

Following Where the Brush Leads:
The Potential of the Zuihitsu in American Postmodernist Literature

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According to Paul Hoover in the introduction to *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*, postmodernism refers to “the historical period following World War II... as well as a worldview that sets itself apart from mainstream culture” (xxv). While this is only one of many possible definitions of postmodernism, it does indicate that looking to Classical Japanese literature for forms conducive to American postmodernity may be somewhat counterintuitive. However, postmodernists have found useful tools in stranger places, and a moment’s glance at one Classical Japanese genre, the zuihitsu, will begin, I believe, to reveal its potential as a postmodern form. Employing Kimiko Hahn’s *The Narrow Road to the Interior* as the primary example, with some comparison to an established American postmodern text, Carole Maso’s *AVA*, I intend to demonstrate that potential.

Before I can proceed further, however, I must provide a little background on both postmodern literature and the zuihitsu genre. Only then can I begin to discuss why the latter may be so useful to the former. For Fredric Jameson, postmodernism represents a specific break from Romanticism and Modernism. As he argues in “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” one of the most important features of postmodernism is the transgression or “effacement” of key boundaries or separations, “most notably the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture” (655). Postmodernism is also characterized by, among other things, “aesthetic populism,” “the deconstruction of expression,” the “fragmentation of the subject,” and the imitation of dead styles and languages through the use of pastiche (Jameson, “Cultural Logic” 53-92).

Furthermore, Paul Hoover, in *Postmodern American Poetry*, views postmodernism as “an ongoing process of resistance to mainstream ideology” (xxvi). Hoover elaborates, explaining that postmodernism includes a process of doubling-back, overlapping, and contradicting to erase or deconstruct conclusions, relies on a “panoptic” view point, and “opposes the centrist values of unity, significance, [and] linearity...” (xxvii). Finally, Ihab Hassan’s essay “Toward a Concept of Postmodernism” offers a list of some of postmodernism’s most recognizable aspects. According to Hassan, postmodernism incorporates such things as play, silence, process and performance, absence, dispersal, parataxis, metonymy, idiolect, desire, difference, indeterminacy, and immanence.

The zuihitsu is a classical genre of Japanese literature that emerged sometime in the Heian Period (794-1185 AD), and the first known example is *Makura Soshi*, or *The Pillow Book*, by Sei Shonagon. The word zuihitsu, made up of the kanji for ‘to follow’ and ‘brush,’ is usually loosely translated as “random jottings,” or more literally and evocatively as “following [the impulses of] the brush” (Keene 1). The most basic definition of zuihitsu is: a collection of “brief essays on random topics” in which the “observations and reflections of the writer are presented with stylistic grace” (Keene 1, 9). A zuihitsu may consist of a series of loosely connected essays and anecdotes, as well as disconnected sentences, fragments, ideas, word pictures, poems, lists,

and snatches of conversations. Donald Keene, in *Seeds in the Heart: Japanese Literature from Earliest Times to the Late Sixteenth Century*, adds that “after reading a series of seemingly unrelated anecdotes or impressions, we may nevertheless feel a great sense of intimacy with the writer, much as if we had read his diary or perhaps an ‘I novel’ in which he laid bare the joys and sorrows of his life” (9).

The two most famous examples of the genre are *The Pillow Book* of Sei Shonagon, and *Tsurezuregusa* or *Essays in Idleness* by Yoshida Kenko. As has already been stated, *The Pillow Book* was the originator of the genre, and is still its best exemplar. In this collection of prose pieces, Shonagon recounts her experiences at the Imperial Court as well as varied, occasionally scathing impressions of nature and the behavior of those around her (Keene 412). Kenko’s *Essays in Idleness* is, like *The Pillow Book*, widely regarded as a masterpiece of the genre. But, while the two are similar in that they both deal with a wide range of topics in no particular order or structure, they are very different in tone. *The Pillow Book* was written by a lady of the Imperial Court who took great pleasure in collecting and relaying all manner of gossip. *Essays in Idleness* on the other hand, was written by a Buddhist priest, who while showing some interest in the world, was far more concerned with religious truth than matters of day-to-day life.

These two examples have dictated the two most common themes of *zuihitsu*: the gossipy nature of day-to-day existence, and Buddhist belief. These two over-arching themes have dominated works of the genre from its inception to its revitalization during and after World War Two. However, this has not limited the scope of the *zuihitsu* as it is employed in contemporary Japanese literature or in its immigration to America. It is still a new and rare form in America, but it is beginning to make itself known, mostly among poets. For example, *The Heart’s Traffic: a novel in poems*, by Ching-In Chen was greatly inspired by the concept of “following the brush” (Shipley and Chen), and includes a poem entitled “Xiaomei’s *Zuihitsu* for Shapeshifters” (Chen 80). However, the best-known American writer of the form is Japanese-American poet Kimiko Hahn, who has employed the *zuihitsu* on many occasions, but most notably in *The Narrow Road to the Interior*.

The Narrow Road to the Interior contains several poems that are self-contained *zuihitsu*, but the collection as a whole is also a *zuihitsu*. The opening poem in *The Narrow Road* is entitled “Compass,” and offers some direction in the form of a letter. It begins “Dear L – You asked for a little compass. Thank you!” (Hahn 3) and then it proceeds to offer an explanation of the *zuihitsu* form. Hahn quotes several short definitions from outside sources but elaborates on them, saying: “Notice that none conveys the tonal insistence a writer finds her/himself in. None suggests an organizing principle – what we might call a theme. None comments on structural variety – list, diary, commentary, essay, poem. Fragment. / None offers that a sense of disorder might be artfully ordered by fragmenting, contradicting, varying length or – even with a piece – topic” (3). Hahn explains that for her, “the *zuihitsu* feels encompassing” (4).

Hahn’s *The Narrow Road*, like *The Pillow Book*, is a jumble of various pieces: long and short poems containing fragments, snippets from real or imagined conversations and emails, lists, and even course syllabi and tests. Her subject matter ranges from Japanese literature – such as in “The Tunnel” in which she reacts to the Japanese novel *Snow Country* (Hahn 38-43); to 9/11 – especially in “Trading Words,” which reads like a diary kept during and after the fall of the World Trade Center towers (Hahn 74-77). Hahn also deals with broad questions of cultural

identity, especially American identity in the wake of 9/11 as well as perceptions/representations of the Asian/Oriental. The best example of this last is “Asian American Lit. Final” which poses questions about exoticism, the Asian-American body, family dynamics, and ethnic ambiguity (Hahn 91). However, Hahn’s most sustained and important focus is on the questions and complications of her identities as daughter, mother, wife, lover, American, Asian, writer, and teacher, and how all these fragmented selves may or may not mesh.

These questions of identity are a vital part of what makes *The Narrow Road* a postmodern text. As each individual poem explores one or more aspects of Hahn’s identity, it becomes increasingly evident that her subjectivity is fragmented. In “Utica Station,” Hahn watches a woman tending to a newborn and finds herself questioning her own identity as a mother. Despite recalling moments in which she feels she was “a good mother,” Hahn continually returns to her perceived inadequacies. She states: “I do not want to return to their infancies. I would merely do the same: want to be in this notebook, not on the carpet covered with dolls. To be at the window waiting for their father, not swinging them in the park” (Hahn 5). While Hahn automatically inhabits the role of mother by virtue of having given birth to two daughters, it seems at times she does not wish to incorporate a mother identity into her subjectivity. Her identities as writer and lover supersede other aspects of her life. Later in the poem she adds: “I look up from this notebook and see a tiny island with the shell of a castle – what is that? Is that how I’ve been a mother?” (Hahn 7), as if to indicate that her role as mother is the island, always separate from the rest of her identity. Fragmented in the truest sense.

Hahn’s fragmented and multiple subjectivity is demonstrated not only in her exploration of the facets of her own identity, but also in her ability to inhabit different subject positions. The best example of this is in “Radio and Mirror” written in response to Abe Kobo’s novel *Suna no onna (Woman in the Dunes)* (Hahn 20). *Woman in the Dunes* is about an entomologist stranded in a small village. The villagers force him down into a sandpit where a nameless widow has been forced to dig sand to sell to cities for construction purposes. The entomologist helps her in this task, and becomes her lover. Though he tries several times to escape, he eventually becomes obsessed with the task itself and decides to stay. In “Radio and Mirror,” Hahn pulls away from the “I” position and becomes merely “she” – and this “she” position is split between a woman reading *Woman in the Dunes*, and the nameless widow of the novel itself. Hahn writes, “*Is it that I can’t stay here or that I need to leave? I’ve been looking for a choice that does not admit craving. Even so, I love that he loves insects*” (20); here she is giving subjectivity to the nameless widow who remains merely an object of the entomologist’s desire in the novel, “a suitable vehicle for his newfound fixation: the sand” (22). Hahn also states that “*she could be the entomologist and the woman. She didn’t have to choose*” (22). Simultaneously she melds her own personal experience with the experience of the novel, thus creating a complex layering of subjectivity, and undermining the self/other binary. At once Hahn inhabits the position of a woman reading novels, a woman with no name who is forced by her neighbors to dig in a sandpit, and a man who becomes obsessed with that very sand (20-23). The three positions, while contradictory, coexist within the poem, flowing one into the other.

Another postmodern element of *The Narrow Road* is the way Hahn effaces linearity by defying the requirements of beginning, middle, and end. Many of the poems, such as “Opening Her Text,” and “Sparrow,” skip around arbitrarily between the past and the present without

structure or explanation. *The Narrow Road* also contains a series of poems, including “Wellfleet, Midsummer” and “Brooklyn, Late Winter” among others, that eschew numerical order. Each poem is a group of tanka (short 1-2 line poems with a nature focus), and each tanka is numbered. However, the tanka are arranged in a random order, and some numbers are missing entirely. The result is a feeling that the order does not, in fact, matter; that there is no true beginning, middle, and end either to the poems or to the experiences and images related in the poems. Instead, each individual tanka can be read independently, as a free-floating fragment of thought or image, while also building on each other slowly in an imagistic, nonlinear way – like a collage.

Also of importance to the postmodernity of *The Narrow Road* is Hahn’s extensive use of word-play and parataxis. Hahn revels in word-play throughout the text, loving how words call on other words, intermingling, creating sensations and meanings that they could not have created on their own. For example, “Utica Station” closes with word-play as Hahn states: “—those dozen poles in the river – swollen and rotted from a long-vanished pier. / That’s what the heart was – swollen – like a mother weeping for something. A pier. / Appear missing” (8). The word-play here echoes back to Hahn’s feeling that something is missing in her life – the image of a pier becomes a trace for all the things she cannot have as either a woman or mother. In “Sparrow,” Hahn writes: “Who could not, as I could not, reflect more than one another’s wounds. / Wound. Wind. / Wind” (30). The poem then concludes with: “I could not return to the body that contained only the literal world. / Where sparrow does not suggest sorrow. / Where sorrow does not suggest sorry” (32). The word-play here helps to highlight Hahn’s fears, longings, and insecurities as she faces her relationships with various men.

Where Hahn’s word-play employs a surplus of words to create meaning, her use of parataxis employs a lack of words in order to allow the readers to create the meaning. Just a couple of examples of parataxis in Hahn’s poems include: “...the passenger behind me leaned forward and said, You’re a good mother. I nearly wept” (8); and “Dozing in the grass, I wish I had paid attention to my mother: I cannot distinguish one birdcall from another” (17). In the first example, from “Utica Station,” the reader looks to the context of the poem to understand the line: the passenger tells her she is a good mother and she almost weeps because she fears she is not, and is grateful that someone believes she is. In the second example from “Wellfleet, Midsummer,” we can gather that Hahn’s mother used to try to teach her about birdcalls, which is why she wishes she had listened to her. We as readers can, of course, easily understand what is being said, but without the subordinating conjunctions it is left entirely up to us to create the relationships between the clauses. Hahn leaves empty the spaces between these clauses in order to allow the readers to fill it with whatever we see fit.

Finally, there is Hahn’s project to write a woman’s text, to find a writing space for women. In “Pulse and Impulse,” Hahn explains why the *zuihitsu* is a perfect vehicle for such a project. She states:

...it was cultivated by a woman and feels significant – as a writing space for women. It is by its own nature a fragmented anything. I love long erratic pieces into which I can thrash around – make a mess. Lose the intellect.

Begin with your own fleshy body to seek fragments that will sustain.

...

This “space” includes all those traits women have been assigned, usually with negative connotations: subjectivity, intuition, irrationality (what short essays or lack of a formal structure might suggest). What is wrong with subjectivity anyway? My facts. The fact of my experiences. (49, italics in original)

These traits that have been traditionally assigned to women, and which Hahn advocates in *The Narrow Road*, are the same traits attributed to postmodernity by Hoover and Hassan. And it is not merely that Hahn praises fragmentation, subjectivity, intuition, and irrationality; she employs them throughout the text, as I have begun to demonstrate here. In “The Orient,” Hahn adds: “This is where I write zuihitsu – for the permission, the blur, the rooms created by the little blocks of text.... I love words that confuse— / —how words can arouse. So the words are mine.... / *Mine* – the noun and verb. That blur” (65-70).

It becomes evident, then, that Hahn aligns herself with the concepts of *l’écriture féminine* and “writing the body” as imagined by Helene Cixous when she calls for a woman’s voice that speaks “in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the ‘truth’ with laughter” (357). For Cixous, that voice rises up from the woman’s body (350). Hahn, likewise, begins from this concept, looking to the “fleshy body” for those “fragments that will sustain” her, and for the place where she can begin to blur the lines, remove the boundaries that separate all categories: of gender, of sexuality, of class, of ethnicity. And, as Hahn states, “this *elegant mongrel*,” the zuihitsu, perfectly “suits this desire to blur” (68).

It is because the form is so suited that Carole Maso, when attempting a similar project, unintentionally creates a text that is also a zuihitsu. This text is *AVA*, which depicts the thoughts and memories of Ava Klein as she lays on her deathbed in flashes of narrative, thought, and image. While *AVA* relies more heavily on repetition than *The Narrow Road* does, they are similar in many ways. They are both interested in *l’écriture féminine* and “writing the body;” in fact, much of Maso’s project rests on Ava’s acceptance of her own body and desires. This is represented not only in the subject matter of Maso’s text, but also in the tone and style. For instance, consider a representative sample taken from a few random pages:

The results, written in blood.

...

We were working on an erotic song cycle.
I got to sing. I got to kiss you on the cheek.
Ava Klein, your chances are slim. (32)

...

We were working on an erotic song cycle. It was called *Flirting in the Life Café*.

...

The slow movements of the late Schubert.
Sing to me, my love.

...

I’d like you tonight up against the wall.

...

In the terrible, in the terrifying, in the terror – at night – they still had Schubert in their throats.

We had made a plan to work on an erotic song cycle because “you are a poet in your blood, Ava Klein,” the young composer said.

Songs the blood sings. (58-9)

Some images are blatantly sexual, others are more mundane. However, the way Maso mixes and blends the mundane and the sexual without distinction or hierarchy lends a sensual nature to the whole of Ava’s life and memory. Furthermore, the quick succession of short fragments and the repetition of words, phrases, and images, works like a musical crescendo, the intensity and passion ratcheting up and up.

In *AVA*, Carole Maso also works to create a space for a woman’s writing. She does this using many of the same techniques Hahn employs, such as non-linearity, fragmentation, irrationality, and multiple subjectivity, thus offering an imagistic portrayal of a woman’s life. By doing so, Maso writes against the traditional masculine novel, which limits the woman’s subjectivity and tyrannically usurps the reader. One way Maso accomplishes this is through the visual and auditory silence she creates by leaving white space between the fragments. Another way is by refusing to offer any explanation of the connections, orders, or hierarchies that may or may not exist between the various fragments. Thus, she hopes to allow the readers freedom within the text, leaving space for readers to enter into the text and create meaning for themselves. This is similar to Hahn’s use of parataxis.

Furthermore, Ava is able, like Hahn, to inhabit various subject positions – I, you, we. Ava moves in and out of other characters because the entire text occurs within her mind, and her thoughts have absorbed all the voices of those she has encountered and now remembers. For instance, the voice that tells her “Ava Klein, you are rare bird,” “You are a wild one, Ava Klein” (Maso 11) is not her own voice but someone else’s. She has taken this voice into her memory, and it has become a part of who she is. She also often speaks in the plural, “we,” combining her subjectivity with others – “we were working on an erotic song cycle” (58), “We were truthful at any rate” (73); “We lost the baby” (151) – showing her ability to think as one piece of a larger whole. Thus, like Hahn, she undermines the self/other binary opposition – demonstrating that all subjectivities are multiple and connected, each influencing all the others.

However, a similarity in subject matter and philosophical stance is not enough to prove that *AVA* is, like *The Narrow Road*, a *zuihitsu*. For that we must look again at the form. The text is made entirely of fragmented narratives, flashes of thought and image. Sometimes a line may be only a single word floating alone in the white space, and sometimes Maso forms whole pieces of prose. In the midst of these impressions of Ava’s life are quotes from songs, novels, and essays. Snippets of poetry rise up out of the narrative passages. On page 41, Maso even includes sections from an interview, real or imagined, and a fill-in-the-blank questionnaire. This seems sufficient evidence that the form a *zuihitsu* is there.

Some might argue that it is purely coincidental that these two examples happen to be postmodern, feminist, and a *zuihitsu*. After all, it is possible to write a postmodern feminist text without using this particular form. However, I would argue that the *zuihitsu*, even in its earliest examples, possesses a postmodern sensibility that makes it uniquely qualified; and that if fragmentation and non-linearity are two key ways a postmodernist text creates space for meaning, then even without calling it by name, such a text is likely to be a *zuihitsu*. As Hahn states, “the tone becomes altered by the form” (67); the form and meaning create each other, and

this form is uniquely suited to *this* project. On the other hand, given that both *The Narrow Road* and *AVA* were written by women whose focus was on creating a space for women's writing and subjectivity, I should perhaps rephrase my argument and state that the *zuihitsu* is a perfect vehicle for American *women's* postmodernist literature. However, that the two best examples of *zuihitsu* in American postmodernist literature are currently by women does not necessarily preclude a male writer from also assimilating the form. That is one of the beauties of the *zuihitsu*: it is an open form, like a malleable and empty vessel that can be shaped and filled however the writer sees fit. After all, while a woman originated the genre, many of the best examples in Japanese literature are also by men. Perhaps it is best, then, to return to the literal meaning of the word: following the brush. Where the brush leads will depend largely on the hand that holds it, but I maintain that the path will continue to be postmodern in nature.

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