chapter 1

The Art of Retelling and the Universality of Literature. The Case of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke

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Introduction: Is beauty independent of time and space?

The question of whether beauty is defined and appreciated universally or whether it is rather culture-specific, depending on time and place, has long been addressed in the arts. It is also the main theme of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's (Fig. 1) short story entitled *Noroma ningyō* [*Noroma Puppets*] (1916), which was published at the time his other, more famous works were also created, such as *Hana* [*The Nose*], *Imogayu* [*Yam Gruel*], and *Hankechi* [*The Handkerchief*].[1]

Akutagawa's reflection in *Noroma ningyō* revolves around a quotation taken from Anatole France's *Le jardin d'Épicure* (originally published in 1894 and translated into English as *The Garden of Epicurus* in 1908).[2] The words quoted are as follows:

> As I cannot conceive beauty independent of time and space, I only begin to take pleasure in works of the imagination when I discover their connection with life; it is the point of junction between the two that fascinates me. The coarse pottery ware of Hissarlik has made me love the Iliad more, and I can

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[1] I am grateful to dr Aleksandra Szczechla for bringing *Noroma ningyō* to my attention. See R. Akutagawa, "Noroma ningyō," [in:] *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshū* [*Collected Works of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke*], vol. 1, Iwanami Shoten, Tokyo 1995, pp. 217–222.

[2] A. France, *Le jardin d'Épicure*, Calmann-Lévy, Paris 1903. See also A. France, *The Garden of Epicurus*, trans. A. Allinson, John Lane, London 1908.

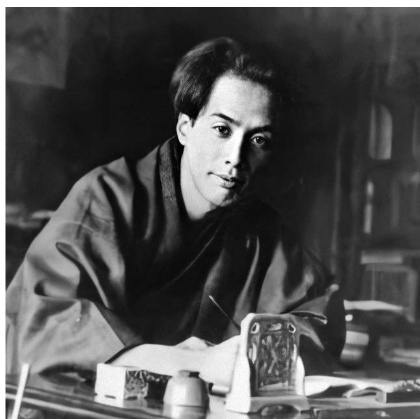

Figure 1. Akutagawa Ryūnosuke working on one of his novels in Tokyo. Source: Wikimedia Commons Public Domain.

better appreciate the *Divine Comedy* for what I know of Florentine life in the Thirteenth Century.[3]

As is commonly known, Anatole France was an artist of great importance to Akutagawa, who began his career as a writer translating (from English) *Balthasar* and publishing it in *Shinshichō* [*New Thought Tides*], a university literary journal. He also referred to France's other works in his own writings, including *Noroma ningyō* and *Tabako to akuma* [*Tobacco and the Devil*] (1917). France's influence can be detected both in Akutagawa's view of human nature and in his style.[4] In *The Garden of Epicurus* quoted above, France also uses Goethe's phrase that "the only durable works are works of circumstance," suggesting that, in fact, all artistic creation may be referred to as "works of circumstance," since "we cannot understand them nor love them with an intelligent love, unless we know the place, time, and circumstances of their origin."[5]

Interestingly, Akutagawa's question of whether art may be universally appreciated is not triggered by his reading of the works of Homer, Dante, or Goethe. It appears as a response to his contact with *noroma ningyō*, puppets developed in the early Edo period (1603–1868) in Japan, tradition-

3 A. France, *The Garden*, p. 92.
4 Sh. Nakamura, *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke no sekai* [*The World of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke*], Iwanami Shoten, Tokyo 2015, p. 199.
5 A. France, *The Garden*, 92.

ally manipulated by one person and usually accompanied by a *sekkyō-bushi* narrative.[6] Is this art still understandable and appreciated in Akutagawa's times? Are his own works going to be understood by generations to come? The belief that there is life in art that can transcend the boundaries of time and space is necessary for an artist to continue his work. However, is it possible to transmit the life of art to further generations, or is it merely wishful thinking? What makes art universal? Such questions are embedded into Akutagawa's short story. They also seem to be present, even if not expressed directly, in his other writings.

In this article I would like to reflect on how Akutagawa's drawing from other literary works, which is so characteristic of his technique, may also be an expression of his belief in the universal power of artistic creation.

Archetypal power of literature

Akutagawa, an "extremely self-conscious man" who "never failed to criticize the artist within himself, usually with unforgiving scrutiny," is known for his use of existing materials, with *Konjaku monogatari* [*Tales of Now and Then*] (early twelfth century) and *Uji shūi monogatari* [*A Collection of Tales from Uji*] (early thirteenth century) as his frequent sources of inspiration.[7] It is also well-acknowledged that a great number of Akutagawa's stories is to a lesser or greater extent indebted to other sources – Chinese, Indian, and Western, including "the Bible, Caxton, Swift, Defoe, Goethe, Poe, Bierce, Browning, Butler, Gogol, and Dostoevsky, as well as Flaubert, Régnier, Mérimée, Loti, Strindberg, France, Synge, and others."[8] Donald Keene mentions that Akutagawa has been likened to "a mosaicist, piecing together fresh masterpieces out of the materials gleaned from many books," and he adds: "Sometimes the list of 'sources'

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[6] B.E. Thornbury, "Puppets on Strings and Actors on Floats. Japan's Traditional Performing Arts in a Festival Setting," *The Journal of the Association of Teachers of Japanese* 1992, no. 26(2), pp. 181–192. *Sekkyō bushi* (sometimes translated as 'sermon ballad') is a narrative form, originally related to Buddhism, and often performed with music.

[7] M. Ueda, *Modern Japanese Writers and the Nature of Literature*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1976, p. 111.

[8] B. Yu, *Akutagawa. An Introduction*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit 1972, p. 21.

for a single story, as uncovered by diligent scholars, is so extensive that one can only marvel that any author could fuse together so many disparate elements."[9] The already existing tales or stories are, however, used by Akutagawa as the basis for an in-depth analysis of human nature, as his short stories – to quote Mizuta Lippit – "do not usually deal with human reality directly, but with materials which have already been fictionalized."[10]

Akutagawa's famous *Kumo no ito* [*The Spider's Thread*], considered an example of a children's tale or *märchen*, may be one example of this tendency.[11] It is also a vivid illustration of the meandering transition of literary images and ideas in literature. The story was first published in 1918 in the first volume of *Akai Tori* [*Red Bird*], a children's literary magazine, and quite well received. It is a short narrative featuring Buddha Shakyamuni and a man named Kandata, a robber, killer, and arsonist, the former strolling by the Lotus Pond in Paradise, the latter writhing in hellish pain underneath. The story begins when Shakyamuni puts down a spider's web in an attempt to save Kandata, an evil man who, nonetheless, once refrained from killing a spider. The attempt is unsuccessful as the thread breaks when Kandata tries to prevent others from using it as a way of escaping from Hell.[12]

Akutagawa's story has long been read in relation to the third chapter of Book VII of Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), where Grushenka tells Alyosha a story of "An Onion," about a wicked peasant woman who dies and is plunged by the angels into a lake of fire.[13] Her guardian angel testifies, however, that once she gave an onion to a beggar, and this single good deed is used to help her by holding out an onion

9 D. Keene, *Dawn to the West. Japanese Literature of the Modern Era*, Columbia University Press, New York 1984, p. 565.
10 N. Mizuta Lippit, *Reality and Fiction in Modern Japanese Literature*, M.E. Sharpe, White Plains, NY 1980, pp. 39–54.
11 M. Ueda, *Modern Japanese Writers*, p. 135.
12 R. Akutagawa, "Kumo no ito," [in:] R. Akutagawa, *Gendai Nihon bungaku taikei* [*Collection of Contemporary Japanese Literature*], vol. 43, Chikuma Shobō, Tokyo 1977, pp. 64–66.
13 B. Yu, *Akutagawa*, pp. 25–26. See also D. Keene, *Dawn to the West*, p. 565.

in the lake.[14] There are clear parallels between the old folk tale retold by Dostoyevsky in his famous novel and Akutagawa's *Kumo no ito*: the wicked protagonists are given their last chance to escape from hellfire based on their own deeds: the peasant woman is given an onion leaf, Kandata – a spider's thread. Both protagonists, however, are consumed with envy and egoism, which leads to their final demise – the onion leaf breaks as does the spider's thread.

Read in parallel, the two stories pose a question also asked by Bert O. States, who, following Jean Starobinski, inquires: "What is then that persists? What is an archetype?" to which he answers that an archetype is "the ghost of a former form, endlessly migratory, infinitely tolerant of new content, ever fresh, ever archaic."[15] There is both repetitiveness and freshness involved, as the old blends with the new and certain elements and structures wander from one text to another. The migration of archetypes may not be fully conscious, as is the case with the readers' response to it. In the case of Akutagawa, however, the use of existing materials is often a conscious decision which may be related to how he read and appreciated archetypal stories both in Japanese and non-Japanese literatures.

The case of *Kumo no ito* is further complicated by the existence of *Karma. A Story of Buddhist Ethics* by Paul Carus, whose first version was translated into Russian by Leo Tolstoy around 1894. From Russian, the story *Karma* was translated into French as *Imitations*, and published under Tolstoy's name, as was the abbreviated German translation.[16] Five years after the publication of the Russian translation, Suzuki Daisetsu translated *Karma* into Japanese, and Akutagawa is commonly believed to have known the story.[17] He uses the plot almost without changing it,

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[14] F. Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. C. Garnett, New York Modern Library, New York 1900, pp. 423–425.
[15] Quoted by B.O. States, "The Persistence of the Archetype," *Critical Inquiry* 1980, no. 7(2), pp. 333–334.
[16] See "Publisher's Advertisement," in P. Carus, *Karma. A Story of Buddhist Ethics*, Open Court Publishing Company, Chicago 1917, pp. iii–vi.
[17] K. Shōno, "*Kumo no ito* no zaigen o megutte" ["Reflecting on the Sources of *Kumo no ito*"], *Jinbunka Kyōiku Kenkyū* 1981, no. 8, p. 32.

but artistically alters the structure, and his Buddha is far more tranquil as compared to Carus's story.[18]

The migration of *Kumo no ito* poses various questions regarding the nature of creativity and the status of authorship. Here, however, I would rather like to focus on the universal popularity of Kandata's story, which is aptly described in Tolstoy's introduction to his translation of Carus's *Karma* (which was then retranslated into English):

> I read this fairy tale to children, and they liked it. Among the adults, after reading it, it always rises [*sic*] talks about the most important matters of life. And it seems to me that this is a very good recommendation.[19]

Tolstoy noticed in Carus's story something universally appealing to readers or listeners, which made him translate it into Russian. Akutagawa must have had a similar impression. With his eye for universal tales, he chose and rewrote what remains attractive to children and adults alike until today.

Universality questioned

By referring to already existing materials, Akutagawa not only highlights their universal quality, often shedding new light on their understanding, but also questions their meanings. An interesting commentary on the problem of universal appeal of ideas may be found in Akutagawa's other well-known short story entitled *Hankechi* [*The Handkerchief*] (1916).[20] The story revolves around one incident in Professor Hasegawa Kinzō's life,

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[18] Beongcheon Yu focuses only on the comparison of Akutagawa's story and Dostoyevsky's "An Onion," without referring to Paul Carus. Hence, he may highlight the alterations: "So completely recast, 'Spider thread' as it stands leaves almost no trace of the original. By juxtaposing both versions we may sufficiently understand what Akutagawa meant by his union with the materials." B. Yu, *Akutagawa*, p. 26.

[19] See L. Tolstoy, *Karma*, n.p., 1902 (Internet Archive, 2017), p. 2. https://archive.org/details/Karma_LevTolstoy/page/n1/mode/2up; accessed: 12.12.2020.

[20] R. Akutagawa, "Hankechi," [in:] R. Akutagawa, *Gendai Nihon bungaku taikei* [*Collection of Contemporary Japanese Literature*], vol. 43, Chikuma Shobō, Tokyo 1977, pp. 28–32.

namely his encounter with a mother of one of his students, Nishiyama Ken'ichirō, who comes to visit him. The incident is embedded in the narrator's reflections on Hasegawa's understanding of human behavior and cultural patterns. The readers are presented with what may be described as "a highly satirical picture of what really goes on in the mind of an internationally known philosopher and moralist."[21]

The narrative opens and closes with Hasegawa sitting on a veranda and reading August Strindberg's essay on dramatic techniques (Akutagawa gives the title: *Dramaturgie*).[22] The narrator comments on how Hasegawa takes the trouble to read works outside of his research area – by Strindberg, Ibsen, Maeterlinck, or Wilde – only because they are popular with his students. This may be interpreted as a characteristic of a zealous educator, but it may also be read as an example of the character's mannerism, his attempt to pose in front of everybody (including himself) as a self-sacrificing teacher. In fact, Hasegawa is reading – be it absent-mindedly, as he has no real interest in drama – Strindberg's passage on mannerism, which he will so eagerly apply to analyzing his guest's behavior. It is nonetheless equally legitimate to look at his own demeanor in the light of Strindberg's passage.

Hasegawa's inclination to mannerisms is hinted at in a number of instances, especially in the passage which describes his dreams of becoming "a bridge spanning East and West," which would facilitate "mutual understanding between the European-American peoples and the Japanese people."[23] In order to build this understanding, Hasegawa brings up the notion of *bushidō*, as he believes that "its essence might well be identified with the Christian spirit of the peoples of Europe and America."[24] At this point, it is impossible not to see a parallel between Hasegawa and Nitobe Inazō, the author of *Bushido. The Soul of Japan* (1899), a book originally written in English and intended as a bridge between Japan and the West. Nitobe explains, first and foremost to his non-Japanese readers, that *bushidō* may be regarded as the basis of

21 M. Ueda, *Modern Japanese Writers*, p. 127.
22 Cf. A. Strindberg, *Dramaturgie*, trans. E. Schering, Müller, Munich 1920.
23 R. Akutagawa, "Handkerchief," [in:] R. Akutagawa, *The Beautiful and the Grotesque*, trans. T. Kojima, J. McVittie, Liveright, New York 1964, p. 144.
24 R. Akutagawa, "Handkerchief," p. 144.

ethical behavior in Japan and compares it to European chivalry deeply rooted in Christian values. He insists that *bushidō* may disappear, but its essence will continue to influence Japanese conduct:

> Bushido as an independent code of ethics may vanish, but its power will not perish from the earth; its schools of martial prowess or civic honor may be demolished, but its glory will survive their ruins. Like its symbolic flower, after it is blown to the four winds, it will still bless mankind with the perfume with which it will enrich life. [25]

In the Preface to *Bushido. The Soul of Japan*, Nitobe mentions his American wife's questions about Japanese customs as "the direct inception of this little book."[26] Hasegawa also has an American wife who appears in his musings on the relationship between Japan and the West:

> The Professor, while studying abroad, had married in America; so his wife was, as you might suspect, American. But she loved Japan and the Japanese hardly less than *he* did. Especially was she an admirer of the finely wrought objects of Japanese arts-and-crafts. Accordingly, it was safe to surmise that the Gifu lantern, suspended on the veranda, did not so much represent the Professor's taste but rather was an expression of his wife's enjoyment of the things of Japan… Whenever he put down his book, the Professor thought of his wife and the Gifu lantern and the Japanese civilization as represented by that paper lantern. [27]

Hasegawa's American wife is shown as an element in his worldview, proof that harmonious cohabitation of Japanese and Western values is both possible and quite pleasant. She is a splendid picture of how Japanese art may be universally appealing.

However, *The Handkerchief* is hardly a testimony to amicable communication between cultures. On the contrary, it questions the oversimplifications and hasty conclusions such communication often involves. These questions arise with Hasegawa's reaction to Nishiyama's mother, who

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[25] I. Nitobe, *Bushido. The Soul of Japan; An Exposition of Japanese Thought*, Leeds & Biddle, Philadelphia 1900, p. 127.
[26] I. Nitobe, *Bushido*, p. v.
[27] R. Akutagawa, "Handkerchief," p. 142.

speaks about her son's premature death with a serene, even smiling face while under the table her hands are trembling, tightly grasping a handkerchief. Hasegawa is at first bewildered by what he considers an unnatural calmness, which he juxtaposes with – to his taste – the excessive weeping of Wilhelm I's subjects after his death. Then, to his surprise, he notices the woman's hands tearing the handkerchief, which pleases him as an expression of *bushidō*. When he later reflects upon the gesture, however, he happens to encounter Strindberg's words on mannerism of a so-called "dual performance" or "double dealings."[28] His composure and complacency is "shattered by this unpleasant denial of the stoical action that had so impressed him." He is thus left without any reliable interpretation of the woman's behavior, with his eyes cast on the Gifu lantern, as if hoping that it would restore his peace and harmony. As Keene says, "Akutagawa's cynicism was here directed at the high-minded professor whose ideals are so easily challenged."[29] But there is also Akutagawa's skepticism here towards any act of hasty conclusion or complacent thought that other people are to be interpreted easily.

One event, two perspectives

Another question in the discussion around the universality of experience is raised by Akutagawa's *Butōkai* [*The Ball*] (1919), which revolves around Akiko's reminiscences about how she danced with a French naval officer as a young, seventeen-year-old woman. It is possible to see the story as "a poetic evocation of a so-called Rokumeikan era – gay, fresh and dreaming of a brave new world."[30] The cultural space in *Butōkai*

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[28] A. Strindberg, "Memorandum to the Members of the Intimate Theatre (1908)," [in:] *The Strindberg Reader. A Selection of Writings of August Strindberg*, trans. A. Paulson, Phaedra, New York 1968, p. 79.

[29] D. Keene, *Dawn to the West*, p. 569.

[30] B. Yu, *Akutagawa*, p. 54. See also D. Keene, *Dawn to the West*, p. 54. Rokumeikan, or Deer Cry Pavilion, was a Western-style building in Hibiya, designed by Josiah Conder and meant to impress foreign visitors with its modern atmosphere. The 1880s in Japan are even sometimes referred to as the "Rokumeikan era" due to the numerous diplomatic gatherings and balls which were held in the building. It is also the setting of the famous play *Rokumeikan* (1956) by Mishima Yukio.

is “marked by intoxication and mixing of cultures.”[31] In addition, Akutagawa might have dissociated himself from “the extreme adulation of the West of the early Meiji,” viewing it as “picturesque” and describing it “with almost the same sense of distance as in his accounts of sixteenth-century Nagasaki.”[32]

Akutagawa created a fictitious image responding to what is found in Pierre Loti’s *Un bal a Yeddo* included in his *Japoneries d’automne* (1889), a piece dedicated to Madame Alphonse Daudet. Loti’s work opens with an invitation to Rokumeikan:

Le ministre des affaires étrangères et la comtesse Sodeska ont l’honneur de vous prier de venir passer la soirée au Rokou-Meïkan, à l’occasion de la naissance de S. M. l’Empereur. On dansera.[33]

The ball is to commemorate the Emperor’s birthday in 1886. Loti, accused of Orientalism in the modern times, notices to his surprise that the surroundings of Rokumeikan look very Western:

Ici, c’est une autre surprise. Est-ce que nous arrivons à Londres, ou à Melbourne, ou à New-York? Autour de la gare se dressent de hautes maisons en brique, d’une laideur américaine. Des alignements de becs de gaz laissent deviner au loin de longues rues bien droites. L’air froid est tout rayé de fils télégraphiques et, dans diverses directions, des tramways partent avec des bruits connus de timbres et de sifflets.[34]

Here, he mentions the houses of brick and telegraph wires that are signs of Japan’s rapid Westernization. Furthermore, Loti’s opinion on Rokumeikan (Fig. 2) is rather unflattering – the building reminds him of a casino in some run-down European town. Inside, what immediately attracts the guests’ attention are the chrysanthemums, impressive in size and colors: white, yellow, and pink. Equally intriguing are the red and green Chinese banners with dragons.

[31] S.M. Lippit, “The Disintegrating Machinery of the Modern. Akutagawa Ryūnosuke’s Late Writings,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 1999, no. 58(1), p. 45.
[32] D. Keene, *Dawn to the West*, p. 570.
[33] P. Loti, *Japoneries d’automne*, Calmann-Levy, Paris 1889, p. 77.
[34] P. Loti, *Japoneries*, p. 79.