

FICTION THROUGH THE AGES

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“SPIDER THREAD” BY RYUNOSUKE AKUTAGAWA: WHAT IS A LITERARY STYLE?

I am pleased to have a chance to talk about a Japanese writer Ryunosuke Akutagawa (1892–1927) and his short story “Spider Thread” (1918) which is used as a material of “Foreign Literature” at Ukrainian schools.

The theme of my lecture will be “What is a literary style?”, especially for a country which started modernization later than some Western countries. True, I will talk mainly about Japan, but my talk will hopefully be applicable to many other countries including your own.

Akutagawa’s Position in Modern Japanese Literature

Ryunosuke Akutagawa was born in 1892 in Tokyo. As is well known, Tokyo was the new name for *Edo* which had been the capital of Japan with a Shogun system which was a Samurai run state governed by the Tokugawa clan for over 260 years. The Tokugawa Government was dissolved in 1868 and a new government, led by the Emperor himself, began its rule. This is known as the “Meiji Restoration” after the name of the emperor at that time.

The main goal of the new government was to achieve modernization in a similar form as Europe, which Japan was forced to begin under pressure by Europe and the United States. As part of this process, Japan had to change a lot of things: the name of the capital, the system of government, education, sciences, clothes, food, and... language, Japanese itself. Every country which has started modernization needs innovation of national language, especially its written form in order to accept new knowledge efficiently and express new notions and ideas in its mother language. In this process writers, journalists, translators, and education bureaucrats play a central role. Modern literature takes a special position in that it helps the formation of a new language and new styles suited for modernization and a new society, new ideas and ideals.

In this respect, one should note that those generations to which Akutagawa belonged made a great contribution to these changes. Akutagawa is well known for trying various literary styles in his works. He was a master of literary adaptation whereby he made use of Japanese, Chinese and other old tales as well as modern European literature. It is often said that he was weak in his own creation, but strong in literary technique and stylization. Maybe it is true, but some of his best short stories occupy a unique position in the history of Japanese literature as they record moments of the birth of a new Japanese language and literature in the early stages of modernization of the country.

Akutagawa and Gogol: the Role of Adaptation

As an example of Akutagawa's adaptation, let me introduce some of his short stories which are said to have something connected with Gogol. "Nose," a work which made his literary career, is not so Gogolian as expected from the title. It is a story about an old Buddhist monk who lived in medieval Japan. He had a tremendously big nose of which he was ashamed. He was a high-ranking monk whom they respected, but at the same time they secretly laughed at him behind his back about his nose. He himself had a complex about it and tried several measures to lessen but all in vain. But one day a solution his apprentice recommended had some success and his nose was reduced into a normal range although it was still comparatively big. But to his great surprise, after this change, they started to laugh at him openly. The monk could not understand why their attitude had changed. The narrator explains about "two contradictory sentiments in human hearts" which show a real sympathy for other people's misfortunes while at the same time they cannot help but feel dissatisfaction if they succeed in getting through to them. The story ends that early one morning the monk's nose became as big as before, and he said to himself, "No one will laugh any more if it stays like this." What would you say? Is there something Gogolian about this story?

Another short story of Akutagawa's, "Potato Porridge" is more clearly Gogolian. There was an old samurai who worked for a high-ranking aristocrat in medieval Japan. He was poor in appearance (his nose was reddish), intelligence, and human relations. Young samurais did not show respect to him and even had fun teasing him. He usually did not care, but only when their teasing became unbearable, he said to them, "Not good, you comrades." One young samurai was impressed by his words which had a deep humanistic tone. Of course, it is Akakii Akakievich! The old samurai had his "ambition," too. It was to eat potato porridge as much as he wanted which was very expensive at that time. Then the main episode starts but let me omit it as I just wanted to show how Akutagawa loved Gogol and he was good at adaptation.

As is well known, translation and adaptation which sometimes goes closely to imitation plays an important role in the establishment of national literature. National literature in the early stage of its development needs to import new literary formats and devices from those countries which started their modernization earlier. Writers of late-starting countries learn and make experiments as to how to depict their own countries in the processes of tackling the problems of nation-building and modernization.

Literary Tasks of Akutagawa

From the viewpoints described above, it is possible to say that Akutagawa had two literary tasks intertwined with each other. One of them was the task of making a new literary Japanese language which was still in the making at the beginning of the twentieth century. A writer and a literary critic Shinichiro Nakamura (1918-1997) wrote of him: "Young Akutagawa decided to become a writer. That meant for him also to "produce" a new colloquial form of literary Japanese, which was a situation different from ours" (Nakamura 2015, p. 207). Nakamura emphasized that various stylistic experiments of Akutagawa were made not only by his own literary disposition, but also by the demands of the times in which he lived. His most successful works have been considered as being highly influential in this regard.

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The second task Akutagawa worked on was a question “What is literature for?” which he “inherited” from his literary master Soseki Natsume (1867-1916). Both Soseki and Akutagawa asked themselves what modern literature is for. As they studied English literature at university, they knew well that modern European literature was very different from ancient and medieval Chinese and Japanese literature to which they had been accustomed regarding their methods, goals and social functions. After he made a brilliant literary debut with Soseki’s praise, Akutagawa continued to make literary experiments and to write works with various techniques and tones. He continually changed his styles as if he feared repeating himself. Therefore, each reader who likes him usually has his or her own favorite type of his works: for example, stories for children like “Spider Thread,” adaptation stories for adult readers based on old Japanese tales such as “Rashomon,” or autobiographical stories with neurotic tone written in his last years like “Life of an Idiot.” In my opinion, Akutagawa’s literary changes, which did not stop until his death, show that he was consumed by the question as to what modern literature is for or how he should make it by his artistic creation.

As a result, Akutagawa’s literature continued to inspire other writers by its multifarious literary styles. For example, the literary prize named after him (“Akutagawa-sho”) has been regarded as the most prestigious for young writers in Japan.

Akutagawa’s Literary Dilemmas

As a leading writer of the trend of “art for art’s sake” Akutagawa had some literary dilemmas. Shinichiro Nakamura writes: “Akutagawa had in himself so keen a sense of beauty that he earnestly aimed for perfection in composition and style of his works. But he aimed also for variety in their perfection. For that purpose, he wanted to prepare different material, contexts, composition, and style in each work” (Nakamura, 2015, p. 45). In other words, Akutagawa refrained from repetition. One can even say that he was afraid of repeating himself. He wrote in an essay about the arts: “You always make regression if you do not make progress. When artists make regression, they always start a kind of automatic action, that is, they make only similar works” (Akutagawa, 1977–1978, v. 3, pp. 264–265).

But ironically enough that tendency made him a writer whose repetition stands out. Even a slight similarity makes readers remember another work of his which is more successful. He was deeply conscious of those expectations of his readers who wanted more and more innovations in his literary technique. This dilemma was characteristic for many writers of modern literature who are expected to continue to entertain readers by continual innovations or newness.

Another dilemma of Akutagawa was a question as to the use of literature. Most of his literary rivals were so-called “naturalists,” a term which means something different from European literature. It is recognized that one of the characteristics of modern Japanese literature was the rise of autobiographical trends with which writers tried to write about their real lives without fictional elements. Such works had been regarded as “authentic” literature about human life. Of course, Akutagawa was critical of the trend as he believed that modern literature should be composed with imagination, fictionality and literary devices. Shortly speaking, he emphasized the importance of “literariness.” On the other hand, Akutagawa especially in later years, when he was exhausted and burnt out by constant invention of new techniques, envied

some leading naturalist writers, for example, Naoya Shiga (1883–1971), whose major works are evidently autobiographical. Perhaps respect and envy towards Shiga's works made him also write some autobiographical short stories, some of which were his masterpieces in his last period. Believing that modern literature should be imaginative and artistic, Akutagawa also wanted his works to be regarded not only as just artistic, but also as authentic or "real."

In my opinion, such a dilemma is characteristic for writers in countries which started to modernize later because they imported new literary formats mainly from European literature, which helped them make a new, modern literature on one hand, but at the same time let them see how imported European literary formats were not completely suitable to depict their own society. It is possible to say that this discovery with surprise and disappointment helps to make a real start for young writers to construct their national literature. In that sense, Akutagawa's dilemma between "artistic" and "authentic" literature is one example of the birth of a national literature representative of late-starting countries which actually comprised the vast majority of the world.

On Sources of "Spider Thread"

"Spider Thread" was first printed in 1918 in the first issue of *Akai Tori (Red Bird)*, a new journal for children's literature. Akutagawa wrote some stories for children, and "Spider Thread" has been regarded the best work among his catalogue of children's literature.

One can even say that "Spider Thread" is suitable also for adult reading in that it represents some of the main features of Akutagawa's literary creation. First, he made an adaptation of a Buddhist story, which is his most representative technique. Second, he made most use of stylization with elaborate metaphors and fantastic imageries of *Gokuraku*, a Buddhist Paradise, and Hell with a pond of blood and a mountain of needles. As a result, an originally religious story was transformed into an aesthetic fairy tale with a hint of a moralistic message about deep human egoism. As a literary scholar has stated, "it is not a thread of faith, but as that of beauty that remains in readers' hearts" (Hiraoka, 1982, p. 308). We should say that it is aestheticization of a religious motif which is dominant in this story.

Literary scholars have conducted a lot of research about the source of this story. The established theory is that Akutagawa got an idea when he read a Buddhist story "The Spider-web" originally written in English by Paul Carus (1852–1919), a German American writer and scholar of comparative religion, which had been translated into Japanese by Daisetsu Suzuki (1870–1966), a famous Japanese scholar of Buddhism (Yamaguchi, 1978).

Interestingly enough, a Russian writer and thinker Lev Tolstoy also was interested in Carus's story and translated it into Russian (Yamaguchi, 1978; Туниманов, 1995). And it is also well known that Fedor Dostoevsky makes use of a similar folktale in a chapter "Onion" of his last novel *Brothers Karamazov* (Yamaguchi, 1978; Туниманов, 1995).

But here let me introduce to you a Ukrainian version with the same motif which was recorded by a Ukrainian folklorist Panteleimon Kulish in *Zapiski o Yuzhnoi Rusi*. The story is about an old sinful woman who now suffers in hell like Kandata:

Була вона богата, та скнара, що од неї ніхто й хліба куска не бачив. Ото раз полола вона цибулю, аж иде поуз вор'є дид-старець. «Подари, каже, паниматко, ради Христа!» Вона вирвала стрилку: «Прийми, каже, старче Божий». Тільки ж од неї и бачили. От, як умерла, то вжо звісно — тут своя дорога, а там тебе поведут. Взяли її небогу та й потягли в пекло. А Онисим [його син — S. N.] и побачив з неба, що вона велику муку приймає, та й каже: «Боже мій милий, Спасе мій Христе! за всю мою щирість, за всю мою правду, зроби мині таку ласку — нехай и моя мати буде в раю зо мною». А Христос и рече ему: «Ні, каже, Онисиме! вельми грішна твоя мати. Візьми хіба оту цибульку, що лежить перед нею, та коли витягнеш її с тиї бездни, то нехай и вона буде в раю с тобою». Уз'яв він тую стрілочку та й подав матері. Схопилась вона за неї... от, от витягне, от, от витягне с пекла! бо що-то Божому святому? Аж ні: як поначіплювались їй и в плахту, и в намітку грішні души, що б и собі с того пекла вибратьця, то й не здержала тая цибулька: перервалась, а вона так и бовтнула в гарячу смолу! (Кулиш, 1856, т.1, с. 307-308)

It is true that the Ukrainian version is different from Akutagawa's as to the reason why the onion broke up in the end, but still we can see a striking similarity among these stories. It is possible to guess that this motif has some elements which attract human imagination generally. What is important is that they are not only religious or moralistic, but also aesthetic, which is especially conspicuous in Akutagawa's story.

Some critics and scholars point out that Akutagawa omitted some Buddhist doctrine in Carus's original story while he emphasizes the pure psychological horror of Kandata who saw so many inhabitants of hell climbing the spider thread behind him that it looked like it was going to break. He cried to them "This thread is mine! Get off!" and it suddenly broke and they all fell back down into hell's pool of blood. Shakyamuni (Buddha) who had wanted to help Kandata sadly looked at that, but said nothing and continued to walk around in Paradise. The story ends:

The lotuses of the Lotus Pond, however, were unperturbed. They swayed their perfect pearl-white blossoms near the feet of Lord Shakyamuni, and from their golden centers wafted forth each time a never-ending fragrance wonderful beyond description. I think it must have been close to noon in Paradise. (Akutagawa, 2009, p. 41)

True, it is Buddhist Paradise (*Gokuraku*) written here. But Akutagawa evidently is much more interested in imagining another world generally rather than a peculiarly Buddhist one. Shinichiro Nakamura explains the meaning of another world written by Akutagawa: "when we encounter another world created by Akutagawa, we feel a kind of strong and pure realistic impression. (...) The farther his works go away from our everyday experience, the nearer they come to the essence of our life, so they are opposite to something like an escape from reality" (Nakamura, 2015, p. 105). From this point of view, the main theme of "Spider Thread" is not religious, but artistic and in a way realistic.

Moral Elements of “Spider Thread”

Still, we should take account of the moral elements of “Spider Thread” because Akutagawa felt free with them in children’s literature. While he dealt with moral themes mainly with irony and a parodical tone in works for adult readers, Akutagawa was straighter and more open with it in children’s literature.

It is worthwhile to note that morality is one of the most important topics in societies which started modernization later than others because traditional morals often collide with new and imported ones in those countries. Some people endeavor to adapt to new moral ideas imported from Europe such as liberty, equality or individualism while others tend to stick to traditional ones as they believe that it is better to live like their ancestors. As is well known, such conflicts among various generations and social groups often serve as a popular theme of modern literature in each country.

Akutagawa was very conscious of the difficulty in establishing new moral standards in Japanese society which was changing very rapidly. A short story of his “Husband of Enlightenment” (1919) is about a husband who acquiesced to his wife’s cheating as he tried to follow the ideal of free love. Having listened to his confession, his friend makes a remark: “Perhaps, your ideal was a childlike dream. But the Enlightenment itself which we are aiming at will be another children’s dream in one hundred years” (Akutagawa, 1977–1978, v. 3, pp. 25–26). Akutagawa lets readers think of the impossibility of making stable moral principles in a country changing with such a speed as Japan during that period.

In a lecture titled “Tomorrow’s Moral” Akutagawa gives a distinctive scheme: yesterday’s moral was feudalistic, today’s one is individualistic, and tomorrow’s one will be “such principles orientated toward a social community” (Akutagawa, 1977–1978, v. 7, p. 155). It is typical that he was not quite satisfied with morality based on individualism which was regarded as a European idea. He was one of so many people who wanted to establish their own morality which would integrate old and new, traditional and modern, national and universal ideas.

In this respect, one can think that “Spider Thread” gives a clue to Akutagawa’s moral message to children who will make “tomorrow’s moral”. Although the moral of the story seems rather traditional and educational, it seems to have also something suited to the new conditions of the modern society.

A literary critic and writer Tsuneari Fukuda made an interesting remark as to Akutagawa’s description of good and evil. According to Fukuda, the writer has acute “eyes that see human dignity and ugliness at the same time” (Fukuda, 2018, p. 135). He continues: “Akutagawa’s works tried to create something in an empty vacuum located between good and evil, ideal and reality; they represent the very vacuum” (ibid.). One can easily see that “the dangling short end of the spider thread from Paradise, delicately gleaming in the moonless, starless sky” (Akutagawa, 2009, p. 40) symbolizes his tendency toward the “vacuum” between good and evil.

However, we should not see here only Akutagawa’s skepticism or relativism, which is actually distinctive of his literature, but also something humane toward “the poor in spirit.” In an essay written at the age of nineteen, he talks about the necessity of breaking “worlds of formalities” (Akutagawa, 1977–1978, v. 12, p. 81), which seems to mean poor, old societies full of meaningless conventions in Japan. But he adds that they should break them with “a

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warm heart” (ibid.) because there are also poor children and old people in such worlds with nobody to take care of them. The young Akutagawa writes quite candidly: “Even if we try to break “worlds of formalities” in order to find Truth hidden in them, we should do that with a warm heart. (...) It is our task to break “worlds of formalities” always with a warm heart” (ibid.).

I think we can count Kandata as a resident of “worlds of formalities,” where he had been so poorly taken care of as to live a villain’s life. If so, Akutagawa broke the spider thread in his story perhaps with “a warm heart,” too. Slight warmth which the broken thread keeps with it might comfort our hearts.

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