

CHAPTER 5



TRIVIALITY

SEI SHONAGON'S *PILLOW BOOK*

I

During the Heian age (794–1186), a period of Japanese history characterized by a remarkable cultural efflorescence, two widely recognized masterpieces of world literature were produced: Sei Shonagon's *Pillow Book* (*Makura no soshi*) and Murasaki Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*). Although my focus in this chapter will be on the first of these, I would like to begin by comparing the two, for the contrast between their dominant affective qualities—between the joyful inconsequentiality of the former and the melancholic profundity of the latter—could hardly be more pronounced. And here, too, we can detect a clear conflict of aesthetic values, reminding us once more of the opposing tendencies that have competed in literature throughout the centuries. If *Genji* privileges qualities such as density, linearity, and stability of meaning, then Sei's narrative does everything it can to achieve the opposite effect, transforming language into a “weightless element that hovers above things like a cloud or better, perhaps, the finest dust or, better still, a field of magnetic impulses” (Calvino, *Six Memos* 15).

According to Motoori Norinaga, writing in 1796, the fact that *The Tale of Genji* (c. 1001–13) refuses to uphold a morality based on imported Buddhist and Confucian principles makes it one of the first narratives to articulate a uniquely Japanese sensibility. In Murasaki's novel, he argues, “those who know the meaning of the sorrow of human existence . . . are regarded as good; and those who are not aware of the poignancy of human existence . . . are regarded as

bad.”¹ Thus Genji himself, the philandering protagonist, is regarded as a good man despite the “extraordinary iniquity and immorality” of his behavior. “The purpose of *The Tale of Genji*,” Norinaga concludes, “may be likened to the man who, loving the lotus flower, must collect and store muddy and foul water in order to plant and cultivate [it]. The impure mud of illicit love affairs described in the *Tale* is there not for the purpose of being admired but for the purpose of nurturing the flower of the awareness of the sorrow of human existence” (533–34). More specifically, Norinaga is referring here to an aesthetic quality known in Japanese as *mono no aware*, the “pathos of things,” which describes an appreciative sensitivity to the fragility and evanescence of the phenomenal world—a sense of beauty grounded in the ephemerality of all living things. The spirit of *aware*, we learn elsewhere, “pervades all Heian literature. It is discovered in the feelings inspired by a bright spring morning and also in the sense of sadness that overcomes us on an autumn evening. Its primary mood, however, is one of gentle melancholy” (Hisamatsu Senichi qtd. in I. Morris, *World* 208). As Norinaga quite rightly observes, this sense of melancholy, this “awareness of the sorrow of human existence,” dominates *The Tale of Genji*, giving rise to “a thousand miseries” and ensuring that none of the characters are ever very “far from weeping” (Murasaki, *Tale* 204, 209). Consider, for instance, the scene anticipating the death of Genji’s young lover, Lady Murasaki. “[H]er beauty,” we are told,

really was sublime, and her pensive air—for she knew that her time was nearly over—was more sorrowful and more profoundly moving than anything in the world . . . With a pang she saw how happy her little reprieve had made [Genji], and she grieved to imagine him soon in despair.

“Alas, not for long will you see what you do now: any breath of wind may spill from a hagi frond the last trembling drop of dew.”

It was true, her image fitted all too well . . . The thought was unbearable. He answered while he gazed out into the garden,

“When all life is dew and at any touch may go, one drop then the next, how I pray that you and I may leave nearly together.”

He wiped the tears from his eyes . . . They made a perfect picture as they talked, one well worth seeing, but the moment could not last, as Genji well knew, though he wished it might endure a thousand years. He mourned that nothing could detain someone destined to go. (759)

And go she does, the very next morning, initiating another round of lachrymose brooding from our hero: “Waking or sleeping, Genji’s tears never dried, and he spent his days and nights swathed in fog” (762).

The word *aware* appears over a thousand times in *The Tale of Genji*, and if we turn to Murasaki's diary, we discover the same lugubrious tendencies—"[a]ny *joie de vivre*," as Richard Bowring writes, being "carefully balanced by a pervasive melancholy" (xxxvi). At one point, for example, she confesses to feeling "depressed and confused," suffering "unbearable" loneliness, and "tasting the bitterness of life to the very full" (33–34). Elsewhere she offers this rather depressing vignette: "I am not the kind of person to abandon herself completely to despair. And yet, by the same token, I cannot entirely rid myself of such feelings . . . [Even] when I play my *koto* rather badly to myself in the cool breeze of the evening, I worry lest someone might hear me and recognize how I am just 'adding to the sadness of it all'" (55). And finally, in the diary's concluding pages, we are not particularly surprised to learn that "[e]verything conspires to make [her] unhappy," for the world is, above all, a "prattling [and] tiresome" place (58–59).

As I have suggested, these melancholic tendencies also find their way into *The Tale of Genji*, distinguishing it quite emphatically from that other Heian masterpiece, Sei Shonagon's *Pillow Book* (c. 996–1000). Of course, *The Pillow Book* is a different kind of "narrative" altogether: a jumbled miscellany of anecdotes, descriptive passages, reminiscences, essays, eclectic catalogues, and diary entries. But the main difference between the two lies in their respective narratorial sensibilities and the dominant structures of feeling out of which they emerge. If we agree with Sianne Ngai that "every literary work has an organizing quality of feeling akin to an 'atmosphere'" (174), then the emotion that most clearly dominates *The Tale of Genji* would have to be the aestheticized melancholy invoked on almost every page. In *The Pillow Book*, by contrast, a sense of delight dominates, as well as an inveterate reluctance to acknowledge tragedy or misfortune. Whereas for Murasaki the sound of rain provokes a mood of "indefinable sadness" or, at best, a "vague, lingering malaise" (*Tale* 489, 755), for Sei it is something to enjoy, just one of the many simple pleasures that punctuate her day. "In the seventh month," she writes, "when the wind blows hard and the rain is beating down, and your fan lies forgotten because of the sudden coolness of the air, it's delightful to take a midday nap snuggled up under a lightly padded kimono that gives off a faint whiff of perspiration" (47). Indeed, as we shall see, the governing aesthetic principle in Sei's narrative is not *mono no aware* but *okashi*—an adjective that is most often translated as "amusing," "delightful," or "charming." This is not a deep and sustained response to the

tragic ephemerality of the phenomenal world, but a superficial and fleeting charge of pleasure inspired by the smallest and most inconsequential things: the lingering traces of incense (183), say, or “[t]he transparent light in water as you pour it into something” (148). As one critic has pointed out, “in its making light of the tragic,” *okashi* was “just the opposite of the attitude of *aware* which sought to impart to the otherwise meaningless cries of a bird or the fall of a flower a profound and moving meaning” (de Bary 45). For Sei, more often than not, rain is something to be celebrated (if it isn’t just plain boring), a fallen flower is “still lovely” (71), and the cry of a bird inspires nothing but joyful elatives.

Needless to say, it is this superficiality, this enthusiasm for “the simplest trifles” (212), that has traditionally disqualified *The Pillow Book* as a serious work of literature—or at least diminished its literary value when compared to the austere grandeur of classics such as *The Tale of Genji*. In fact, Murasaki herself was probably the first to offer a critique of this kind:

Sei Shonagon . . . 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? (*Diary* 54)

Indeed. And Murasaki has not been the only one, over the years, to disapprove of such frivolity. According to Meredith McKinney, her most recent translator, Sei continues to occupy a rather ambivalent place within the Japanese canon: “While *The Pillow Book* is always mentioned in any list of the great Heian period classics, attention more often moves on to *The Tale of Genji*, or to the more pensive and melancholy diaries.” What critics seem to find particularly troubling, even irritating, are the very attributes that from our perspective make the narrative most appealing—its “‘shallow’ aesthetic and ‘erratic’ spontaneity” (xxvii).² (But perhaps I am revealing something of myself here, for I see that it is common in Japan to contrast Sei with Murasaki, and “those who side with [the former] in this perceived rivalry are often characterized as vacuous and frivolous” [McKinney xxviii].) In a fascinating article on Sei’s use of poetic

catalogues, Mark Morris also compares *The Tale of Genji* to *The Pillow Book*. “While Murasaki’s gift,” he writes, “was an ability to infuse a scene or landscape with so much mood as to produce a sort of force-field permeating the boundaries of setting and character,” Sei’s world is “noticeably one of exteriors.” And he, too, registers the critical tendency to favor one narrative over the other, making the point that for “*Genji* devotees this dwelling on the surface of things” (40) has tended to deprive *The Pillow Book* of “high seriousness” and literary value. Generally speaking, then, those readers or critics looking for evidence in Sei’s writing of the values we tend to associate with “high” literature—stability and density of meaning, unity of style, a certain moral gravity—are bound to be disappointed. The discourse simply doesn’t have the patience to engage with life’s more serious or “weighty” issues or to sustain for any length of time a single narrative trajectory. In places we sense it might, and in other places it actually initiates a project of this kind (see, for instance, Section 294), but it quickly tires of such drudgery and moves on to something else—something more amusing, more delightful, more charming.³

In this final chapter, I would like to subject Sei’s “‘shallow’ aesthetic and ‘erratic’ spontaneity” to closer scrutiny. Precisely how does she manage to achieve this degree of superficiality? How does the “trivial” function as an organizing principle within *The Pillow Book*, and what impact does it have on the narrative’s production of meaning? Although the circumstances surrounding its composition were undeniably tragic, Sei’s narrative observes a kind of “directional taboo” that forces it to move always toward the “trivial little thing[s]” (Sei 27) and away from anything of real historical or political significance. Over the course of the chapter, I will be exploring some of the key strategies by which the discourse is able to maintain and protect this taboo. I shall begin by discussing *The Pillow Book*’s commitment to inconsequentiality and its enthusiasm for a diverse range of aesthetic pleasures, all of which fall under the category of the *okashi*. In the first case, I shall argue, these tendencies reduce the narrative’s capacity to generate deeper layers of meaning, while in the second they reduce the specificity of the discourse, further contributing to its lack of historical referentiality. I shall then address in greater detail the disjunctive or “erratic” quality of Sei’s writing. This style of composition, I would like to suggest, serves to disrupt the chronological trajectory of history and suspend teleology, while also generating a liberating sense of spontaneity and nonchalance. Finally, I will turn my attention to the justly celebrated catalogues,

for it is here that a picture of Sei herself most clearly emerges. But of course the kind of autobiography we are offered in these enumerative passages is entirely consistent with the narrative's governing aesthetic principles, dissolving the totality of Sei's life into trivial and "insignificant" particles of meaning. In *Sade/Fourier/Loyola*, Roland Barthes has used the term *biographeme* to describe the smallest possible unit of biographical discourse—an anecdote, say, or a metonymic signifier that reduces the grand narrative of a life to a few "novelistic glimmerings, a discontinuous chant of amiabilities" (8). And this, I shall argue, is precisely what we find embedded within these highly personalized catalogues of likes and dislikes, preferences and prejudices: the residual traces of a unique sensibility, the (auto)biographemes of a writer who lived over a thousand years ago but whose "inimitable delight in being" (Kundera, *Testaments* 86) survives to this day.

II

In the spring or autumn of 993, Sei Shonagon entered the service of the Empress Teishi, the eldest daughter of Fujiwara no Michitaka, who at that time held the prestigious post of chancellor within the imperial court at Kyoto. For more than a century, the Fujiwara family had ensured its political dominance by marrying its daughters into the imperial family; and so although Teishi appears to have been the preferred consort of Emperor Ichijo, her elevated position at court was largely contingent on her father's continued power and prestige. In 995, however, Michitaka died, and his rival, Fujiwara no Michinaga, became chancellor in his place. For some time it seemed Teishi might retain a degree of political influence through her brother, Korechika, but in 996 he was involved in an intrigue at court and exiled, along with a younger sibling, to the provinces. Teishi's failure to provide the emperor with a male heir for almost a decade contributed to her steady decline in status, and in 1000 Michinaga was able to consolidate his position by establishing his own daughter as the first empress. Later that same year, at the age of 24, Teishi died giving birth to another girl, and with the death of her patron, Sei's service at court also came to an unceremonious end. The last reference to Sei is dated 1017, after which she vanishes from the historical record.

Although *The Pillow Book* was composed during the period immediately following Michitaka's death in 995, the consequences of this tragedy are only ever referred to obliquely, in the form of

elliptical asides.⁴ In Section 136, we learn that “[a]fter the Regent had departed this life, certain events were set in train in the world. There was considerable upheaval and commotion, and Her Majesty left the palace and moved to the Konijo mansion” (143). But that is all we are told, and more often than not, Sei prefers to ignore such distressing matters altogether. The events in Section 78, for instance, take place only a month after Teishi’s brothers have been exiled and while she and her immediate circle are still in mourning for her father, yet Sei chooses to focus her attention on the beauty of plum trees and the “dazzling” (70) robes of a senior courtier. Similarly, Section 73 narrates an episode that occurred in the summer of 997, by which time Teishi had been obliged to leave the imperial palace, yet it occupies itself with lively poetic exchanges and the pleasures of “moon-viewing” (64). And despite being set in the final year of Teishi’s life, when she is already pregnant with the child she will die bearing, Section 222 concentrates on festive wheat cakes and more “splendid” (196) poetry. From time to time, of course, Sei does offer fleeting glimpses of the tragedies unfolding around her, as well as proleptic auguries of those yet to take place. In one passage, for example, the emperor praises the young son of a courtier, reminding “us all uneasily of the fact that [Teishi] had yet to produce a son” (111), while in another Sei herself praises Fujiwara no Michinaga, prompting the reflection that if the empress “could have lived to witness the greatness he later attained, she would have realized how right I was to find him so impressive” (129). But such glimpses are rare, and for the most part, Sei does everything she can to deprivilege these tragic episodes—consigning anything that might compromise the vivacious, carefree quality of her writing to the periphery of the narrative or beyond.⁵

As I have indicated, this refusal to engage with history or politics, however pressing the circumstances might be, constitutes a kind of directional taboo within *The Pillow Book*. The directional taboo (*kataimi*) was part of yin-yang lore and widely observed by members of the Heian aristocracy. The most common type of taboo was based on the position of certain moving deities who, having descended to Earth, would circle the compass in periodic cycles. Whenever they paused at a particular point, that direction would become temporarily “blocked” (*futagaru*), leaving travelers with two possibilities. Either they could wait until the taboo no longer pertained, or they could take a circuitous route (*katatagae*), thus avoiding the precise direction that was forbidden at the time.⁶ In *The Pillow Book* we find evidence of both practices (see, for instance, pages 23 and 70), but this

directional taboo also operates, I would like to suggest, at the level of the discourse itself. Whenever something of consequence threatens to impose itself on the narrative, the direction in which that threat lies immediately becomes blocked, obliging the discourse to find some other way of proceeding, some other way of ensuring its continuity. In such places, then, one could argue that the narrative observes a self-imposed directional taboo, turning away from anything too serious, too sad, too tragic, and focusing instead on the trivial—plum trees, dazzling robes, wheat cakes—until the threat has passed and it can continue on its way.

Despite appearances, however, there *is* a story unfolding here; something is happening in *The Pillow Book*, only it's happening just around the corner, just beyond the representational range of the narrative, where the reader can't quite see it. Instead, we are offered inconsequentialities and nonoccurrences, a story with a minimal degree of substance and significance. In his classic essay, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," Roland Barthes distinguishes between those narrative functions that "constitute real hinge points of [a] narrative" and those that "merely 'fill in' the narrative space separating the hinge functions." The former he describes as nuclei; the latter, as catalyzers. For a function to qualify as a nucleus, Barthes writes, "it is enough that the action to which it refers open (or continue, or close) an alternative that is of direct consequence for the subsequent development of the story, in short that it inaugurate or conclude an uncertainty . . . Between two [nuclei] however, it is always possible to set out subsidiary notations which cluster around one or other nucleus without modifying its alternative nature . . . These catalyzers are still functional, insofar as they enter into correlation with a nucleus, but their functionality is attenuated, unilateral, parasitic" (265–66). According to Barthes, nuclei are "the risky moments of a narrative. Between these points of alternative, these 'dispatchers,' the catalyzers lay out areas of safety, rests, luxuries" (266). And this, I believe, is precisely what *The Pillow Book* does—immersing the reader in the luxury of the inconsequential, while scrupulously avoiding anything that lies outside this zone of safety. As we have seen, what really "matters" to the story takes place offstage: the death of Fujiwara no Michitaka, the disgrace and exile of Teishi's brothers, her departure from the palace, even the pregnancy that will eventually kill her. These are the occurrences on which the narrative hinges, and yet what *doesn't* matter, what should merely fill the narrative space between these critical nuclei, instead saturates the entire discourse, leaving no room for anything

of real consequence. In his essay, Barthes also makes an important point about the relative interchangeability of nuclei and catalyzers. "A nucleus cannot be deleted without altering the story," he writes, "but neither can a catalyst without altering the discourse" (267). Simply put, if we add or delete a nucleus, then we no longer have the same story, whereas if we add or delete a catalyzer, we have the same story told in a different way.⁷ This observation is particularly revealing when applied to *The Pillow Book*, for if almost any detail of the narrative were to be replaced—if the "colourful picture of flowering cherries" on page 148, say, became something else altogether, something equally inconsequential—it would make no difference whatsoever to the underlying "story." The discourse, as Barthes suggests, would certainly be different, but the story would remain the same. And this is what ultimately demonstrates the triviality of the narrative: the fact that it *could* be replaced in this way, the fact that it contains no essential qualities, nothing that guarantees or underwrites its specificity (aside from one or two rather starved nuclei and the translator's voluminous endnotes).

Instead of focusing on history and politics, then, *The Pillow Book* assumes a microscopic quality, zeroing in on "every trivial little thing" (27) that catches its eye: "the sight of a string of wild geese in the distant sky, very tiny" (3), the way the falling snow emphasizes the "lovely black curves" (203) of the roof tiles, or "[t]he sight of a dancer's face lit by the glow of a nearby lamp as she dozes" (92). This preference for the microcosmic also underlies the narrative's strong anecdotal tendencies. Take the following story, for instance: "Masahiro once left his shoes on the ledge where the Emperor's food is placed. There was a terrible fuss when they were found, and he innocently joined in the general excitement. The serving women and the others all went around exclaiming, 'Whose shoes can they possibly be?' Then Masahiro suddenly realized they were his, and caused a hilarious uproar by impulsively declaring, 'Good gracious, I do believe the filthy things are mine!'" (54). This is all very well; however, the reader may be forgiven for wondering whether Masahiro leaving his shoes on the ledge was really the most important thing that happened that day. Probably not, but the narrative simply doesn't care about anything else. Instead of tracing the grand trajectory of history—and she was ideally placed, remember, to do just that—Sei would prefer to regale us with inconsequential and anticlimactic anecdotes. When she goes on a pilgrimage in Section 109, to cite another example, we expect something to happen, something that will provide a justification for the story we are being told, but

no: “[A]s we crossed the river we noticed what looked like quite short stems of sweet flag and reeds growing in the water nearby, but when we had them picked they turned out to be extremely long” (118). That, believe it or not, is the point of the story; nothing else really transpires, nothing else really matters. What at first appeared to be a nucleus, something of “direct consequence for the subsequent development of the story” (Barthes, “Introduction” 265), turns out, after all, to be just another catalyzer—a “subsidiary notation” filling empty space.

In the introduction to *Marvelous Possessions*, Stephen Greenblatt acknowledges the heavy reliance on anecdote in New World travel narratives:

As is appropriate for voyagers who thought they knew where they were going and ended up in a place whose existence they had never imagined, the discourse of travel in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance is rarely if ever interesting at the level of sustained narrative and teleological design, but gripping at the level of the anecdote. The sense of overarching scheme is certainly present in this discourse . . . but compared to the luminous universal histories of the early Middle Ages, the chronicles of exploration seem uncertain of their bearings, disorganized, fragmentary. Their strength lies not in a vision of the Holy Spirit’s gradual expansion through the world but in the shock of the unfamiliar, the provocation of an intense curiosity, the local excitement of discontinuous wonders. Hence they present the world not in a stately and harmonious order but in a succession of brief encounters, random experiences, isolated anecdotes of the unanticipated. (2)

Although such anecdotes are, for Greenblatt, “registers of the singularity of the contingent,” they are “at the same time recorded as *representative* anecdotes, that is, as significant in terms of a larger progress or pattern that is the proper subject of a history perennially deferred in the traveler’s relation of further anecdotes.” In other words, anecdotes may be “seized in passing from the swirl of experiences” (3), but they also gesture toward a larger and more coherent historical structure to which they could—if properly shaped, arranged, and interpreted—eventually contribute. It is difficult to imagine, however, a historical narrative that would benefit from many of the anecdotes on offer in *The Pillow Book*. What would “history” make of the fact that Masahiro once left his shoes on the ledge where the emperor’s food was placed? What kind of enduring historical value could a detail of this kind possibly carry? Here, too, the emphasis is on what doesn’t matter, what doesn’t transpire,

what refuses significance. And here, too, we register the narrative's reluctance to contribute anything of substance to the historical archive—to “the *grand récit* of [a] totalizing, integrated, progressive history, a history that knows where it is going” (Greenblatt, *Marvelous 2*).

At times this commitment to inconsequentiality severely impedes the narrative's capacity to generate meaning. There is, of course, always the literal or denotative meaning—and in some cases, a secondary level of meaning that signifies the principle of triviality itself—but almost nothing in the way of deeper symbolic meaning. In this respect, certain passages of *The Pillow Book* could be said to assume a haiku-like quality, generating images of great simplicity and transparency: whether it be the sound, early one morning, of the wind “rustling the bamboo” (120); the leaves lodged in “all the little spaces of [a] lattice weave [fence]” (180) the day after a typhoon; or “the lovely moment when some wormwood gets crushed by [a] carriage wheel, whose turning then carries it round and up, right to where you're sitting” (190). According to Barthes, the haiku “diminishes to the point of pure and sole designation. *It's that, it's thus, says the haiku, it's so*” (*Empire* 83). And this in turn liberates literature from its commitment to more “weighty” structures of significance: “You are entitled,” the haiku says, “to be trivial, short, ordinary; enclose what you see, what you feel, in a slender horizon of words, and you will be interesting” (70).⁸ In Section 100 of *The Pillow Book*, this authorization is delivered with particular clarity. “A branch of plum from which the blossoms [have] fallen arrive[s] one day from the Privy Chamber, with the message: ‘What do you make of this?’” Sei's response is simple: “The flowers have already scattered” (113). The message she receives here is the message the narrative itself carries: What do you make of this? What do you make of the sound of the wind rustling the bamboo or the leaves lodged in the lattice weave fence? Indeed, what *can* we make of it? In many cases, nothing at all. We can only respond by noticing, by acceding to Sei's request that we notice, and by acknowledging the “factuality” of what she has brought to our attention. Yes, the bamboo does rustle, the leaves are lodged in the lattice weave, the wormwood does cling to the carriage wheel—yes, the flowers have already scattered. It is undeniably so.

Undeniably so, and undeniably charming, for more often than not, the narrative obliges us to notice something by labeling it *okashi*, by assigning it to this particular aesthetic category and thus justifying its presence on the page. As mentioned earlier, the adjective *okashi*

bears an antonymic relation to *mono no aware*, describing an aesthetic response based on pleasure and joy rather than their opposites. It is employed over four hundred times in *The Pillow Book* and in the translation I am using here has been most frequently rendered as “delightful,” “charming,” “lovely,” “amusing,” “entertaining,” “interesting,” “marvellous,” and “intriguing” (Midorikawa 153).⁹ A typical passage, for instance, reads as follows:

In summer . . . it's beautiful when fireflies are dancing everywhere . . . And it's delightful [*okashi*] too to see just one or two fly through the darkness, glowing softly. Rain falling on a summer night is also lovely [*okashi*].

In autumn . . . the crows, in threes and fours or twos and threes, hurrying to their roost, are a moving sight. Still more enchanting [*okashi*] is the sight of a string of wild geese in the distant sky, very tiny. (3)

The constant reiteration of this particular adjective (what Naomi Fukumori refers to as the “*okashi* effect” [20]) would appear to be a deliberate strategy on Sei's part, serving to reinforce the narrative's antitragic qualities and direct our attention away from anything that could be said to belong, more properly, to the category of *aware*.¹⁰ It has been noted by several Japanese critics that the activity most commonly associated with *aware* is weeping, while *okashi* is typically combined with laughter. In one particularly revealing analysis of the narrative, Haraoka Fumiko has identified those diary-like passages in which the words *okashi*, *warau* (“to laugh”), and *emu* (“to smile”) can be found. After dividing these passages according to whether or not they predate the death of Fujiwara no Michitaka in 995, she compiles the following table:

	okashi	warau	emu
Before (16 passages)	46	33	6
After (35 passages)	77	84	4

What becomes obvious from these statistics is that Sei has actually intensified the *okashi* effect in the episodes that take place after the sudden demise of Teishi's father. This is the event, you may recall, that initiates the series of tragedies and misfortunes that will eventually bring about the destruction of everything she values. Yet as we can see, the narrative assumes an inverse relation to its background

circumstances, becoming lighter and more carefree as the combined fortunes of Sei and her patron steadily decline. Instead of acknowledging this downward trajectory, then, Sei does everything she can to ensure the narrative's aesthetic and affective continuity—foregrounding only that which amuses, provokes laughter, and gives pleasure.

And here, too, *The Pillow Book* deliberately abjures meaning. Repeated several hundred times over 250-odd pages, the adjective *okashi* becomes a floating signifier, distributed with such profligacy throughout the narrative and applied to so many disparate experiences that it very quickly loses much of its signifiatory force. It's wonderful, delightful, and charming. Why? How so? In what way? It just is, that's all. In *The World of the Shining Prince*, Ivan Morris attributes the repetitive quality of Heian literature to the "poverty of the vocabulary" that writers such as Murasaki and Sei had at their disposal. "Like many languages in an early stage of development," he observes, "tenth-century Japanese was endowed with an extremely rich grammatical apparatus but a relatively limited choice of words. This applies especially to abstract adjectives. The result is that certain words tend to be greatly overworked and to lose all precision of meaning." Indeed, he goes on to say, Heian writers "almost seem to revel in the repetition of the same emotive words, whose range of meaning is so widely and thinly spread as to make accurate communication impossible" (290–91). The particularly significant point here, for our purposes, is the last one. Sei may very well have had a limited vocabulary at her disposal, yet her reliance on the term *okashi* strikes the reader as unnecessarily excessive—reducing her entire (adjectival) vocabulary to a single word, a single referential gesture. And as I have suggested, it is completely consistent with her overall aesthetic project that this should be the case, for it allows her, once more, to jettison the deeper structures of meaning that would otherwise undermine the narrative's commitment to inconsequentiality. Thus, even in the translation I am using, almost everything is described in the same way, employing the same narrow range of abstract adjectives: "enchanting" (3), "deeply moving" (44), "very touching" (47), "indescribably lovely" (93), "charming" (109), "absolutely wonderful" (218), "glorious" (225), "quite marvellous" (228), "incomparably splendid" (234), "utterly delightful" (240), and so on. In places this effect is also doubled, as when Sei characterizes Teishi's younger sister as "utterly splendid and wonderful" (109). What, we may ask ourselves, does the second adjective add to the first? And what,

for that matter, does the adverb contribute to the two adjectives it prefaces?¹¹ Nothing in particular, of course, but that is precisely the point: to amplify this sense of nonmeaning and nonspecificity, of excess and redundancy, by placing empty signifiers one on top of the other, like the carefully layered sleeves Sei describes “spilling out on display” (18) from passing carriages.

But I am overstating my case just slightly here, for as I observed in Chapter 1, every signifier signifies something, and in this instance the constant reiteration of the adjective *okashi* does carry some meaning. For a start, it offers another way of repudiating larger historical and political realities, while constructing an idealized, prelapsarian image of Teishi’s court—a place where everything, so we are led to believe, was always delightful and charming. On a more immediate level, however, the dominance of this particular affective/aesthetic quality also serves to convey a certain kind of narratorial sensibility, a way of regarding the world that makes it possible, as Susan Sontag writes, “to be pleased with the largest number of things” (“Writing” 79) and to derive aesthetic pleasure from a virtually infinite range of sources.¹² “Whether it be plants, trees, birds or insects,” Sei confesses, “I can never be insensible to anything that on some occasion or other I have heard about and remembered because it moved or fascinated me” (44). One doesn’t need to look very far to find evidence of this panegyric impulse (“[e]verything that cries in the night is wonderful” [46]; “absolutely anything that’s tiny is endearing” [149]; “[a]ll moonlight is moving, wherever it may be” [254]), and even those negatives the discourse does generate are almost immediately transformed into positives. The melia may be an “ugly tree,” we are told, “but its flowers are lovely” (41). Ants may be “rather horrible, but they’re wonderfully light creatures, and it’s intriguing to see one running about over the surface of the water” (47). And sleet may be “unpleasant, but it’s lovely when it falls mingled with white snowflakes” (203).

Roland Barthes has argued—quite persuasively, I believe—that literary characters are essentially composed of semes (or units of meaning) clustered around a single proper name. According to Barthes, “[w]hen identical semes traverse the same proper name several times and appear to settle upon it, a character is created . . . The proper name acts as a magnetic field for the semes; referring in fact to a body, it draws the semic configuration into an evolving (biographical) tense” (*S/Z* 67–68). A similar kind of process occurs in *The Pillow Book*, only in this case the semes are really just different manifestations of the *okashi* effect, different episodes of aesthetic pleasure,

that gradually coalesce around a figure (or “magnetic field”) labeled *Sei*. This configuration of eclectic preferences, in other words, generates our sense of character in the narrative, delineating a quite distinct sensibility—yet without being drawn into anything like an “evolving” or biographical tense. We come to know *Sei* through all the “trivial little thing[s]” (27) that give her pleasure, and this is what ultimately survives on the page: not the historical or political circumstances surrounding her life, but the simple fact that she liked drinking water at night (30) or hearing someone she loved being praised (211). This is a subject we will return to in due course, but before doing so, I would like to say a little bit more about the disjunctive or “erratic” quality of *Sei*’s writing, for this technique also contributes a great deal to the narrative’s overall sense of carefree inconsequentiality.

III

According to Ivan Morris, the “structural confusion” of *The Pillow Book* is “generally regarded as its main stylistic weakness.” Those anecdotes that can be dated are “not in chronological order,” the catalogues have been “placed with little attempt at logical sequence,” and the arrangement of individual episodes is “unsystematic and disordered” (Introduction 12–13). However, as Morris himself observes, this undisciplined quality is precisely what makes the narrative so appealing, and over time it would give rise to a literary genre known in Japanese as *zuibitsu*. In the *zuibitsu* tradition, the writer is free to address a wide range of topics, from the poetic to the paltry, in whatever (abbreviated) form he or she chooses: anecdotes, descriptive passages, catalogues, or short essays.¹³ Such fragmentary jottings, Donald Keene writes, may “be no more than an intriguing sentence or two, or [they may] extend over several pages.” Yet “[i]n the end, after reading a series of seemingly unrelated anecdotes and impressions, we may nevertheless feel a great sense of intimacy with the writer, much as if we had read his [or her] diary” (9). In a similar way, *The Pillow Book* obliges us to follow every last deviation of the narratorial consciousness as it moves rapidly, impulsively, between different topics, registers, styles, and genres.¹⁴ Thus, in the space of just 12 pages, we are offered a list of things that create the appearance of deep emotion (“plucking your eyebrows” [75], for one); an episode describing *Sei*’s return to court after a brief absence in 997; an anecdote about a visiting beggar in “horrible grimy clothes” (76); several poetic exchanges on a diverse range of topics; an attempt, in the winter of 998, to estimate

just how long a pile of snow would last before melting (ten days? a week or two?); a list of splendid things (Chinese brocade, tinted Buddhist images, the color violet “wherever it’s found” [87]); and another catalogue listing things of elegant beauty (a letter “tied to a sprig of willow,” for instance, or a “charming cat with a white tag on her red collar” [87]).

This tendency to wander from topic to topic makes *The Pillow Book* another good example of “loiterature,” the “leisurely mode of writing” (Chambers 28) we discussed in some detail in Chapter 2. As a reminder, here’s how Ross Chambers characterizes the typical loiterly narrative:

These texts . . . resist contextualization—being penned into a single category as either this or that—because they are themselves all the time shifting context, now this, then that. They’re sites of endless *intersection*, and consequently their narrator’s attention is always divided between one thing and some other thing, always ready and willing to be distracted. But that’s how they give pleasure: they enact a relaxation of the constraints by which one’s attention is held and one’s nose kept to some grindstone or other; they figure the mobility and freedom of the libido, attacking all possible objects of attention without attaching itself to any. And that’s why such pleasure is subversive: it incorporates and enacts—in a way that *may* be quite unintended—a criticism of the disciplined and the orderly, the hierarchical and the stable, the methodical and the systematic, showing them to be unpleasurable, that is, alienating. (9–10)

This perfectly describes *The Pillow Book*, for it, too, has no particular place to go and takes its time getting there. It, too, defies categorization, changing genres and styles whenever it pleases. And it, too, demonstrates a reluctance (or inability) to focus on one particular subject for any length of time. After reading all 1,120 pages of *The Tale of Genji*, we are left with an overwhelming sense of industry: the sustained labor that went into composing the story and (quite frankly) the labor that goes into reading it. But Sei’s narrative carries itself rather differently. In this case, we come away with a strong sense of the leisurely (or as Chambers would put it, the loiterly): the leisure that made its composition possible in the first place (how else could such unmitigated frivolity be justified or even possible?), the leisurely nature in which it was written, and the leisurely way in which we are encouraged to consume it—drifting, along with the narrator, from one trivial little thing to another, always ready to be distracted, always looking for new sources of

aesthetic pleasure. And in this respect, too, Chambers is quite right; pleasure of this kind does take on a subversive quality, refusing to endorse all the “good” literary values that we are supposed to look for in a narrative: significance, linearity, consistency, order, closure, stability of meaning, and a clear distinction between what matters (plot nuclei) and what does not (descriptive detail and other “inessential” catalyzers). In *The Pillow Book*, notably, the narrative is free to do whatever it likes, and we are free to tag along, enjoying the many dilatory pleasures to which this form of “literary wandering” (Washburn 13) gives rise.

It is inevitable that the use of the *zuihitsu* method should also have a particularly disruptive influence on the narrative’s chronological trajectory. According to Peter Brooks, there is an internal energy that drives all narratives forward, “connecting beginning and end across the middle and making of that middle—what we read *through*—a field of force” (*Reading* 47). This energy, he argues, is ultimately generated by a “dynamic of desire” (38): “the desire to wrest beginnings and ends from the uninterrupted flow of middles, from temporality itself; the search for that significant closure that would illuminate the sense of an existence, the meaning of life” (140). What is especially interesting about *The Pillow Book*, however, is the way in which it resists these traditional narratological imperatives. It dissipates its energies on insignificant fripperies (catalyzers); it refuses to provide “significant closure,” demonstrating no interest whatsoever in achieving a full and final predication of meaning; and it deliberately suppresses its own beginning and ending so that in fact it becomes *all* middle and nothing else—or perhaps more precisely, it offers a multitude of beginnings and endings, beginnings and endings on every page, but none that would seem to qualify as the *real* beginning or the *real* ending.¹⁵ Of course, *The Pillow Book* does eventually come to an end (on page 256 of my edition), but because of the narrative’s disjunctive and fragmentary quality, this ending doesn’t conclude the story; it merely terminates the discourse. And because the termination of the story precedes the termination of the discourse, when it does arrive, this real ending, somewhere in the middle of the narrative, the reader passes over it without noticing—as does the discourse itself, which is simply too preoccupied with cherry trees, roof tiles, and misplaced shoes to have any intimation of what it is missing.

But why should Sei want to disrupt the chronology of her narrative in this way? Why should she be so averse to the possibility of a genuine ending, one in which termination coincides with closure?

For the very simple reason, I would argue, that history failed to supply her with the ending she wanted. If she were to adhere to a strict chronology, Sei would be obliged to conclude the narrative with everything it has tried so assiduously to avoid: the epidemic of 995 that killed Fujiwara no Michitaka, the exile of Teishi's brothers in 996, and the death of the empress herself in 1000. So instead she does her best to disrupt this trajectory by employing strategies of antichronicity (in which episodes are "dated in erratic and contradictory ways" [Prince, "Postcolonial" 378]) and achronicity (in which episodes are liberated from all "dependence, even inverse dependence, on the chronological sequence of the story" [Genette, *Narrative Discourse* 84]). Such strategies serve to deprive the narrative of the ending that history itself would ultimately supply—or at least to bury it as deeply as possible within the discourse, to conceal it among 326 different beginnings and 326 different endings, so that we are never quite sure which one is the real thing and which one the decoy. In fact, it soon becomes clear that the digressive, antilinear qualities of *The Pillow Book* don't simply retard the progress of history but freeze it altogether, suspending the narrative in an eternal present tense. "Seeing her splendour," Sei writes at one point, "we [longed] for Her Majesty to continue just like this for a thousand years" (18). And the narrative itself does everything it can to ensure that this will indeed be the case—guaranteeing that even if the discourse must necessarily come to an end (as it does on page 256), the glory days of the court, the perfect world Sei has constructed, will last forever.¹⁶

As noted earlier, these digressive tendencies also give *The Pillow Book* a strong sense of spontaneity, further contributing to the narrative's light, loiterly tone. Time and again, we are privy to Sei's thought processes as she writes: qualifying what she has said, editing and reediting her utterances, correcting and even contradicting what has gone before. The following passage, from Section 22, demonstrates this quite plainly: "I can't bear men who consider women who serve at court to be frivolous and unseemly," she declares. "Though mind you, one can see why they would . . . And have you ever heard tell of a lady who served at court shyly hiding herself [away]? A gentleman wouldn't come across as many people as we gentlewomen do—though probably they do while they're at court, it's true" (22). Here we are offered two declarative sentences, but each is subjected to further "editing" in the form of additional qualifying clauses. No, the narrative is constantly saying, that's not quite right; let me put it another way, let me rephrase. And so it does, repeatedly. "I never

intended this book to be seen by others,” Sei tells us in an aside, “so I’ve written whatever came into my mind” (140). But the crucial point, really, is that she has written whatever comes into her mind *as it comes into her mind*, thus calling attention to the narrative’s leisurely compositional procedures and generating its second major affective quality: nonchalance.

When Sei first arrived at court in 993, she was particularly impressed by the casual confidence with which the other gentlewomen performed their duties. “Beyond the pillars,” she remembers, “a crowd of ladies was sitting packed close together round a long brazier, their Chinese jackets informally slipped back from their shoulders, and I was filled with envy to witness their easy nonchalance. I watched as they carried messages to and fro, stood or sat, came and went, without a trace of diffidence, chatting and smiling and laughing together” (170). Over time, of course, she would learn to carry herself with the same kind of “easy nonchalance,” but more significantly, this courtly virtue would also find its way into the narrative she was writing.¹⁷ Indeed, in several cases, it does so quite explicitly. At one point, for example, Sei describes a pair of sleeves that have been “overscrupulously” arranged—“so much so that someone of taste might find the effect if anything a bit repellent” (97). This aesthetic preference also applies to the poetry she discusses. When composing poetry, we are told, one should never be “too constrained by wanting to create something pedantically correct” (100–1); and even a good poem can be ruined if it is recited with a “ridiculous amount of poetic feeling” (36). But above all, it is the discourse itself that internalizes this particular courtly virtue, for like the gentlewomen Sei describes, it, too, carries its messages to and fro without diffidence, “chatting and smiling and laughing” with the reader as it does so. Consider the following passage, for instance. “The *shinobu* fern is very touching,” Sei writes. “I also like wayside grasses and blady grass, and I particularly like wormwood. Mountain sedge, creeping fern, mountain indigo, beach mulberry, kudzu vine, bamboo grass, woody vine, shepherd’s purse and rice seedlings. The *asaji* reed is also charming” (57). This kind of writing very quickly takes on a phatic quality, communicating to the reader the affability of the discourse, its desire to pass the time of day, and very little else. Rather than striving to achieve a “commanding structure of significance” (Bersani 53), that is to say, rather than trying to make of these trivial preferences something *worth narrating* (as “good” literature should), *The Pillow Book* is perfectly content to keep on chatting, plying the reader with whatever amiable banalities may come to mind: “[T]he *kamatsuka*, though it doesn’t look important

enough to be worthy of particular attention, is very sweet . . . It's written with characters meaning "wild geese arriving" (58); "I love it when you open the lattice shutters . . . at daybreak, and a sudden gust of stormy wind stings your face" (180); "Some people wear gloss-yellow robes, but I . . . much prefer white" (231); and so on.

More than anything, though, it is the sheer simplicity of such passages that generates their air of "easy nonchalance." And this brings us back, once more, to the notion of leisure, for there is no sense of industry attached to discourse of this type, no evidence of the "atrocious labor" that Flaubert associated with the process of writing (qtd. in Barthes, "Flaubert" 297).¹⁸ Nor is this the "intensely elaborated kind of simplicity" (Morley 201) that over time takes on a certain semiotic density and carries within it the fossilized traces of hard labor. On the contrary, the simplicity of *The Pillow Book* seems to have been achieved without any effort whatsoever on Sei's part—almost every line being designed to convey, at a secondary level of meaning, the "ease" with which it was originally put together. Unlike Flaubert, in other words, who applied a labor theory of value to literature, Sei attaches aesthetic value to the *absence* of labor, to compositional facility and pleasure.¹⁹ Moreover, such implied effortlessness ultimately influences the way in which we as readers relate to the narrative, persuading us that we, too, might have been capable of producing these (rather ordinary) sentences had we been so inclined, jotting them down as casually and spontaneously as Sei herself once did. After all, anyone can write a list, can't they? I have already mentioned some of the similarities between Sei's prose style and the traditional Japanese haiku, and here, too, the correspondence is striking. According to Barthes, "[t]he haiku has this rather fantasmagorical property: that we always suppose that we ourselves can write such things easily. We tell ourselves: what could be more accessible to spontaneous writing than this . . . *It is evening, in autumn / All I can think of / Is my parents*" (*Empire* 69). Indeed; and what could be more accessible to spontaneous writing than this:

[241] *Things that just keep passing by*—A boat with its sail up.
People's age.
Spring. Summer. Autumn. Winter.

Or this:

[242] *Things that no one notices*—All the inauspicious days.
The ageing of people's mothers. (Sei 205)

This is writing that quite clearly distances itself from authorial industry, from the notion of style as suffering, and instead generates an air of “lazy elegance” (Berger 298)—assuring the reader, yet again, that nothing could have been easier, more leisurely, more loiterly, than the composition of these simple lines.²⁰

I have thus far been proposing that *The Pillow Book* observes a kind of directional taboo that forces it to retreat from history and politics. Instead of addressing these “worldly” matters, it focuses on two intersecting categories: (1) whatever is inessential to the narrative, carrying a minimal degree of meaning or significance; and (2) whatever could be described as *okashi*, whether it be a dancing firefly, a fragment of Chinese verse, or a cherry tree. In the first case, I have argued, these strategies reduce the narrative’s capacity to produce broader connotative meaning, while in the second they reduce the specificity of the discourse, further contributing to its lack of historical referentiality. I have also discussed in some detail the narrative’s disjunctive quality—its tendency to move rapidly between different topics, genres, and styles. This rejection of linearity, I have suggested, serves to disrupt the chronological trajectory of history while also emphasizing Sei’s leisurely compositional procedures. As we shall see, however, all of these strategies are most effectively realized in the narrative’s use of catalogues—in the enumerative passages, the eclectic inventories of likes and dislikes, that delineate with such clarity their author’s unique sensibility.

IV

The use of catalogues in *The Pillow Book* constitutes one of its most striking formal features. Essentially, there are two different types of catalogue embedded within the narrative. The first simply provides examples of famous ferry crossings, bodies of water, residences, villages, bridges, and so on. The second enumerates different “things” that have inspired in Sei some kind of aesthetic or affective response: “refined and elegant things,” “dispiriting things,” “things that make you feel nostalgic,” “startling and disconcerting things,” “things that give you pleasure,”²¹ and so on. As suggested above, these catalogues serve to reinforce many of the narrative’s underlying aesthetic strategies. For a start, they almost always privilege the trivial by compiling inventories of free-floating catalyzers liberated from their servitude to nuclei. They also tend to focus our attention on the *okashi*—the charming and amusing—and even when this is not the case (e.g., “infuriating things”), the triviality of what is said ultimately mitigates

the core grievance: “A guest who arrives when you have something urgent to do, and stays talking for ages” (26). And finally, the use of catalogues greatly contributes to the disjunctive or “erratic” quality of the narrative—disrupting its chronological trajectory and forcing it to enter a kind of loiterly or dilatory space where teleological progress is suspended, causal logic collapses, and “thought wanders off in sweet lazy liberty” (Kundera, *Art* 162). Just the one example, at this stage, should suffice:

[39] *Refined and elegant things*—A girl’s over-robe of white on white over pale violet-grey. The eggs of the spot-billed duck. Shaved ice with a sweet syrup, served in a shiny new metal bowl. A crystal rosary. Wisteria flowers. Snow on plum blossoms. An adorable little child eating strawberries. (46)

In an essay on Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag describes an aesthetic stance that makes it “possible to be pleased with the largest number of things” and argues that the literary device that “best projects this attitude is the list”—the “whimsical aesthete polyphony that juxtaposes things and experiences of a starkly different, often incongruous nature, turning them all, by this technique, into artifacts, aesthetic objects.” Here, Sontag concludes, “elegance equals the wittiest acceptances” (“Writing” 79). And this is precisely what the catalogue offers Sei: an opportunity to be “pleased with the largest number of things,” to derive aesthetic pleasure from an extraordinarily diverse range of sources, and to derive *additional* pleasure from the process of cataloguing itself, from the sheer hedonistic joy of bringing all these images together on the same page.²² Like the haiku, once more, this kind of classificatory listing also requires us to acknowledge the simple *thingness* of things, so that every utterance becomes a distinct narratorial gesture, directing the reader’s attention toward each individual object in turn: an egg, a bowl of shaved ice, a crystal rosary. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes himself discusses the appeal of the catalogue—the pleasure we derive from the ineluctable “persistence of the thing.” Having just finished reading a passage from Stendhal in which there “occurs a naming of foods: milk, buttered bread, cream cheese, preserves, Maltese oranges, [and] sugared strawberries,” he tries to identify the precise source of the readerly pleasure such a list produces:

Is [the pleasure of this list] another pleasure of pure representation (experienced therefore solely by the greedy reader)? But I have no

fondness for milk or so many sweets, and I do not project much of myself into the detail of these dishes. Something else occurs, doubtless having to do with another meaning of the word “representation.” When, in an argument, someone *represents* something to his interlocutor, he is only alleging the *final state* of reality, its intractability. Similarly, perhaps, the novelist, by citing, naming, *noticing* food (by treating it as notable), imposes on the reader the final state of matter, what cannot be transcended, withdrawn . . . *That’s it!* This cry is not to be understood as an illumination of the intelligence, but as the very limit of nomination, of the imagination. In short, there are two realisms: the first deciphers the “real” (what is demonstrated but not seen); the second speaks “reality” (what is seen but not demonstrated); the novel, which can mix these two realisms, adds to the intelligible of the “real” the hallucinatory tail of “reality”: astonishment that in 1791 one could eat “a salad of oranges and rum,” as one does in restaurants today: the onset of historical intelligibility and the persistence of the thing (orange, rum) in *being there*. (45–46)

Here, as was also the case in his analysis of the haiku, Barthes is celebrating (or simply enjoying) a representation of reality based on designation rather than interpretation, metaphor, or metonymy. (“*It’s that, it’s thus*, says the haiku, *it’s so*” [Barthes, *Empire* 83].) In *The Pillow Book*, similarly, Sei’s classificatory listing forces us to notice these disparate entities (by treating them as notable) and to acknowledge their factuality, the “persistence of the thing [an egg, a bowl of shaved ice, a crystal rosary] in *being there*.” Only thus is she able to preserve the sublime inconsequentiality of the object: removing what is “essential” from the narrative, leaving only what doesn’t matter, what carries minimal meaning, what contributes nothing of significance to the discourse.

But something does remain embedded within these catalogues, something does survive the narrative’s systematic retreat from meaning, and that something is Sei herself—or more precisely, perhaps, the semiotic traces of her authorial sensibility. By gathering often disparate entities under a single classificatory rubric, all catalogues impose a semblance of order on the world, and for this reason they tend to privilege the organizing subject responsible for giving the world this particular shape, for establishing this particular “order of things” rather than any other. Think of Jorge Luis Borges’s famous (and imaginary) Chinese encyclopedia entry,²³ for instance, or the tireless inventorizing of Georges Perec.²⁴ Such catalogues create a world, a discursive universe, shaped by a quite specific sensibility, one that leaves residual traces of itself within the categories it

creates. Simply put, catalogues give us the opportunity (however limited or circumscribed) to arrange the world according to our own cognitive categories—accepting one thing, rejecting another, codifying, classifying, and regulating until the list is complete. A project of this kind, as Umberto Eco observes, “confer[s] unity on a set of objects that, no matter how dissimilar among themselves [they may be], comply with a *contextual pressure*, in other words they are related for their being . . . all in the same place” (*Infinity* 113–16). In the case of *The Pillow Book*, this contextual pressure is provided by Sei’s unique configuration of proclivities, attitudes, preferences, and prejudices, all of which provide the catalogues with their organizational logic and structural coherence. Although her sensibility could be considered representative of an entire cultural/aesthetic ethos, Sei’s status as central focalizing figure within the narrative ensures that her individual perspective, her personal tastes, are afforded particular salience. Granted, her contemporaries may have agreed, with complete unanimity, on the beauty of flowering cherry trees, but would they necessarily have listed a dried sprig of *aoi* under the category of “things that make you feel nostalgic” (30)? Or pine trees and mountain villages under the category of “things that gain by being painted” (119)? These flashes of individuality are what give the narrative its particularly subjective quality, providing stroboscopic glimpses of a genuine authorial presence. And needless to say, this, too, is consistent with the narrative’s governing aesthetic principles: resisting the chronological trajectory of the traditional autobiography, its “evolving” (auto)biographical tense, and instead collapsing the totality of Sei’s life into particles of disjointed (and largely achronic) meaning.

In *Sade/Fourier/Loyola*, as we have already noted, Barthes refers to such particles of meaning as “biographemes.” As part of his analysis of these three very different writers, he makes an allowance for the “amicable return of the author,” thus revising his earlier position on the subject.²⁵ However, the authorial figure who makes this return has no historical or biographical unity; “he is a mere plural of ‘charms,’ the site of a few tenuous details . . . the source of vivid novelistic glimmerings, a discontinuous chant of amiabilities.” Consequently, Barthes writes,

what I get from Sade’s life is not the spectacle, albeit grandiose, of a man oppressed by an entire society because of his passion, it is not the solemn contemplation of a fate, it is, *inter alia*, that Provençal way in which Sade says “milli” (mademoiselle) Rousset, or milli Henriette, or

milli Lépinai, it is his white muff when he accosts Rose Keller, his last games with the Charenton linen seller (in her case, I am enchanted by the linens); what I get from Fourier's life is his liking for *mirlitons* (little Parisian spice cakes), his belated sympathy for lesbians, his death among the flowerpots; what I get from Loyola's life are not the saint's pilgrimages, visions, mortifications, and constitutions, but only his "beautiful eyes, always a little filled with tears." . . . [W]ere I a writer, and dead, how I would love it if my life, through the pains of some friendly and detached biographer, were to reduce itself to a few details, a few preferences, a few inflections, let us say: to "biographemes" whose distinction and mobility might go beyond any fate and come to touch, like Epicurean atoms, some future body, destined to the same dispersion. (8–9)

At the end of the book, Barthes provides examples of how this fragmentation of biographical discourse might be put into practice. In a brief section entitled "Lives," he reduces the 74 years of Sade's life to 22 (listed) biographemes. Sade, we are told, liked theater costumes and dogs (entries 5 and 16), "feared and immensely disliked" the sea (entry 13), and was prevented from reading Rousseau's *Confessions*, in the year 1783, by the penitentiary authorities at Vincennes (entry 17) (174–81). The life of Fourier, on the other hand, dwindles to a mere twelve entries, and here we learn that he hated old cities (entry 4), that he survived the Terror "only at the cost of repeated lies" (entry 6), and that in his old age he surrounded himself with cats and flowers (entry 10) (183–84). In these passages, Barthes would appear to be deliberately "trivializing" his subjects' lives, replacing biographical nuclei (those episodes that are supposed to guarantee and justify their place in history) with inessential catalyzers. And by doing so, by reducing the lives of these historical figures to the level of anecdote, he manages to disrupt the teleological trajectory of the traditional biography—refusing, as Sei did previously, to contribute anything of substance to "the *grand récit* of [a] totalizing, integrated, progressive history, a history that knows where it is going." Thus, in Loyola's case, Barthes ignores the "pilgrimages, visions, mortifications, and constitutions" around which a traditional biography would be structured, focusing instead on the saint's "beautiful eyes, always a little filled with tears." And in his account of Sade's life, he bypasses "the spectacle, albeit grandiose, of a man oppressed by an entire society because of his passion" in order to discuss what Sade was wearing on a particular night in 1768. In other words, rather than producing a biographical narrative that offers, in the process of its unfolding, some sense of internal

logic and thematic coherence, Barthes leaves us with nothing more substantial than a series of vaguely evocative images: “Sade’s white muff, Fourier’s flowerpots, Ignatius’s Spanish eyes” (9).

Of course, this is precisely what Sei also does in *The Pillow Book*. Instead of composing a “proper” autobiography, one that traces her life at court in a linear and progressive way, she collapses her identity into a disconnected series of *autobiographemes*: “a few tenuous details,” some “vivid novelistic glimmerings, a discontinuous chant of amiabilities.” These autobiographemes can be found in various places throughout the narrative, but they emerge most clearly in the catalogues enumerating Sei’s likes and dislikes. Here, for example, we learn that she likes ceremonial dances, tiny lotus leaves, good-quality writing paper, the sound of the thirteen-stringed *koto*, and having her poetry praised; or, conversely, that she doesn’t like mosquitoes, loud sneezes, the spindle tree (“Nothing need be said on the subject” [43]), spilling things, and people who express themselves poorly in writing. In Barthes’s own autobiography, he compiles a similar list of likes (the piano, coffee, Médoc wine, having change, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, etc.) and dislikes (the harpsichord, Miró, tautologies, telephoning, spontaneity, etc.), and here, too, he argues that such biographemes serve to delineate an authorial presence within the narrative. “*I like, I don’t like*: this is of no importance to anyone; this, apparently, has no meaning. And yet all this means: *my body is not the same as yours*” (*Roland* 116–17). The catalogues of likes and dislikes that fill *The Pillow Book* would appear to be saying the same thing, delineating the same presence. For in these passages we as readers are also brought into contact with the body of the author, required to familiarize ourselves with her preferences and prejudices, and obliged to respond in some way to her specific tastes—to recognize the places where our respective pleasures converge and diverge, and to acknowledge, ultimately, the persistence of this particular sensibility, this particular body, this particular set of likes and dislikes, in *being there*.

I suggested earlier that Sei’s use of catalogues in *The Pillow Book* serves to reinforce many of the narrative’s underlying aesthetic strategies: privileging the trivial, foregrounding the “things that give [one] pleasure” (Sei 210), and greatly contributing to the fragmentation of the discourse. But that is only part of the story, for as we make our way through the narrative, it gradually becomes clear that Sei has subjected her authorial identity to the same process of “lightening” that the narrative itself has undergone. For one thing, as we have seen, she deliberately reduces the biographical substance of her

life to a series of trivial catalyzers, ignoring episodes of genuine historical significance (epidemics, political intrigues, fatal pregnancies) in favor of what simply doesn't matter: her enthusiasm for ceremonial dances, say, or her aversion to mosquitoes. Disregarding one of the dominant aesthetic values of her day (*mono no aware*), Sei also consistently stresses the delightful and charming nature of her existence. "Overall," she declares in the narrative's final pages, "I have chosen to write about the things that delight . . . I merely wrote for my personal amusement [*tawabure ni*] things that I myself have thought and felt" (255–56).²⁶ And finally, by collapsing her identity into a disjointed series of autobiographemes, Sei manages to disrupt the chronological trajectory of her own life, entering the same loiterly or dilatory space as her narrative—a space just slightly removed from history, where teleological progress is suspended and the discourse afforded the luxury to do as it pleases. Here, in this dilatory space, Sei herself becomes something of a floating signifier, a "magnetic field" around which particles of meaning gradually coalesce. Like Holly Golightly, that is to say, whose carefree "hither and yonning" (Capote, *Breakfast* 54) we discussed in Chapter 1, she ultimately dissolves into discourse—into the "sliver of writing, the fragment of code" (Barthes, *Empire* 55). And that is where the residual traces of her sensibility can be found to this day, a thousand years later, embedded within these autobiographical passages, these intimate inventories, like leaves lodged in a lattice weave fence.