Motoori Norinaga’s Poetics

A medical doctor by training and profession, Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801) has left a profound imprint on the world of Japanese letters thanks to his pioneering efforts as a philologist who spent thirty years of his life deciphering one of Japan’s earliest mythological records, the Kojiki (Records of Ancient Matters, 712).1 Norinaga’s antiquarian interests in literary records led him to in-depth studies of what are considered today the major classics of Japan’s literary canon—classics written in the vernacular Yamato language that poets used in their composition of non-Chinese poems (waka). Poetry continued to be at the center of Norinaga’s humanistic interests during his whole life, as we can see from his continued efforts to talk about it in theoretical works such as Ashiwake Obune (A Small Boat amidst the Reeds, 1757), which he wrote as a young man during his training in Kyoto; Shibun Yōryō (The Essentials of the Tale of Genji, 1763); Isonokami no Sasamegoto (Personal Views on Poetry, 1763); Genji Monogatari Tama no Ogushi (The Jeweled Comb of the Tale of Genji, 1799); and the collection of essays Tama-katsuma (The Jeweled Comb Basket, 1793–1801). Like most members of the Japanese intelligentsia up to modern times, Norinaga enjoyed composing poems, mainly thirty-one-syllable poems, although he tried his hand at a variety of styles, including the ancient long-poem meter (chōka). His best-known poems are collected in his private collection, which is known under the title Suzunoya Shū (The Collection of the House of Bells, 1798–1800), taken from the name of his private school. Norinaga is credited with the composition of over ten thousand verses.2

Norinaga’s discovery of poetry coincided with the time he spent in Kyoto studying medicine. In 1752 he joined the school of Morikawa Akitada, a student of the revered Reizei Tamemura (1712–1774). Norinaga also became a disciple of Aruga Chōsen (1712–1774) and attended his poetry gatherings. Norinaga indicates in his diary that he was impressed by the Hyakunin Isshu Kaikanshō (Revised Views on One Poem by a Hundred Poets), Keichū’s (1640–1701) commentary on Fujiwara Teika’s renowned selection of one
hundred poems. Keichū was quite critical of the traditional Nijō School that had introduced Norinaga to the world of poetic composition. The Nijō School was the inheritor of a tradition known as Kokindenju, or “Secret Teachings of Ancient and Modern Poems,” an institution that had kept the confines of poetry restricted to the diction of the first three imperial collections: Kokinshū (Collection of Ancient and Modern Poems, 905), Gosenshū (Later Collection, 951), and Shūishū (Collection of Gleanings, 1005–1007). Despite the impact that the revolutionary work of Keichū had on Norinaga’s poetics, Norinaga seems to have been unwilling to break free from the powerful Nijō School, as we can see from the indebtedness to Kokinshū, Gosenshū, and Shūishū shown in the following poem on the Yoshino Mountains:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Miwataseba</th>
<th>When I look far away</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tada shirakumo zo</td>
<td>Only white clouds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niounaru</td>
<td>Shine in their splendors—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sakura wa izura</td>
<td>Where are the cherry trees,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miyoshino no yama</td>
<td>Mountains of fair Yoshino?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the first three imperial collections Mount Yoshino was sung for its white snow, which was often compared to the whiteness of the cherry blossoms, for which the mountain came to be known only after the compilation of the Shinkokinshū (New Collection of Ancient and Modern Poems, 1205). Norinaga relies on a set of images that were well known to poets of the Nijō School—a combination of topoi developed in the first three imperial collections (the whiteness of snow and clouds capping Mount Yoshino) with further images (the beauty of the cherry blossoms and the act of looking far in the distance), which appear in an anthology that Norinaga revered: the eighth imperial collection Shinkokinshū.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Miyoshino no</th>
<th>Flowering cherries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yamabe ni sakeru</td>
<td>Blossoming in the mountains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sakurabana</td>
<td>Of fair Yoshino—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yuki ka to nomi zo</td>
<td>Betrayed by unwary eyes,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayamatarekeru</td>
<td>We mistake them for snowflakes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Miyoshino no</th>
<th>Flowering cherries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yoshino no yama no</td>
<td>On the Yoshino mountains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sakurabana</td>
<td>The fair, good field,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Shirakumo to nomi I have taken them to be
Miemagaitsutsu Nothing but white clouds.⁶

Yoshinoyama The Yoshino mountains
Kiesenu yuki to Have been seen as a place
Mietsuru wa Where the snow does not melt!
Mine tsuzuki sae The cherry trees have bloomed
Sakura narikeri On the ranges of its peaks.⁷

Whereas in poetic composition Norinaga became a strong supporter of the traditionalism of the Nijō School, in the study of poetic texts he did not hesitate to confront interpretations that were based exclusively on authority rather than on philology. When it came to scholarship, Norinaga clearly sided with Keichū against the repetition of hollow theories promoted by the secrecy of the Kokindenju tradition. A thorough study of the ancient language allowed Norinaga to formulate a sophisticated poetics in which he attempted to recover the voices of the past—a realm of sounds that he associated with primordial voices heard in the most ancient texts. This explains the great attention he paid to the most ancient collection of Japanese verse, the Man’yōshū, despite his admiration for the aristocratic texts of the Nijō School. One might have reservations about the quality of Norinaga’s poetic production due to his tendency to follow the rules and regulations of poetic precedent religiously. However, it would be disingenuous to dismiss the complexity of his poetics in which he dealt with linguistic, aesthetic, and ethical issues. The following is a summary of Norinaga’s technical description of the poetic voice, the poetic sign, and the role played by poetry in the formation of interpretative communities.

Voice

In his discussion of poetry Norinaga emphasizes four key concepts: “koe” (voice), “aya” (pattern), “sama/sugata” (form), and “mono no aware” (the pathos of things). Simply stated, the sound of words (koe) takes on a poetic form (sama or sugata) by being externalized into written signs (aya), a process informed by the poet’s ability to be moved by the external surroundings (mono no aware). This basic idea had been the working hypothesis for any Japanese poet or scholar working in the field of classical poetics since the time it was formulated at the very beginning of a document that is considered to be the first theoretical statement on waka, Ki no Tsurayuki’s (868?–945?)
vernacular preface \( (Kana-jo) \) to the first imperial anthology of Japanese poetry, the \( \textit{Kokin Waka Shù} \) \( (\text{Collection of Ancient and Modern Poems, 905}) \): “Japanese poetry \( (\text{Yamato-uta}) \) has the human heart \( (\text{kokoro}) \) as seed and myriads of words as leaves \( (koto\ no\ ha) \). It comes into being when men use the seen and the heard to give voice to feelings aroused by the innumerable events in their lives.”

Tsurayuki’s metaphor privileges the human heart \( (\text{or mind}) \) as the repository of feelings \( (\text{or ideas}) \) that, like a seed, sprout into words \( (\text{kotoba}) \) \( (\text{or leaves, koto no ha}) \) under the pressure of the surrounding reality \( (\text{the perception of what is seen and heard}) \), thus making a poem come into being. Literally, a “word” \( (\text{kotoba}) \) is “the leaf of koto” \( (koto\ no\ ha) \). The question is, what does the word \( koto \) mean? The linguist Ōno Susumu argues that prior to the eighth century \( koto \) meant both “words” \( (koto 言) \) and “things” \( (koto 事) \). He states that a differentiation between an object and its naming came to be made only during the Nara period, a time when “words” eventually came into being as the “expressions of things” \( (kotoba\ or\ koto\ no\ ha) \). Óno’s debatable theory is rooted in a belief shared by thinkers such as Motoori Norinaga, who were later classified as members of the “School of National Learning,” or “Nativism” \( (\text{Kokugaku}) \). In mythological times prior to history, no separation existed between things and the perceptions of them. Things were the way they appeared to be and the way they were named. This theory, known as \( \text{kotodama} \) \( (\text{the spirit of words/things}) \), provided Nativist scholars with powerful arguments in favor of an allegedly sacred origin of the voice, “a divine sign expressed in words,” as Keichū \( (1640–1701) \), the alleged father of \( \text{Kokugaku} \), argued in \( \text{Waji Shōranshō} \) \( (\text{Rectification of Japanese Names, 1695}) \). Keichū based this belief on the observation that in the \( \text{Man’yōshū} \) \( (\text{Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves, 759}) \), one of Japan’s most ancient poetic collections, the Chinese characters for “word” and “thing” were interchangeable in the writing of the word \( \text{kotodama} \) \( (\text{言霊/事霊}) \). This observation led to the formulation of a coextension between expression and event, a belief that is still at work in Ōno’s modern explanation of the word \( koto \). The spirit of language \( (\text{kotodama}) \) had the power to create reality, inasmuch as naming \( (koto 言) \) had a direct bearing on the construction of things \( (koto 事) \). The \( \text{Man’yōshū} \) provided Norinaga with evidence of the ancient liturgical practice of “lifting up words” \( (kotoage) \)—the practice of correct naming that was the prerogative of deities. To use a biblical example, God said “light,” and light came into being. Wishing to praise the strength of a warrior who could translate his plans of victory into reality, Takahashi Mushimaro \( (\text{fl. ca. 720–737}) \) sang the brave
soldier as someone who could achieve the result of the *kotoage* liturgy with his own actions, without having to rely on any linguistic ritual:

\[
\begin{array}{ll}
    \text{Chiyorozu no} & \text{Though you faced a foe} \\
    \text{Ikusa naritomo} & \text{A thousand myriads in strength,} \\
    \text{Kotoage sezu} & \text{You are such a man} \\
    \text{Torite kinubeki} & \text{As without lifting up words} \\
    \text{Onokoi to so omou} & \text{Could bring them captive back.}^{12}
\end{array}
\]

The recovery of correct naming, therefore, was paramount to the recovery of the original, divine voice. Norinaga thus committed himself to the ambitious task of uncovering “the true voice of the spirit of language” (*kotodama no shingon*) that could be found in ancient poetry.\(^{13}\) Nativist hermeneuticians achieved this task by using the homophonies of the Yamato language and by entrusting “ancient words” (*furukoto* 古言) with the voicing of “ancient facts/history” (*furukoto* 古事). In *Isonokami no Sasamegoto* (Personal Views on Poetry), Norinaga emphasizes the futility of applying the hermeneutical enterprise to scriptive traces—the imported mass of Chinese signs—before understanding the meaning of the voice to which, Norinaga argues, Chinese characters have been improperly attached. He takes issue with the graphically oriented struggle of philologists who “read foreign characters in Yamato language” (*wakun*). In Norinaga’s opinion, such an act privileged the sign (*moji*)—the character for poetry, *uta* 歌, for example—rather than focusing attention on the native sound that Norinaga recorded in *man’yōgana* as 千多, and that he argues “was expressed in words since the age of the gods.” Norinaga believed that words (*kotoba* 詞) are the root of signification, whereas signs (*moji*) are the tree’s twigs. While the sound was “the master” (*shu*), its written representation was nothing but “a servant” (*bokujū*), “a borrowed temporary device” (*kari no mono*) that could easily be replaced by a different Chinese character, thus making writing an unreliable object of study.\(^{14}\)

The fracture of meaning following the improper association of a foreign script with the native language was already a major concern for the philosopher Ogyū Sorai (1666–1728), whose theories Norinaga knew from his teacher Hori Keizan (1688–1757). It was Keizan who in *Fujingen* (Things That Cannot be Fully Expressed in Words, 1742) had noticed the awkwardness of translating Japanese language into Chinese characters, thus providing alien shapes for native meaning.\(^{15}\) Norinaga took up his teacher’s lesson in an earlier poetic treatise, *Ashiwake Obune* (A Small Boat amidst the Reeds), in
which he attacked the practice of earlier commentators who analyzed the Chinese character for *uta* rather than its sound, not realizing that “*kanji* are harmful to the language of our country.”

Norinaga’s privileging of speech/action over representation/object is rooted in his attempt to distinguish native speech from the “alien” continental script inherited from China. Paradoxically, he based his defense of the lyric nature of native poetry (*uta*) to be distinguished from Chinese poetic language (*shi*), on the canonical Chinese definition of poetry that appears in the *Shu jing* (Book of Documents): “The poem (*shi*) articulates what is on the mind intently (*zhi*); song makes language (*yan*) last long” 詩言志歌永言. The *Shu jing* explains poetry as the articulation of the poet’s intentionality by a special language whose musical pattern makes the word last a long time through the chanting of “elongated” words. Norinaga, however, forced this text by disjoining the sentence as if the author were dealing with two different kinds of activities, one more prosaic resulting from an act of will, and the other more spontaneous following the singing impulse of a lyrical heart. It goes without saying that Norinaga read the first clause—“poetry expresses intent (*kokorozashi*)”—as the definition of Chinese poetry, while using the second—“the act of singing (*utau wa*) makes language last long”—to characterize the native voice.

The “sustained elongation of the voice” (=song; *nagamu*) becomes for Norinaga a distinctive mark of the native *uta* that keeps it apart from the intellectualistic bent of Chinese poetry aiming at “expressing intentionality” (*kokorozashi o inu*). As Keichū already noted in his annotation of the *Kokin-shū*, the *Kokin Yozai Shō* (Excess Material of the *Kokinshū*, 1692), *shi* stops at the level of intentionality (*kokorozashi no koto*, or, literally, “the words of the will”), while *uta* implies the presence of the language of music. However, Keichū denied that there was any difference between the two forms of lyric, arguing that “in the *Shoku Nihongi* [Chronicles of Japan, Continued, 797] and in the *Man’yōshū*, songs (*uta*) are called poems (*shi*).”

Norinaga makes it a priority to recover the native voice. His philological agenda outlines the rift between “the voice of writing” (*moji no koe, ji no koe*) forming “scriptive meaning” (*jigi, moji no giri*), and the native voice or “voice of speech” permeating “local meaning” (*kotoba no kokoro, konata no kotoba no gi*). This defense of song as the voice of speech is based on the realization of the musical origin of poetry as a performative act. In order to prove the primacy of the voice in the process of signification, Norinaga used the discrepancy between signifiers and signified to attack the philological methodol-
ogy that explained local terms according to the etymology of Chinese characters. He addressed his criticism to scholars such as Hosokawa Yūsai (1534–1610) and Keichū, whose interpretation of the word “song” (uta) followed the explanation that Liu Xi gave of the Chinese character ge (to sing) in Shi ming (Explanation of Terms, ca. 200 C.E.): Liu Xi found the etymon of ka (歌) in the character ke (柯), which means “branches,” since “the upward and downward modulation [=pitch] of the singing voice was like the movement of leaves on a branch [when the wind blows].” Norinaga faulted Japanese scholars for corrupting the meaning of native expression—in this instance the phoneme uta—with a scriptive trace that could well be explained in light of Liu Xi’s theory, but that, basically, fractured the local voice with an alien sign. The freezing of speech in writing implied a series of contextual translations that distanced the native signifier—graphically represented in man’yōgana (千多 for uta)—from its scriptive representation (歌). This explains Motoori’s skepticism towards the etymological enterprise that was alleged to recapture a universal meaning from an alien root of signification.

Addressing the question of the etymology of “song” (uta), Norinaga relied on a work by the Ise Shintō scholar Tanigawa Kotosuga (1709–1776), the Nihon Shoki Tsūshō (A Compendium Treatise on the Nihon Shoki, 1762), a commentary of the Nihon Shoki (Chronicles of Japan, 720). Kotosuga quoted a senior colleague, Tamaki Masahide, arguing that “the act of singing, reciting a poem aloud” (utau), was related to “the act of appealing to someone” (uttau). Hori Keizan had further explained the same etymology as “an expression of grievances piling up in one’s heart, which needed to be relieved in order to dispel the heart’s gloom.” Poetry, thus, was seen as the explosion of an excess of feeling that the heart could hardly contain; it acted as a safety valve that would guarantee the person’s physical and mental well-being. Norinaga refused to either corroborate or reject his teacher’s theory, dismissing the matter with a curt statement, “now there is nothing more we can say about it.”

In a later work addressed to beginning scholars, the Uiyamabumi (First Steps into the Mountain, 1798) Norinaga openly voiced his distrust of the etymological method, stating that “etymologies are not that essential . . . and they do not deserve too much scholarly attention.” Norinaga was clearly skeptical of a method that would attempt to recapture meaning from the root of a scriptive trace from which meaning had originally been separated. Therefore, he encouraged a more historical approach to the study of language that would analyze temporal changes in the usage of words and in the meanings attributed to them. As he states in Uiyamabumi, “more than being concerned
with the original meaning *(moto no kokoro)* of such and such a word, we should think to which uses such words were put by the ancients, and we should clarify what meaning such and such a word had at that time.”

If the etymological enterprise could find a justification, this was limited to the uncovering of the roots of speech, the study of native words whose transcription into an alien script was purely phonetic *(man’yõgana)*.

As an example of the etymologist of the native voice at work, Motoori’s philological explanation of the notion of “making a poem” *(uta o yomu)* is particularly eloquent. He focuses on the several Chinese characters — that were associated with the sound *yomu* (よ in *man’yõgana*) indicating, in Norinaga’s words, “the act of reading/making a poem by having the voice imitate words/concepts already in use . . . as in the case of counting numbers . . . without any melody attached to it or any particular intonation.”

On the other hand, the presence of melody or intonation explains the expression “to sing a poem” *(uta o utau)*, with particular regard to an ancient composition that is not a creative act on the reciter’s part. Norinaga reminds his readers that the sound *utau* 千多布 (“to sing”) was also conveyed by the character *ei* 説, whose other reading, *nagamuru* (“to sing/to sigh”), becomes Norinaga’s ground for an act of philological bravery. He explains the poetic act *(nagamuru)* as “a long reverberation of the voice” *(koe o nagaku hiku)* expressing the “lamenting heart lost in deep thoughts” *(monoomoi shite nageku koto)*.

Norinaga relates the act of singing *(nagamuru)* to the act of sighing *(nageku)*, which, according to what Tanigawa Kotosuga and Kamo no Mabuchi had previously argued, derived from the expression “a long breath” *(nagaiki)*. As Norinaga himself points out in the *Kojiki-den*, “a lament *(nageki)* is the shortening of a long breath *(nagaiki)*.” It was also the shortening of “a long life” *(nagaiki)*, a widespread popular etymology lent credit by Kaibara Ekiken (1630–1714) when he wrote in his *Nihon Shakumyõ* (Japanese Etymologies, 1699), “the living *(iki-taru)* human being has breath *(iki)*; with death there is no breath.”

“To sustain the breath *(iki o nagaku suru)* in poetry meant to reproduce semantically the process of life at the time when “the shortening of breath” deriving from human emotions threatened the body’s organic functions.

The complex web of signification surrounding the meaning of *uta* included a pneumatological theory of existence that made breath the major component of poetry, as well as of life, translating sighs of regret and relief into the articulations of poetry. Poetic language restores life to a body deeply threatened by overwhelming passions. Poetry then, is defined as “the spontaneous sigh of relief following the deep movement of the heart, the clearing of
a gloomy disposition.” Several organs and senses are engaged in the poetic process. In particular, Norinaga singles out the role played by the voice (koe) that transforms the deep breath (nagaiki) into exclamatory particles—ana, aya, aa, aware—which, as I will mention later, are at the center of Norinaga’s theory of mono no aware. The eye also, Norinaga continues, came to play a fundamental role in the process of poetic signification, starting from the time of the Senzaishū (Collection of a Thousand Years, 1187) and Shinkokinshū (New Collection of Ancient and Modern Times, 1205), when nagamuru came to include the meaning, “staring at an object.” The fixed gaze of the observer contributed further to the depressed state of the man “sunk in deep thoughts” to which the word nagamuru also refers. By combining all the different meanings that make up the Japanese word for poetry, the poetic act could then be defined, in somewhat Heideggerian fashion, as “the voicing of the deep breath of the long life of a still, pensive Being” (nagaiku/nageku/nagamuru).

The same distrust for the written word that sets Norinaga apart from several generations of philologists can be seen in Norinaga’s reconstruction of the etymology of the word “Yamato.” First conceived as the name of the geographical area where the capital was located (the Yamato province), it eventually became a general term that included in its meaning the entire land of Japan (ame no shita no sōmyō). Norinaga challenges the explanation given to this name in the Nihongi Shiki (Private Notes on the Chronicles of Japan), a record of commentaries of the Nihon Shoki compiled during the Heian period. According to this work, after the separation of heaven and earth, people were forced to live in the mountains because the ground had not yet solidified and still remained in a muddy state. This would explain the large number of “footprints left in the mountains” (yamaato), from which the name Yamato allegedly derived. Moreover—the document continues—since in ancient times “to live, to dwell” was indicated by the character “to” (to stop), Yamato (山跡) also means “to dwell in the mountains.” Norinaga contends that, according to eighth-century mythological records, the early history of a not yet solidified land preceded the birth of the two ancestral gods, and therefore the Japanese land (Ōyashimaguni) could not have been created. He argues that, as there was no textual proof of people living in the mountains during the first stage of human history, the argument advanced in the Nihongi Shiki must be rejected. Keichū, Norinaga admits, was already very critical of an interpretation that would single out only one land, the Yamato province, as the place where the ground had not yet solidified. However, by still accepting
the theory that the name Yamato derived "from the many traces left by people in the mountains because the Yamato province was surrounded on four sides by mountains," Keichū ignored the fact that his explanation was based on an interpretation of Chinese characters—Yamato 严肃—that were meant to be taken phonetically rather than literally. Norinaga also points out that this incorrect interpretation caused the malpractice of incorrect intonation during poetry meetings in which the singer would linger on the word "Yamato" as if it were made of two words, yama and ato.

Norinaga also criticizes as “modern philosophizing" (nochi no yo no gakumonzata) and “self-affectation" (sakashidachitaru setsu) the theory that explains Yamato as a contraction of “Ya(shi)ma(mo)to" or “the original land among the myriad islands." Norinaga defends his rejection of this theory on the basis that, unlike the Nihon Shoki, the Kojiki states that the first island created by the ancestral deities of what is known today as the Japanese archipelago was Awaji, while Yamato—the island of Honshū—was the last. Norinaga continues, saying that too much reliance on a work marred by concerns for rhetorical embellishments (kazari) such as the Nihon Shoki, at the expense of the natural simplicity (sunao) of expression found in the Kojiki, has led to the loss of the signifying codes in use during the age of the gods—codes that the philologist has the duty of making readable once again. Norinaga further took issue with the interpretation that explained Yamato as an auspicious name (kagō) attached to a sound that was destined to become the signifying mark of the entire land. Such an interpretation wrongly privileged debates centered on the need to find a proper character for Yamato (moji no sata) rather than explaining what for Norinaga counted the most, the meaning behind the voice of the word (kotoba 言).

Where, then, should one look for the correct etymology of the sound “Yamato”? Given the foundational status Norinaga accorded to the mythological accounts of the Record of Ancient Matters, the answer could only be found in the oldest native songs, such as in the following, which the Kojiki attributes to the legendary Yamato Takeru no Mikoto:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yamato wa</th>
<th>Yamato is</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kuni no mahoroba</td>
<td>The highest part of the land;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tatanazuku</td>
<td>The mountains are green partitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aokaki</td>
<td>Lying layer upon layer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yamagomoreru</td>
<td>Nestled among the mountains,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yamato shi uruwashi</td>
<td>How beautiful is Yamato!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Being a land surrounded by mountains—“the green fences” that, according to another poem quoted by Norinaga, “shield” the land, protecting it from the outside—Yamato simply means “mountainous place.” North, behind this land, lies the Yamashiro province—today’s Kyoto prefecture—whose name literally means “behind the mountains.” Norinaga found a legitimate etymology in the voice of poetry, a voice that for centuries had been silenced by the alien traces of Chinese characters.

Signs

Norinaga never denied the fact that the voice of poetry is inscribed in scriptive signs. He never took issue with the fact that words were recorded in the phonoetical system (man’yōgana) used in the earliest records of the Yamato language, the Kojiki and the Man’yōshū. Phonetic signs were part of the poetic voice that stood in opposition to daily expressions used for the practical reason (jitsuyō) of communication. For Norinaga, the difference between poetic language and common language could be compared to the difference between appreciating a cherry tree for the beauty of its blossoms and valuing the same tree as firewood. Poetic language was made of what he called “pattern words” (aya), the unmediated expression of a pristine voice transmitting “the heart of things” (koto no kokoro/mono no kokoro). On the other hand, daily language was conveyed by “common words” (tada no kotoba), simplified signs communicating the “reason” (kotowari) and “meaning” (i) of objects. It was certainly not unusual for poets to define the language of their trade with a vocabulary that distinguished the refinement of the poetic voice from the crudeness of daily expression. The eleventh-century poet Fujiwara Michitoshi (1047–1099), for example, stressed “the needlework like” (nuimono) nature of poetic words, “brocade patterns” (nishiki nuimono) that he singled out as one of poetry’s distinctive marks, together with “heart” (kokoro) and “voice” (koe). Fujiwara no Shunzei (1114–1204) quoted Michitoshi in one of the most influential poetic treatises of the middle ages, the Korai Fūteishō (Poetic Styles Past and Present, 1197).

For Norinaga “patterns” (aya) were graphic visualizations of poetic speech, the translation of sound into “spontaneous expressions” (onozukara kotoba), which were grounded in the wondrous nature of “the principle of spontaneity” (jinen no myō)—the principle that let things “be what they are” (ari no mama). The articulation of spontaneity relies more on the language of exclamations than on logic of the proposition. Norinaga argues that, whereas the common
word for expressing sadness would be a simple repetition of the adjective “sad” (kanashi kanashi), only the sigh of sadness that arises spontaneously—“Oh, how sad, oh, oh!” (ara kanashi ya, nō nō)—can free the heart from gloom and convey the depth of human sensitivity (fukaki aware). Such a spontaneous sigh can be conveyed only by poetry. Norinaga’s reduction of the notion of “pattern” to the idea of spontaneity exonerated him from any further explanation. The etymology of the character “aya”—a method of which Norinaga would not have approved—actually provides some further clarification.

An etymological analysis of aya (Ch. wen; J. fumi, bun), which Norinaga used to indicate the word “pattern” and its most distinguished extensions—“letters” and “literature”—indicates that this character “consists of intersecting strokes, representing a crisscross pattern.” We find this definition in the Shuo Wen Jie Zi (Explanations of Simple and Compound Graphs, ca. 100 C.E.), China’s most ancient etymological dictionary by Xu Shen. In it, we read that Can Jie, a scribe in the service of the Yellow Emperor, devised the system of Chinese writing by observing the prints of birds and other animals on the ground, thus representing graphically the configuration of things by a process of analogy. The Zhouyi (Book of Changes) explains “aya” as “an image in writing of the shape of the things written about.” According to this work, after noticing the marks (wen/bun) on the bodies of birds and other animals, Pao Xi traced the first scriptural marks—the eight trigrammes of the Book of Changes—in order to communicate the power of the universe (shenming).

These two definitions include both the symbolic and the syntactic/semantic aspects of “literary patterns” and emphasize the fictional nature of the sign that subsumes under its representational power the “natural qualities” or “inner substances” (zhi) of the objects of representation. The privileging of the “likely” over the closure of mimetic reproduction keeps the process of signification open to the possibility of production, the divine source of infinite creation. Thus, the poet becomes an extension of the god by using words (koto = voice and written sign) to enable the representation of things (koto) “just as they are,” open as they are to the realm of possibilities.

In order for words to be transparent and immediate vehicles for the articulation of things, the sign cannot interfere with the purity of the word’s voice, but must convey it in its total immediacy. Norinaga had to address the question of how scriptive signs relate to the voice, the source of signification—a question that is at the core of all metaphysical systems. Relying on grammatical studies by Kamo no Mabuchi, Norinaga found in the fifty letters of the Japanese syllabary (gojū onzu) repositories of sacred speech, the utterances of
the gods. He accepted the argument developed by Mabuchi in Goi Kō (Reflections on the Meaning of Words, 1769), according to which “the voice of the unseen” (itsura no koe), whose secret source only the gods knew (itsura means “somewhere, although no one knows where”), was “the voice of the fifty linkages” (itsura no koe), “the sacred voice that is subjected to no transformation,” “the voice of heaven and earth” (ametsuchi no koe). Mabuchi’s ideas led Norinaga to categorize five kinds of “divine expressions” (kami no kotoba), which he listed in the eleventh book of the Kojiki-den, arguing that they actually existed.

Known as “the theory of sound/meaning” (ongi setsu), this interpretative model was rooted in commentaries of Buddhist scriptures, such as the Hannyakyō Ongi (Sound and Meaning in the Heart Sutra), and the Hokeyō Ongi (Sound and Meaning in the Lotus Sutra). By applying this theory to the reading of Japan’s ancient records—Kojiki, Nihongi, and Man’yōshū—Nativist scholars believed that they could recover divine speech either in the sound of each syllable (ichion ichigi ha) or in each line (ichigyō ichigi ha) of the kana system. In this regard we see a common pattern developing among late Nativist scholars who shared the view that “nothing is outside language” (Suzuki Shigetane, 1812–1863), and that, as the breath of heaven and earth “kotodama was god (kami) dwelling in the spoken word” (Kawagita Tanrei). The productive power of the fifty sounds was also underlined by Tachibana Moribe (1741–1849), who argued that “the first sound of the syllabary, ‘a,’ was the origin of the world” (aji hongen setsu). His debt to Buddhist philosophy is apparent when we consider that Moribe was resurrecting an ancient Buddhist doctrine developed in the Shingon school, according to which, the sound “a” was the alpha and omega of the world, the principle of the imperishable truth of emptiness (aji honfushō). Other Nativists followed suit by finding the principle of truth in different letters of the syllabary. Fujitani Mitsue (1768–1823), for example, believed that the key to the explanation of the world was in the letter “u” (uji hongen setsu).

It goes without saying that Norinaga was quite indebted to what James J.Y. Liu has called a “metaphysical concept of literature” as it was developed by Chinese thinkers. Although it might appear paradoxical to search for interpretative keys in what Norinaga rejected as a misleading root of signification, the relevance that Chinese discourses on literature had for him can hardly be underestimated. His notion of “pattern” (aya) and the importance that he gave to the rhetorical dimension of poetic language would hardly exist without the analogy developed by Chinese thinkers between the wen of
men and the *wen* of the Sky (*tianwen-renwen*).\(^{50}\) The locus classicus of this analogical patterning is a passage from the *Yi jing* (The Book of Changes) that exhorts readers to “contemplate the patterns (*wen*) of heaven in order to observe the changes of season, as well as to contemplate the patterns (*wen*) of men in order to accomplish the cultural transformation of the world.”\(^{51}\) The French sinologist François Jullien has called the relationship between the Dao and the immanence of *wen* “co-naturality” that the Sage must reestablish in order to understand the configurations of the cosmos.\(^{52}\) For Norinaga, the poet fulfills the task of the Sage whenever the poet reenacts the language of the gods with his words.

The theory of “patterns analogy” penetrated Chinese poetry as well. Bo Juyi (772–846), a Chinese poet well known in Japan since the Heian period, had developed the concept of the three patterns—celestial, terrestrial, and human. He and his followers gave analogical readings of the *wen* of the Sky (sun, moon, and the stars), the *wen* of Earth (mountains, rivers, and trees), and the *wen* of Man (the content of his conscience as shaped by education). The reciprocity of Being, beings, and representation implied the notion of an omnipervasive Dao as the origin (*yuan*) of a creative process whose mechanisms poets reproduced in their acts of literary production. Liu Xie (465?–520?) opened his famous *Wenxin Diaolong* (*The Literary Mind and Carving of Dragons, 5th c. C.E.*) with a quotation from *The Book of Changes* indicating “the power of Words to initiate the movement of the World.” This resulted from the fact that “words are the pattern (*wen*) of Dao.”\(^{53}\)

Within such an analogical typology, linkage becomes of the utmost importance in relating divine/cosmic utterances to human language. Since nature (*tiandao* or *daoti*) was considered the root and the poet’s emotions the branches, the analogical pattern of poetry articulates itself through rhetorical devices playing on the coextension of what the West has hierarchized as *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*. The use of several types of linkages in Chinese and Japanese rhetoric can be seen from a variety of poetic techniques such as, for example, “analogoical rapprochement” (*lian lei*) and “metaphorical projections” (*tuo wu, jie wu yi yin huai*)—rhetorical devices that Norinaga felt were essential to the composition of a successful poem.\(^{54}\) How the reciprocity between god and man, divine and poetic languages, works in Norinaga’s poetics is the subject of his theory of communication (*mono no aware*). Once he had established the perfect correspondence between sound and sign, he could then proceed to explain how the divine prelinguistic model allowed people to communicate in this world.
Mono no Aware

Norinaga’s name has been most vividly associated with the notion of “mono no aware,” a person’s ability to realize the moving power of external reality and, as a result, to understand and, thus, communicate with others. I know of no better introduction to this theory than the following words from Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s On the Origin of Languages, which Rousseau wrote in 1763, the same year that Norinaga developed his theory of mono no aware in Shibun Yöryō (The Essentials of the Tale of Genji) and Isonokami no Sasame-goto (Personal Views on Poetry):

How are we moved to pity? By getting outside ourselves and identifying with a being who suffers. We suffer only as much as we believe him to suffer. It is not in ourselves, but in him that we suffer. It is clear that such transport supposes a great deal of acquired knowledge. How am I to imagine ills of which I have no idea? How would I suffer in seeing another suffer, if I know not why he is suffering, if I am ignorant of what he and I have in common. He who has never been reflective is incapable of being merciful or just or pitying. He is just as incapable of being malicious and vindictive. He who imagines nothing is aware only of himself; he is isolated in the midst of mankind.

Although for Rousseau knowledge preceded rather than followed (as Norinaga argued) the encounter with others, they both agreed on the idea that it is impossible to understand others unless one shares with others a “common sense” that allows one to communicate with them. Norinaga interpreted what he called “the moving power of things” (mono no aware) as the restoration of godly nature to those who understand how to be moved by the awesomeness of external reality. The potential for intersubjectivity—the very possibility of communication—was contained in the power of things (=words) to elicit the same emotions from different perceivers. The subjugation of difference by a universal principle of sameness—“sacred speech” inscribed in “pattern signs”—made communication possible through recording. Norinaga did not reduce the idea of mono no aware to suffering alone; for him, communication was a pathic experience originating from the sum of human feelings. He did not shy away from speculative etymologies when it came to an explanation of the word aware.

In Shibun Yöryō he interpreted it as the combination of two emotive particles—“aa” + “hare” = “aware”—indicating the initial surprise that the subject experiences before “the heart is moved” by the surrounding reality. He
considered *aware* the Japanese translation of the Chinese exclamation “Ah!” (Ch. *Wu hu;* J. *Aa*)—an expression of grief kept hidden (*tansoku*) but in need of linguistic articulation.\(^5^7\) This etymology replaced an earlier etymological explanation of *aware* that Norinaga first defended in *Aware Ben* (A Discussion of *Aware*, 1758), and then rejected in *Isonokami no Sasamegoto*. This earlier explanation was based on a passage from the *Kogo Shūi* (Gleanings from Ancient Stories, 807), recording the happiness and awe that followed the sun’s reappearance in the sky after the Sun Goddess Amaterasu was taken out of her cave, a famous episode that originally appeared in the *Kojiki*. According to this etymological theory, the “amazement” (*aware*) of the gods at the view of the Sun Goddess was the result of “the clearing of the sky” (*amehare*) after a long period of total darkness. This was a commonly accepted interpretation during the Edo period; Kaibara Ekiken included it in his *Nihon Shakumyō* (Japanese Etymologies).\(^5^8\) Eventually, Norinaga rejected this explanation on the ground that *aware* did not simply refer to sighs of relief; rather, it conveyed the entire range of human feelings and perceptions.\(^5^9\)

Norinaga found the first expression of *aware* in a passage from the *Kojiki*—a passage that he also considered the “origin” (*hajime*) of poetry in the Yamato language: the vocal exchange between the deities Izanami and Izanagi prior to their copulation and the production of the land. This passage is quoted in *Isonokami no Sasamegoto* as follows: “Then Izanagi no Mikoto said first: ‘Ah, what a cute girl!’ (*ana ni yashi, e otome o*). Afterwards, his spouse, little sister Izanami no Mikoto said: ‘Ah, what a handsome lad!’ (*ana ni yashi, e otoko o*).”\(^6^0\) Norinaga explains “*ana*” as an exclamatory particle like “*aya*” and “*aa,*” indicating the reciprocal surprise that the “young man” (*otoko*) and the “young woman” (*otome*) felt at the discovery of sexual difference. The choral nature of the exchange—vocal expression (*tonau*) followed by a reply (*kotau*)—underscores the need for a dialogic structure in all acts of communication. An uttered trace of the heart’s outburst, *aware* requires the presence of likeminded witnesses who share in the emotional experience and help the experiencing subject to get free from the oppressive power of feelings by becoming new transmitting agents in a chain of communications.\(^6^2\)

Norinaga made *mono no aware* the key concept for the understanding of classical stories (*monogatari*), a genre whose distinction was marked by its commitment to “recording human feelings just as they are” (*ninjō no ari no mama o kakishirushite*). In *Shibun Yōryō* he argues that *monogatari* offer a glimpse into a concealed world of feelings and perceptions. This allows the reader to recognize himself in the story’s characters, thus reducing his own
psychological burden, of which he thought originally he was the only victim. This ability to relate to the feelings of others also functions as a yardstick to measure the degree of one’s sensitivity and to make sure of one’s ability “to rejoice at a person’s joy and to be sad in the presence of sadness.” The insensitive person—“the person who does not know mono no aware” (mono no aware o shiranu hito)—is the one who does not cry when someone is in tears, and is deaf to the “ah-invoking nature” of things. Norinaga was, again, indebted to Chinese poetics, especially the poetics of “inter emotivity,” which were central to the composition and interpretation of Chinese poetry since the first commentaries on the Book of Odes, eventually culminating in the theories of Bo Juyi. According to such poetics, human nature (xing) is moved (dong) by external reality (wu) thanks to its sensitivity to emotions (gan). The Wenxin Diaolong describes this process as follows: “Man is endowed by nature with seven kinds of sentiments that are the results of an incitation (xing) produced by the external World. Moved by this external World, man sings what he feels in his interiority: nothing is there that is not natural.” This natural incitation puts in motion a relational process in which exteriority/objectivity and interiority/subjectivity move back and forth as a net of unending correspondences.

Norinaga’s “rediscovery” of the Japanese classics (monogatari and waka) was directly related to his belief that their aesthetic appeal—an appeal directed to one’s “senses” (aisthesis in its etymological meaning)—would create an ethical community whose members could eventually communicate without relying on the distortions of language. In other words, membership in Norinaga’s community came with the benefits of transparent communication, which was guaranteed by the fact that each member, after mastering the language of the classics, would be able to speak the language of the gods. To use the words of the contemporary philosopher Sakabe Megumi, Norinaga’s theory of mono no aware becomes the basis of “an aesthetics (bigaku) and of an hyper-ethics (chō-rinri) that transcends the level of the intramundane (naisekaisei) properly known as human.” The language of mono no aware provided Norinaga with an allegedly universal pattern of signification beyond the articulation of language into words and sentences. He believed that poetry and monogatari had the power to trigger a silent communication that brought expression back to its original locus—the gods.

Norinaga’s contribution to the field of aesthetics is particularly striking when seen within the context of a science that in the West was witnessing its birth as the “science of sensible knowledge” (scientia cognitionis sensitivae),
Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten’s (1714–1762) well-known definition of aesthetics, with which he opened his *Aesthetica* of 1750. Unlike the reductive conceptualizations of logic that limit the possibility of communication to the stiffness of formal linguistic categories, thus distorting the truth of all messages, the realm of feelings (aesthetics) recaptures the ontological truth of messages by going beyond mere verbal communication. Norinaga argued that the purpose of poetry had been “to sing human feelings” in order to awaken others to the depths of human nature since the time when the “Great Preface” (*Daxu*) to *The Books of Odes* was compiled in China in the first century C.E. He believed that later exegetical traditions misunderstood the language of poetry and took pride in misreading the “truth of emotions” (*hito no makoto no nasake*) as the common language of craft, cunning, and action. On this issue Norinaga followed an argument that Ogyū Sorai developed in *Bendō* (Distinguishing the Way, 1717):

The bad practices of Tsu Ssu, Mêng Tzu, and those after them consist in that, when they explained [the Way], they made it in the minutest detail [wishing thereby] to make the listeners easily comprehend [the truth]. This is the way of the disputants; they are those who want to sell their theories quickly. . . . When we arrive at Mêng Tzu, we find that he proclaimed his clamorous message by means of casuistry and quibble; and he wished thereby to make people submit themselves. Now, a person who [attempts] to make people submit by words is certainly a person who is not [yet] able to make people submit themselves. For a teacher ministers to people who trust him.

For Norinaga, poetry cannot be reduced to a rhetorical world of self-interest. His stand against neo-Confucian interpretations of literary texts was firm: the idea that poetry could be taken as a yardstick for measuring good and evil was nothing but an act of self-affectation (*sakashigenaru koto*) on the part of scholars who were insensitive to the truth of *mono no aware*. Only the spontaneity of perception, which is best represented in the “language of women and children” (*onna warabe no kotomeki*), could avoid wearing the “deceptive mask” (*itsuwareru uwabe*) of gratuitous “rhetorical flourishes” (*tsukuroikazari*; lit., embellishing makeup). This tension between logic and aesthetics came to assume strong political undertones. In Norinaga’s opinion, the Chinese logic of dynastic succession encouraged new dynasties to devise words of legitimization, thus forging a language whose false virtue led to disloyalty and immorality. On the other hand, the language of the native soil
sprang from the immediacy of nature, whose order the deities maintained by delegating power to their imperial epiphanies.  

Norinaga argues that the recovery of perfect language takes place in the realm of native poetry, in which the particularity of history is bracketed, and the universality of mythical times—“the age of the gods” (kami no yo)—is preserved in poetic form (kokoro kotoba). This was made possible by the alleged power of poetry to short-circuit any mediation between expression (kotoba) and intention (kokoro), and to find in the language of the gods the immediacy and directness (nahoku) of words and things. According to Norinaga, the spontaneity and immediacy of the senses must be translated into poetic language in order to avoid the analytical mediation of reason in the formation of knowledge. The “movement of the heart” or “emotions” (nasake) are, then, recognized as a privileged topos of the native poetic voice, not to be confused with “the passion of desire and craving” (yoku), which is still rooted in the intentionality of self-interest, and as such cannot reach the depth of true feelings (mono no aware).  

Norinaga interpreted the immediacy of feelings as “an original presence” (moto no aru yō), “the essence of things” (moto no tai), which he classified grammatically as “nouns” (tai)—the noninflected parts of a discourse. At the same time, the articulation of mono no aware produced effects in the realm of praxis to be appropriated for hermeneutical purposes. Norinaga called this effect, “the virtuous merit” (kudoku) of poetry, the “pragmatics of inflection” (yō), that worked in the real world in the same way that a verb (yō), or any other inflected parts of a discourse, functioned in a sentence. As an example of the latter, Norinaga quotes Ki no Tsurayuki’s remarks in his preface to the Kokinshū that poetry is believed to have the power of moving heaven and earth, influencing the realm of the unseen, and appeasing domestic relations. Norinaga explained the inflection of mono no aware in the world of the seen hermeneutically as the potential embedded in the poetic word to achieve concrete results that were otherwise inexplicable, such as, for example, the sudden fall of rain, or the resuscitation of the dead—what is known as “the theory of poetic merit” (kadoku setsuwa).  

However, the concept of inflection is a major crux of Norinaga’s philosophy, since immediacy cannot be retained if it needs the mediation of articulation in order to be communicated. How could a fracturing sign convey the truth of immediacy? The straightforwardness of immediacy, Norinaga argued, requires a communicational vessel capable of expressing the reality of the senses in the same way that those essences were perceived when they came
into being during the age of the gods. Because of the changes undergone by the senses and by expression since that age, the recovery of meaning must be conducted by getting as close as possible to the language of the Sun Goddess. Here is where rhetoric comes into play, since it is the art of words that allows the poet to escape the distortions of contemporary language and to reconstruct the expressions of an otherwise irrecoverable past. Rhetoric, however, is a problematic concept, as Norinaga himself pointed out when he attacked Chinese texts on the ground of their alleged embellishments with rhetorical flourishes. Norinaga was confronted with the paradox of entrusting the recovery of the “truth of emotions” \((makoto no kokoro)\) to the working of a “linguistic deception” \((itsuwari)\). He tried to resolve it by stating that the spontaneity of the present moment is far from being equivalent to spontaneity itself. In other words, poetic truth \((makoto)\) is not the expression of the poet’s “immediate inner thoughts crossing his mind now” at the time of poetic creation \((ima omou koto o arinomama ni yomu)\). Instead, it is the result of the poet’s exposure to and mastery of “the correct, refined heart of the past” \((uruwashiku miyabiyanaru inishie no kokoro)\). Norinaga explained this deferral of immediacy by arguing that what at first might look like a forced attempt at appropriating the past, eventually develops into a natural habit that enables the poet to present rather than re-present the perfect language of self-presence.

Since this immediacy was recovered within poetic form, the exclusion of the present in terms of both language and experience from the act of poetic composition did not limit the validity of poetry as a heuristic act. Norinaga shows that a poet cannot allow himself to “be inspired” by his own contemporary world and follow his “natural talents” on the ground that immediacy was created using rhetorical “skills” \((takumi)\) even (in opposition to the claims of other Nativists) in the most ancient native songs. For Norinaga, immediacy meant the complication of expression—the inscription of the unseen into the pattern of the seen text. Far from conveying the immediacy of presence, an uncomplicated, clear expression was a recipe for the composition of a second-rate poem \((ni no machi no koto)\).

The bypassing of the historical present in the recuperation of immediacy had, for Norinaga, noteworthy consequences on the political level, inasmuch as the consumers of poetry dwelt in a shared space (the space of immediacy) and lived in the ahistorical time of what the philosopher Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945) has called “the eternal present” (the age of the gods). While the mastery over perfect language allowed an emperor to sympathize with his subjects and assume the persona of a farmer in his compositions, the lower
classes were made to experience the world above the clouds by bracketing the reality of the present in the immediacy of the imperial presence. This bracketing of human time in Norinaga’s poetics was not an innocent act of retrieval from the historical world. On the contrary, the inclusion in the circuit of courtly values of the knowledge of mono no aware points at the loyalty that Norinaga felt toward the aristocracy in power. Whether his allegiance was to the court’s aristocracy (the emperor), or to the military aristocracy (the shogun) at a time of profound political changes, is for historians to establish.

Hermeneutics

The Sugagasa no Nikki (The Sedge Hat Diary, 1772), Norinaga’s account of a trip he made to the Yoshino area, is a translation in poetic language of the theories examined above. Norinaga left his native Matsusaka in the Ise province and headed west towards the Yamato province—the source of the process of signification that makes his journey so compelling. This was a real journey to Yoshino, witnessed by his adopted son, Ōhira (1756–1833), and other travel companions, as well as a hermeneutical journey through texts and other historical traces—ancient capitals, imperial villas, shrines, and imperial tombs. The complexity of the diary that follows in translation is lost unless the reader is aware of Norinaga’s formidable knowledge of poetry and history—a knowledge that becomes apparent when one reads his poetry in light of a thousand years of poetic sources and the essays Norinaga wrote about the places visited during his trip. The diary is an excellent example of the philologist at work—a scholar committed to uncovering the allegedly original meaning of things. Norinaga was deeply concerned that interpretations through the centuries had inevitably distorted the meaning of the original texts. He wanted to witness in person the places that had generated the most remarkable poems in his country, and see which interpretations could be accepted and which should be discarded. His hermeneutical method aimed at recovering the root of signification, as one can see, for example, in the painstaking arguments that he developed in order to explain the origin of the word “song” (uta).

Norinaga pointed out that the expression “Yamato song” (Yamato uta)—song in the native Yamato language—came from using the Japanese pronunciation in reading the Chinese characters used to record the word waka 倭歌. This word, Norinaga continues, was either modeled on the Chinese practice of defining types of poetry according to the geographical area where the poem
was produced, or, more generally speaking, it indicated a kind of poetry not to be confused with the poetry of China (Morokoshi no kashi). Norinaga seems to prefer the latter explanation because of the need to distinguish the local poetic production (Yamato) from the alien one (Kara, or China). By focusing on the rare passages where the word waka appears in the Man'yōshū, Norinaga warns his readers not to confuse the expression waka 倭歌, indicating “Japanese song,” with the homophonous word currently employed in Japan to indicate native poetry (waka 和歌). He explains that the latter expression originally referred to a poem written in response to another poem (kotauru uta)—what came to be known in later poetic collections as “envoy” (kaeshi). Far from meaning “a song from the country of harmony,” as it was generally believed, this latter use of the word waka derived from the Chinese practice of replying to a poem (shi) by using the same rhyming pattern employed in the original poem. This was known in China as heyun (J. wain), or “fitting rhyme.”

Therefore, according to Norinaga, the association of “song” (uta) and “the Yamato land” (Yamato) in the expression Yamato uta with which Ki no Tsurayuki opened his preface to the Kokinshū—“Japanese poetry has the human heart as seed” (Yamatouta wa hito no kokoro o tane to shite)—was then a misreading of a word that simply meant “song” (waka 倭歌) and nothing more. Norinaga took issue with traditional medieval interpretations of the word “song” that read into it the history and mythology of the land. He leveled his criticism against works such as Sōgi’s (1421–1502) commentary on the Kokinshū, the Kokin Waka Shū Ryōdo Kikigaki (The Verbatim Notes of Both Scholars Tsuneyori and Sōgi, 1472), in which Yamato uta is interpreted as “the poem that softens the heart of the Yamato people,” with reference to the harmonizing role played by the ancestral deities Izanagi and Izanami as symbolized in the union of sun and moon. Norinaga was also rejecting a theory introduced by the Shintō scholar Asai Shigetō, according to whom Yamato uta indicated a form of poetry enriched by the capital’s courtly refinement, as opposed to the vulgar verses made in the countryside (hinaburi).

Norinaga was extremely critical of other Japanese scholars who based their interpretations on what he considered to be alien theories that could hardly be applied to his native land. In his critique, he did not spare even master Keichū, since Keichū had resorted to yin yang philosophy in his interpretation of the 5/7/5/7/7 pattern of waka. Giving credence to the yin yang doctrine, according to which odd numbers were considered symbols of the sun (yang) while even ones represented the moon (yin), Keichū argued in the Kokin Yozai Shō that the three upper verses of a song (kami no ku) and their
seventeen syllables were related to the sun. On the other hand, the two lower verses (shimo no ku) and their fourteen syllables were to be read as symbols of the moon. For Keichū, the relation of the kami no ku to the sky explained the length and the power of the first three verses in comparison to the shorter and less important final verses that were closer to earth.

Keichū also advocated the practice of relating each of the five verses to the Five Elements (wuxing) of metal, wood, water, fire, and earth, as well as to the Five Constant Virtues (wuchang) of humanity, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faithfulness. This latter theory found many supporters in the mid-Edo period thanks to the efforts of neo-Confucian scholars, such as Yamazaki Ansai (1618–1682), to interpret the native Shintō creed in the light of Confucian and other Chinese philosophies. Models of symbolic interpretations reached the public through very popular publications on poetry, such as Waka Yaegaki (The Manifold Fence of Waka, 1700) by Aruga Chōhaku (1661–1737).

Norinaga based his rejection of the Chinese symbolism of heaven on what he believed to be the “truth” of local mythology. Far from being a powerful male figure, the sun in the Kojiki was represented by a female deity, Amaterasu, while the moon was no other than the brave male deity Tsukiyomi no Mikoto. Once again, theology came to the rescue of an interpreter who resisted the idea of relying on interpretations of the “local” poetic voice that derived from “alien” epistemological systems. Norinaga warned his readers against the temptation to inject gratuitous meaning into the process of interpretation. He addressed his criticism to ancient and modern critics alike, with a particular animosity toward those who practiced a contextual reading of poetry. According to him, the contextualization of the poetic act that characterized the development of native literature from its inception by forging compositional “occasions” of poems and by freezing them in historical time had robbed poetry of its “eternal” and ontological dimension. For Norinaga, poetic language was the carrier of a privileged signification uncontaminated by any mark of contingency.

An excellent example of Norinaga’s hermeneutics is his interpretation of a famous song, allegedly composed by the deity Susanoo after he descended to earth, subjugated the dragon, and married Kushihinadahime, the daughter of an earthly deity. Both Kojiki and Nihon Shoki present the poem in the context of Susanoo’s settling down with his new bride in the newly constructed palace at Suga, in the province of Izumo. Standard translations of this poem all refer to the contextualized meaning of the mythical accounts. A well-known English translation gives the following version of the poem:
Although this translation is indebted to his critical work, Norinaga would have undoubtedly quibbled with it. He would probably have accepted the rendering of the first word *yakumo* as “many clouds.” Following Keichū’s explanation in the *Kokin Yozai Shō*, Norinaga noticed that this expression, which literally means “eight clouds,” does not refer to a precise numerical layer of clouds—it is not “eightfold” (*yae*)—but, more generally, that it describes a multiple number of layers, as in the expressions “double cherry blossoms” (*yaezakura*) and “double-petal Japanese yellow rose” (*yaeyamabuki*). Keichū challenged an earlier allegorical reading of the poem by the critic Kitamura Kigin (1624–1705) who, in *Hachidaishū Shō* (A Commentary on the Eight Imperial Collections, 1682), had related what he interpreted as “clouds of eight different colors” (*yairo*) to the place where the eight-tailed dragon (*yamata no orochi*), slain by Susanoo, lived. The place was now the residence of the victorious god, who was reminded of his achievements by the constant presence of these symbolic clouds. Keichū was also disproving a medieval interpretation presented in *Kokin-jo Chū* (Notes on the Preface to the *Kokinshū*, ca. 1320), according to which the expression *yakumo* was a contraction of *yakigumo*, or “burning clouds,” from the smoke rising from the dragon slain and burnt by Susanoo.

In order to lend further credence to Keichū’s theory, Norinaga reminds his readers of the etymological meaning of the word “eight” (*yatsu*). For this purpose he relied on Tanigawa Kotosuga’s *Nihon Shoki Tsūshō*, in which we read that *yatsu* derives from *iya*, meaning “many, numberless,” and *tsu*, meaning “ports.” The indeterminacy of the etymological root transforms the precise representation of a contingent reality into the veiled expression of Norinaga’s poetic truth. Then, Susanoo’s dwelling becomes the metaphorical reading of metaphor itself that displaces everything without ever allowing the reader to enjoy the safety of a temporal, geographical, “historical” interpretation. Many are the clouds that rise in a multilayered structure over the house of poetry. How, then, can poetry be made banal by reading the name of a geographical area such as the “Izumo province” 出雲 in these “rising clouds” (*izumo* 出雲)—literally, “the clouds that are coming out”? It is on this issue that Norinaga would have disagreed with the poem’s standard translations.
Keichū had already criticized the contextualized reading of the poem that the compilers of the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* made in the eighth century. He had pointed out that “since the name Izumo was given to the province after the time of its composition, we cannot read the verse ‘many clouds rising’ (*yakumo tatsu*) as a ‘pillow word’ (*makurakotoba*)—the rhetorical technique that has concrete names preceded by epithets—of ‘Izumo.’” Keichū argued that *izumo* was the contraction of *izuru kumo* (“clouds that are coming out”), the attributive form of the *shimo nidan* verb *izu* (to come out) modifying the name *kumo* (clouds). Therefore, rather than being in the presence of a riddle, the reader was faced with a simple repetition—“many clouds” (*yakumo*), “clouds coming out” (*izumo*).

By fully supporting Keichū’s theory, Norinaga lays the ground for rejecting the making of the “numerous fences” (*iyaegaki*) into the historical walls of Susanoo’s palace. The “fences” are simply “the many layers of rising clouds” (*izumo iyaegaki*) hiding the locus of signification, poetry, from view. In the present case poetry is female because, as Norinaga says in his explanation, “the clouds build numerous fences by piling one upon the other in order to hide my woman from view” (*tsumatagomi ni yaegaki tsukuru*). The novelty of Norinaga’s interpretation lies in seeing the “fences” as barriers made by clouds, which he compares to “mist” (*kiri*) in their power “to obstruct from view something from which the viewer departs.” These barriers are metaphorical walls that block the object of the viewer’s admiration from sight. They are not, as both Kitamura Kigin and Keichū had argued, real dwellings within which the viewer lives together with his beloved. Given this, Norinaga might have been less critical of the following translation that fits well with his definition of the poem as a repetitive variation around the theme of clouds:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><em>Yakumo tatsu</em></th>
<th>Many clouds rising,</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Izumo yaegaki</em></td>
<td>Many layered clouds raising a manifold-fence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Tsumagomi ni</em></td>
<td>Hiding my bride from sight,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Yaegaki tsukuru</em></td>
<td>Clouds are forming a manifold fence,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sono yaegaki o</em></td>
<td>Oh, that manifold fence!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The clouds have been veiling the truth of this poem for centuries—a truth that Norinaga felt it was his responsibility to uncover. This meant peeling off centuries of interpretations and the encroachments of a history of details. Despite the presence of a scientific drive pushing him towards the goal of objectivity in the reconstruction of truth, Norinaga’s working hypothesis was
firmly grounded in his belief in a theological truth—the truth of the gods. De-
spite his tour of hermeneutical force that allows us today to see in this ancient
poem the simplicity of an archaic rhetorical structure, Norinaga never ques-
tioned the “truth” that the poem was written by a god—the divine voice of
Susanoo. For Norinaga, it would have been anathema to recognize the fact
that the voice of the god—and the source of Yamato songs—was nothing
other than the composition of a Buddhist monk assuming the persona of the
Sun Goddess’ evil brother. In this sense, Norinaga belongs to the history of
philology and aesthetics, disciplines that have translated theology into the sec-
ular idiom of science. The gods may have changed their names, but they have
never left the stage: they have come to be called literature, history, the work of
art, and so on. Behind the clouds is Norinaga’s truth—the beautiful cherry
trees blooming in Yoshino that only poetry can capture “the way they are.”
He might have been pleased by words that a later aesthetician, who was un-
aware of his notion of mono no aware, used to define poetry: “A veil of sad-
ness seems to wrap Beauty, but it is not a veil, it is the face itself of Beauty.”98