not only for the mere subjective evaluation of a group of examples, the author insistently and persuasively attempts to transform the reader into an active participant in the world created through words. In *The Pillow Book*, it appears 46 times in the descriptions of the events that had occurred before Michitaka's death and 77 times after his death.³⁹ The adjective *okashi* thus becomes the obvious proof for the means by which Sei Shōnagon tried to manipulate her readers using the power of words. Through *okashi*, the author disconnects herself from the dramatic nature of the day-to-day present, upon which she seems to gaze with detachment and understanding. Moreover, with an inclination that is more intellectual-rational than emotional-affective, the adjective *okashi* seems to also depict the author's momentary attraction to a scene glimpsed in the course of a day, as shown in *Dan 232* as well:

Dan 232

Tuki no ito akaku yoru kawa o watareba ushi no ayumu mama ni suishiyau nado no waretaru yau ni midu no tiritaru koso okashikere [emphasis ours].⁴⁰

Trecând prin vad cu trăsura, pe-o noapte plină de lună, e-o desfătare [emphasis ours] să privești cum se sparge apa sub copitele boilor, în jerbe de stropi scânteietori.⁴¹

[On a bright moonlit night, when your carriage is crossing a stream, it's lovely the way the water will spray up in shining drops at the ox's tread, like shattered crystal.^{42]}

However, if the adjective *okashi* can be used as a spontaneous exclamation in reaction to the freshness of a scene, it can also express one's admiration for the aesthetic codes from the imperial court: "[...] ies oamenii gătiți cu mare grijă să aducă urări stăpânului și celor de-o

³⁸ Sei, *The Pillow Book...*, 2.

³⁹ See Fukumori, 17.

⁴⁰ Sei, 清少納言. *Makura no sōshi 枕草子...*, 206.

⁴¹ Sei, *Însemnări de căpătâi...*, 242.

⁴² Sei, *The Pillow Book...*, 215.

seamnă – zău că e frumos [emphasis ours]!” [It’s quite special and delightful the way people everywhere have taken particular care over their clothing and makeup, and go about exchanging New Year felicitations] (see above, *Dan* 3). Thus, in the brilliance of the author’s spirit and in the ingenuity of the ideas expressed in the context in which it emerges, *okashi* seems to assume an outright aesthetic function. Sei Shōnagon uses it every time she needs to summarise, in one word, the splendour of Empress Teisho’s imperial court, as well as the link between the sky, the earth and the human. *Okashi* thus distracts the reader from the major threatening political conflict whose tragic impact would mark the fate of the empress and of all of her ladies in waiting. Therefore, from the viewpoint of the textual poetics, due to its overwhelmingly large number of uses in *The Pillow Book*, *okashi* becomes a term easily associated with what is or can be amusing, attractive, interesting, in striking contrast with the concept of *aware*, the predominant adjective that outlines the world from the novel *Genji monogatari*. Associated with tears and with the impermanence of the world, the Japanese tradition interprets the withering flowers, the fading reverberations of a bell or the beauty of a woman changing over the years as sources of *aware*. Thus, while *aware* is an aesthetic term that describes the emotion inspired by an object or an event, whose connotation is linked to a profoundly psychological reaction, *okashi* suggests a momentary feeling, stirred by reason, rather than emotion.⁴³ Sei Shōnagon thus uses this instrument to intelligently and humorously present unimportant, even frivolous events, so as to create a harmonious and refined aesthetic vision in the text that she writes with a “running brush.”

As a diversely assorted collection, containing numerous challenges regarding the subjects approached, the observations expressed and, last but not least, the style, *The Pillow Book* permanently explores not only the individual creativity, but also the word’s poetic (direct and indirect) potential. With erudition and high intellectual refinement, with a cultivated aesthetic taste, Sei Shōnagon completes the scope of the “decorative language”⁴⁴ used in her notes with *makura kotoba* 枕詞 or *pillow-words*. *Makura kotoba* are figures of speech⁴⁵ used in *waka* poems in association with certain words; the (fixed) expression can be considered to be a “pillow” for the noun or verb it describes, although its entire etymology can remain unknown. Regarded as a primary source for poets, *makura kotoba* are independent words or expressions generally containing five syllables, associated within the poem with other words or expressions with which they form

⁴³ See Fukumori, 15-16.

⁴⁴ See Donald Keene, “Problems of Translating Decorative Language,” *The Journal-Newsletter of the Association of Teachers of Japanese* 2 (1/2) (May, 1964): 4-12.

⁴⁵ In the Japanese language, the ideogram *fumi* 「文」, meaning ‘writing,’ can also be read as *aya*, bearing the following meanings: ‘design and colouring, decoration, rhetorical embellishment.’ Moreover, the ideogram 「文」 is also part of the word *literature* (文学 · *bungaku*), compiled of the following elements: 「文」, ‘sentence, utterance, writing,’ + 「学」, ‘study, lesson.’ However, in the Heian period, *bungaku* was assigned to scholarly texts, written in Chinese (see Keene, 5).

connections in terms of meaning, of diverse association or of sonority, for a touch of semantic depth or rhetorical elevation. As a literary technique most often used at the beginning of the poem, the *pillow words* add their meaning to the meaning of the word that follows. The first classical poetry anthology *Manyōshū* contains 1200 *makura kotoba* that have survived, and, in the beginning, they undoubtedly must have had a complete, integral meaning that was lost in time.⁴⁶ One illustrative example of *makura kotoba* would be 「日の本の」 (*hi no moto no*) or *origin of the sun*, a pillow-word used for the name “Yamato 大和”, the name of Japan at the time. However, what is truly interesting is that, in time, *makura kotoba* actually replaced the country’s old name and, today, Japan’s name in the Japanese language is 「日本」 (‘The Land of the Rising Sun’), read as *Nippon* or *Nihon*.

As a common practice at the time, these decorative words are also frequently used in *The Pillow Book*, although it would appear that, in fact, these decorative words received the name *makura kotoba* only during the following centuries, after the title of Sei Shōnagon’s book. As decorative metaphors-metonyms that most often lack the original meaning and that have become the poetic standard, Sei Shōnagon uses *makura kotoba* in order to follow the previous Japanese poetic tradition, but also as allusions to the old poems. While today these *makura kotoba* seem illogical or seem to have no rational connection to the rest of the context, at that time they must have been filled with meaning. In *The Pillow Book*, they create a complex wordplay and a subtle network of associations transformed into the object of speculative archaeology the moment the reader is no longer able to crack the code of tradition.

In *Dan 48 [Norimitsu hides Sei’s whereabouts from Tadanobu]*, the author recounts how, having moved to the countryside, she is visited by her husband Norimitsu, who tells her about the uproar caused by her discrete (secret) departure from the imperial court. When questioned by certain important courtiers, Norimitsu, in order to respect his wife’s request, pretended to not know anything, in spite of the fact that Tadanobu suspected the falsehood of Norimitsu’s attitude and became very insistent. In order to resist divulging anything, Norimitsu grabs some seaweed off the table and starts chewing it. Norimitsu continues his recount by noting that those present must have been confused by the prolonged chewing and by the food choice, but the trick worked: he managed to not divulge the secret and Tadanobu believed that Norimitsu did in fact know nothing. Several days pass and Sei receives a letter from Norimitsu in which he asks whether or not he was to continue to hide her whereabouts or whether he could reveal the truth to those interested. As a reply, Sei sends him a piece of seaweed wrapped in paper. However, a new letter arrives from Norimitsu in which he states his confusion regarding the response he had received and asks for another, much clearer one. This time, Sei answers in the form of several verses:

⁴⁶ See Keene, 8-11.

*Ascunzătoarea pescuitoarei de perle
În fundul apelor
Să n-o spui nimănu.
Nu ți-a trimis ea iarba de mare?*⁴⁷

[The silent seaweed
said that you must never tell
the secret dwelling place
of the diving fisher girl
concealed in these hidden depths.⁴⁸]

As an allusion-filled reply, Sei Shōnagon's verses use *makura kotoba*, simultaneously following tradition and attempting to contribute to the making of tradition: could *seaweed* not become the *pillow word* for silence, in a world in which men and women do not speak in broad daylight or face to face, but hidden behind partitions?!

Sei Shōnagon – as a poet in a social, occasional sense – creates a world of the outside, without completely ignoring the dimension of human emotions, in a unique narrative formula found nowhere else in the history of Japanese literature, neither in the centuries before, nor in the ones that followed. The word lists from *The Pillow Book* turn into essay-like or memoir-like passages and then return to their list forms, in a whirlwind of etymologies and wordplays that shows the author's devotion not only to the world comprised in/by each word, but also to the history surrounding each word. Since the only rule is to not follow any rules, *The Pillow Book*, given the freedom of its construction, also unleashes a free flowing tonality that allows the author to fully exploit the potentials of the word. The inspiration is drawn from *kotodama* 「言靈」 (言 'word'+ 靈 'soul, spirit'), or *the spirit of the word*, an intellectual and spiritual concept dated to the 8th-9th centuries that speaks of the magical power⁴⁹ that resides in the word and in language respectively. As a central term in the *Shinto* animist tradition, the Japanese people's native faith that worships the divinity of every phenomenon or natural creation, *kotodama* reminds one of the fact that every word has a spirit. Thus, the good word bears positive energy and the bad word bears negative energy, which can therefore greatly affect the life of the person uttering them aloud. With an uncertain etymology, the concept of *kotodama* can be explained by the homophony between *koto* 「言」, 'word, speech,' and

⁴⁷ Sei, *Însemnări de căpătâi...*, 114.

⁴⁸ Sei, *The Pillow Book...*, 79.

⁴⁹ See Klaus Antoni, "Kotodama and the Kojiki: The Japanese 'Word Soul' between Mythology, Spiritual Magic, and Political Ideology," *Beiträge des Arbeitskreises Japanische Religionen* (2012): 4-5. <http://hdl.handle.net/10900/47042> (accessed on 3 January 2023).

koto 「事」, ‘act, situation, circumstance, occurrence, event, incident.’⁵⁰ The two ideograms (*kanji*, in Japanese) are both used in the chronicles *Kojiki* (*Record of Ancient Things*, 7th century) and *Nihonshoki* (*The Chronicles of Old Japan*, 8th century) as the name of the oracle deity *Kotoshironushi* (「言代主」「事代主」). Moreover, *tama*, meaning ‘soul, spirit,’ the second component of *kotodama* (in a phonetic match), references the soul of the deity both inside the word and inside the object itself.⁵¹ Furthermore, if everything in this universe has a spirit that speaks, the spirit of that very word manifests through the word uttered by the human being.

The *kotodama* concept itself, however, is first mentioned in *Manyōshū* (*Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves*, 8th century, the oldest collection of *waka* poetry that has been preserved) by poet Yamanoe no Okura: *kotodama* [emphasis ours] *no sakihau kuni* 「言靈の幸わう国」 or “the country blessed with the spirit of the word / the spirit of the language.” *Kotodama* thus speaks of history as destiny and of the conversion of the fate of the word – a stance deeply motivated by the original structure of the language –, into the fate of the country. In fact, in the Japanese tradition, no object was ever taken into consideration merely for itself but rather it was most often thought of as *something* that emerges naturally, provided that the certain “something” has “a heart, a spirit,” as a sympathetic energy between form, content and sound, under the auspices of the magic within the word. Thus, the human and the deity become one through the magical power of the word and, given that the word cannot be separated from its meaning and its designation,⁵² the act of uttering the word actually means creating reality itself. In a semiological and ontological identity between the signifier and the signified, a mysterious natural correspondence is interposed between the word and the object, which raises interesting issues regarding the connection between the word and reality, between sign and signified, between deity and human. Explained through the word’s power to create an event, to trigger acts through its very contents, *kotodama* shows that, in the Japanese culture, the word cannot be separated from its significance and designation. Thus, poetry becomes the supreme example that shows the relation between the word and the heart or the spirit of the person wielding it; given that the birth of a poem is strongly connected to the heart (spirit) of its creator. Therefore, unsurprisingly, poetry was considered to be the most... perfect expression of a good governance by the Heian imperial court.⁵³ Literature thus became a key element of social interaction and the literary talent could either help or hamper the person in question.

⁵⁰ See Izuru Shinmura, 広辞苑. 第四版 [The Thesaurus Dictionary of the Japanese Language, 4th edition] (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1991), 946-947.

⁵¹ See Antoni, 5.

⁵² See Yoshihiko Ikegami, “Sign Conception in Japan,” in Roland Posner, Klaus Robering, Thomas A. Sebeok (eds.), *Semiotics. A Handbook on the Sign-Theoretic Foundations of Nature and Culture*, Volume 2 (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), 1901.

⁵³ See Jacqueline Pigeot, *L’Âge d’or de la prose féminine au Japon (Xe-XIe siècle)*, preface by Françoise Lavocat (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2017), 29.

As a composite text, with fragments of journal-type notes and memoir-like retrospections, *The Pillow Book* combines the description of the pompous ceremonies of the imperial court (the author never overlooks even the smallest of details regarding the refined garments of the nobles and of the ladies in waiting) with the superficial description of various daily aspects that animate this closed-off world, all against the background of the evocation of nature in the succession of the seasons. As an unravelled succession of disparate events from the Heian aristocratic court, *The Pillow Book* also contains poems and anecdotal stories created by the author or borrowed from her readings of the Chinese and Japanese classical anthologies, in addition to short word descriptions of images depicting people or situations that moved, amused, or bewildered her. Moreover, the narrative text is casually riddled with lists of very diverse and rather heterogeneous things, in a stylistic register that, on the same page, varies from emotion to critical spirit, from empathy to satire.⁵⁴

Sei Shōnagon remembers entering the service of Empress Teishi, in *Dan* 184: “La început, când am intrat în slujba Măriei Sale”⁵⁵ (*Miya ni hajimete mairitaru koro*) [“When I first went into court service”⁵⁶], and she considered herself a marginal figure, unfit for the royal chambers because of her shyness and ignorance. In time, she asserted herself as a strong figure that was luminous due to her erudition and taste refinement, obtaining fame not only due to her flawless critical judgements and spontaneous and sometimes scathing remarks, but also due to her literary talent manifested in writing – based on the lives of certain remarkable characters (such as the Empress), as well as on her own personal experiences. Deeply cognizant of the creative self, the intimate notes in *The Pillow Book* reproduce the author’s personal view on the contingent facts and the only justification she gives her recounts is that of recording her own inner life. According to the author’s own confession in the epilogue, she filled out the papers received from the Empress with things seen with the eyes and felt in the heart (“I have written in this book things I have seen and thought”⁵⁷). As thoughts arrayed randomly, on the borderline between fiction and history, during the hours of boredom and loneliness, *The Pillow Book* covers and recovers the sky – earth and human hierarchy: “Am hotărât să umplu teancul acela de hârtii (și, vai, multe mai erau!), însemnând pe ele toate ciudățeniile câte mi-au trecut prin minte. Am ales tot ce mi-a plăcut în lume, tot ce mi-a părut mai frumos la oameni, am vorbit despre cântece și copaci, despre păsări și găze”⁵⁸ [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. Overall, I have chosen to write about the things that delight, or that people find impressive, including poems as well as things such as trees, plants, birds, insects and so forth⁵⁹]. Inquisitive and artistic in nature, born into a

⁵⁴ See *ibid.*, 23.

⁵⁵ Sei, *Însemnări de căpătâi...*, 215.

⁵⁶ Sei, *The Pillow Book...*, 176.

⁵⁷ Sei, *The Pillow Book...*, S29.

⁵⁸ Sei, *Însemnări de căpătâi...*, 314.

⁵⁹ Sei, *The Pillow Book...*, S29.

family of renowned poets, Sei Shōnagon doubted the quality of her notes ([...] oare poate sta cartea mea în rând cu altele?⁶⁰ [I never intended that it should be placed alongside other books⁶¹]) and, for a while, she kept them hidden. However, despite the fact that for some it may be a form of literature that only addresses the intellect, Sei Shōnagon's *Pillow Book*, contrary to her desire, did eventually reach the world and thus, her literary-contemplative glossary and her romantic-poetic annotations on the *floating world* became the readers' *pillow book*.

Translated from Romanian by Anca Chiorean

⁶⁰ Sei, *Însemnări de căpătâi...*, 315.

⁶¹ Sei, *The Pillow Book...*, S29.