# FICTION THROUGH THE AGES

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## REFLECTIONS ON UKRAINIAN WEEK IN JAPAN: TOWARD A DIALOGUE BETWEEN NATIONAL AND WORLD LITERATURE

I would like to start my talk with some memories of a project we held in December 2023. It was called "Ukrainian Week in Japan 2023." We invited Professor Olha Nikolenko, Professor Lidiia Matsevko-Bekerska and Kateryna Nikolenko from Poltava National Pedagogical University and Lviv National University to Japan. They read lectures on Ukrainian literature and culture in several universities such as Saitama University, University of Tokyo, University of Kyoto, Keio University and Sophia (Jochi) University. Professor Michiko Komiya (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies) and I translated and published their lectures. (Nikolenko et al., 2024).

We hope that this book will help Japanese readers know how rich and beautiful Ukrainian literature and culture are. In fact, I got to know some important elements as to Ukrainian culture after listening to and translating the lectures. I was particularly interested in the significance of baroque and modernism for Ukrainian literature. I asked myself: Why baroque and modernism?

Let me formulate my explanation this way. In the 17th and 18th centuries, with the rise of the Cossacks, the Ukrainian national consciousness blossomed. The rise of national consciousness and national power brought about special developments in the art of the period by producing a lot of outstanding talents, patrons and audiences. This applies also to Ukrainian modernism which flourished from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century when the Ukrainian national movement regained its power and breadth. This gave rise to a lot of important poets, novelists and playwriters who had a lasting influence on the subsequent development of Ukrainian literature. That is why baroque and modernism, and maybe contemporary literature, occupy a special place in Ukrainian literature.

We can see the same relationship between national power and artistic movements in other countries as well. For example, which country is the most famous for its Renaissance? Of course, Italy. Why? In the 14th and 15th centuries when Renaissance flourished, Italian republics such as Firenze (Florence) and Venezia (Venice), which were wealthy and powerful, helped to create the social conditions for the emergence of many artists, thinkers, and scientists. Therefore, the Renaissance has long been considered Italy's national style, even though, of course, it also had its respective styles and movements, too.

It is possible to say the same regarding Classicism for France, Romanticism for Germany, and Realism for Russia. These styles have had a special position in the literary history, art history, and intellectual history of each country.

So, how about Japan? I think we could say almost the same about our country, too. For example, Waka poems (or tanka, 31-syllable poetry) spread among the aristocrats in the

10th century and the *Tale of Genji*, which is the oldest novel in Japan was written by a female aristocrat in the 11th century, when Japan was developing its own culture after breaking away from the strong influence of China.

The second example is the Edo period (17th-19th centuries) when the then Tokugawa government stopped trade with Europe. During these closed but peaceful 250 years, haiku and kabuki spread, mainly among the merchant classes. Thus, we can say that tanka and haiku, both of which we traditionally regard our typical national literary genres, were born in the periods when Japan accumulated its national power and identity. We might conclude that changes in art schools are not just a change in style, but are linked to social movements in each country.

However, having said all of the above, I would like to state something that appears to be contrary to this. My thesis is that the development of national literature does not occur within a closed national framework, but is almost always caused by contact with world literature. Furthermore, what seems to be unique to one particular nation is often reflected in the "mirror of others." What does this mean? Let me give an example from Japanese literature to explain my theory.

Ryunosuke Akutagawa's "Thread of Spider." I hope many participants of today's seminar know the story, but let me tell you briefly about the writer and the plot of the story.

Ryunosuke Akutagawa was born in Tokyo, formerly Edo, in 1892. We can assume that he was raised in the atmosphere in which old Edo culture was still strong and competed with a new culture based on Westernization and modernization. In fact, Akutagawa was deeply familiar with haiku and ancient Chinese literature as a child, but majored in English literature at university. It was very typical for Japanese intellectuals of this era to have two types of education which were very different from each other. One can say that Akutagawa's literature was born from the mixture of these two types of literature and culture. "Spider's thread" is a work that clearly shows these characteristics of Akutagawa's literature.

"Spider's 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's Thread" has been regarded the best work among his works of this genre.

The plot is simple. One morning, as Buddha (Shakyamuni) was taking a walk around the Lotus Pond in Gokuraku, a Buddhist paradise, he saw hell far below. He noticed one man named Kandata who was suffering in a pool of blood. Budda felt pity for him because he knew that Kandata did only one good deed in his life. He saved a spider's life when he almost stepped on it. So, Buddha hung a spider's thread from paradise to hell so that Kandata could climb up that thread and come out of the pool of blood. Of course, he tried. Perhaps, he might have been able to climb up to paradise! However, when he got tired and looked down, he saw many other people from hell climbing up the spider's thread trying to escape too. What do you think Kandata did? He shouted, "You all get off the thread! This is mine!" The thread broke instantly, and they all fell back down into the pool of blood. Buddha 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)

One can say that "Spider Thread" shows some important features of Akutagawa's literature. 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 Buddhist Paradise and Hell. As a result, an originally religious story was transformed into an aesthetic fairy tale with a hint of a moralistic message about human egoism. As a literary scholar has stated, "it is not a thread of faith, but as one of beauty that remains in readers' hearts" (Hiraoka, 1982, p. 308). We can say that it is aestheticization of a religious motif which is dominant in this story.

What is the source of Akutagawa's story? Many scholars have conducted research about it. The established theory is that Akutagawa got the 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). We can say that "Spider's Thread" was born out of contacts and dialogues between West and East regarding religion and literature.

Interestingly enough, it seemed that Ukrainian tradition was also part of this process. Panteleimon Kulish (1819–1897), a Ukrainian writer and folklorist, published a collection of Ukrainian folklores, *Notes on South Rus'* in 1856, in which we see a similar story about a man who went to Paradice, but from there saw his mother suffering in hell. He asked Christ to save her. In her life she did the only one good deed – she once gave an old man a leek (цибулька):

> And Onisim saw from heaven that she was suffering great pain, and said: My dear God, my Savior, Christ! for all my sincerity, for all my truth, do me such a favor – let my mother be in paradise with me. And Christ said to him: No, Onisim! your mother is very sinful. Take out that onion lying in front of her, and when you pull her out of those abysses, then let her be in paradise with you. So, he took the leek and gave it to his mother. She grabbed hold of it... look, he'll pull out, look, he'll pull her out of hell! What is impossible for saints? But no! As so many sinful souls who had gathered were crammed into the sheet and the head of the onion, the little onion could not hold back: it broke off, and it dangled into the hot tar!
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> А Онисим и побачив з неба, що вона велику муку приймае, та й каже: Боже мий милий, Спасе мий Христе! за всю мою щирость, за всю мою правду, зроби мини таку ласку – нехай и моя мати буде в раю зо мною. А Христос и рече ему: Ни, Онисиме! вельми гришна твоя мати. Визьми хиба оту цибульку, що лежит перед нею, та коли витягнеш ii с тии бездни, то нехай и вона буде в раю с тобою. Узяв вин тую стрилочку та й подав матери. Схопилась вона за неи… от, от витягне, от, от витягне с пекла! бо що-то Божому святому? Аж ни: як поначиплювались ий и в плахту, и в намитку гришнии души, що б и соби с того пекла вибратьця, то й не здержала тая цибулька: перервалась, а вона так и бовтнула в гарячу смолу! (Г. Кулиш, Записки о южной Руси, т. 1, с. 306–8)

It is true that the Ukrainian version is somehow different from Akutagawa's story. But still, we can see a striking similarity among them. How would you explain this similarity? Perhaps, there existed a prototypical story which is unknown to us, and that evolved into the story of the spider's thread in one culture and the story of the leek/onion in another (we can call it "transmission theory"). Or is it possible to think that each culture by itself created similar stories ("parallel development theory")? Unfortunately, we cannot answer the question yet. But we know some other examples; the most famous of which might be the story of Orpheus. Japanese myth also has a story about a male god (Izanagi) who went to the land of the dead and tried to bring back his dead wife (Izanami). But he failed the same way as Orpheus; on the way home, he disobeyed the command not to look back to see if his wife was really following him. As a result, his wife was never able to return to the world of the living.

As can be seen from the above examples, we should look at the development of national literature not only in its own context, but also in the framework of world literature as nations and cultures are in constant contact throughout the ages. In fact, what we are doing at our international online seminar is a good example of such contacts. Hopefully, as a result, we will find something to enrich our national and world literature.

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