

# The Power of Story-Telling. On Reading, Researching and Teaching Japanese Literature in Poland

Katarzyna Sonnenberg-Musiał

In *Wasureenu hitobito* (*Unforgettable People*, 1898) Kunikida Doppo sketches a number of characters who, while deeply rooted in their local scenery, also become a part of the narrator's inner landscape, helping him broaden his horizon and realise the unity of the universe:

How am I different from anyone else? Part of the life we share is from heaven, and part of it is from earth. All of us are returning hand in hand, along the same eternal track, to that infinite heaven. And when this realization comes to me, I find myself in tears, for there is then in truth no Self, no Others. I am touched by memories of each and every one.<sup>1</sup>

Doppo creates a number of encounters for his narrator and, consequently, for his readers who follow the narrator's descriptions of "people as landscapes." The innkeeper of Kameya, a man on a "deserted little beach," a sturdy driver of an empty cart in Kyūshū singing on his way and a monk playing a lute in Shikoku. As the sketches of people and places come and go, the readers are likely to experience, together with the narrator, a profound sympathy for human nature. And if they are truly touched by the work, *Wasureenu hitobito* may become for them one of the *wasureenu sakuhin* – unforgettable works.

The concept of unforgettable encounters may easily be broadened to include not only people but also works of art which we come across and which touch us deeply, thus changing our lives for ever. Just like Doppo's narrator, the readers also discover the importance of certain encounters only after some years have passed. I remember that when I first read Higuchi Ichiyō's *Takekurabe* as a student, I stayed with a vivid image of Daionjima:

Nowhere a decent house, only rows of low tenements, ten and twenty to the row, their roof lines sagging, their front shutters carelessly left half open. One hears no rumors of rich men in these parts. Everyone has something to do with the quarter. A husband bustles about in the doorway of one of the less elegant houses, bunches of coat checks jangling at his waist. In the evening he sets out for work, and his wife clicks flint stones after him for good luck.<sup>2</sup>

The place where Ichiyō's characters grew up was both juxtaposed and intrinsically linked with Shin

Yoshiwara whose famous description opens *Takekurabe*:

It is a long way around to the main gate of the Yoshiwara, the licensed quarter, to the willows with their trailing branches; but the Yoshiwara moat, dark like the smiles of the black-toothed beauties, reflects the lights and the sport in the three-storied houses near enough to touch.<sup>3</sup>

The description is both concrete and evocative. It makes the described reality almost tangible – 手に取る如く<sup>4</sup> – while bringing the readers close to the pitch-black moat with the light of the buildings reflected in its surface and enabling them to hear the busy sounds of the quarter. We are made to experience, feel the surroundings, which resonates with Flannery O'Connor's claim that: "The first and most obvious characteristic of fiction is that it deals with reality through what can be seen, heard, smelt, tasted, and touched."<sup>5</sup>

All the characters appearing in the story are inscribed within the landscape of Daionjimaie – Nobuyuki of Ryūgeji – sober and quiet, Chōkichi – violent and brazen, Shōta – unassuming and (deceptively) docile, cheerful Sangorō with a head "like a small wooden mallet" (才槌). And, of course, Midori of the Daikokuya. The moment when she first appears on stage leaves a lasting impression on whoever sees her:

Her hair--undone it would probably have stretched to her feet-- was pulled up tight from the back. *Shaguma*, "red bear," a ferocious name for a girl's coiffure, but so fashionable that perhaps even the damsels in the fine houses had taken it up. Her skin was white, her nose well shaped. Her mouth was a little large, but closed it did not strike one as unattractive. Taken one by one her features were no doubt less than perfect. She had a soft, clear little voice, however, a bright manner and a winsome way of looking at one.<sup>6</sup>

The characters are all immersed in their surroundings which strongly influence their future – most of them follow in their parents' footsteps and Midori aspires to become someone like her sister Omaki, who is the most prominent and popular courtesan of the Daikokuya. Midori, whose name resonates with the name of an apprentice courtesan (*kamuro*) from the mid-19th-century song *Matsu no Midori* ("Green" of the Pines),<sup>7</sup> is still unaware, however, of the consequences of her childhood yearnings and the subsequent chapters reveal that people around her know more about her destiny than the girl herself. The revelation unfolds in a number of scenes: from the festival of Senzoku jinja until "Tori no ichi" festival in November.

Nobuyuki of Ryūgeji, Chōkichi, Shōta, Sangorō and Midori have all become an important part of my inner landscape and those early encounters with Japanese literature have stimulated my growth as a reader. Eager to introduce Ichyō's works to the Polish readers, I translated

*Takekurabe* (together with nine other Ichiyō's stories) and in 2015 the first collection of Ichiyō's short-stories in Polish was published under the title *Na rozstaju*, which is a Polish equivalent of Japanese "wakaremichi."<sup>8</sup> In the same year, Professor Numano Mitsuyoshi invited me to join the panel entitled "Tōkyō Daigaku de Ichiyō, Ōgai, Sōseki o yomu," which revolved around a newly published translation of *Takekurabe* into contemporary Japanese by Kawakami Mieko included in the 13<sup>th</sup> volume of Ikezawa Natsuki's *The Complete Works of Japanese Literature*.<sup>9</sup>

As Kawakami read out the passages of *Takekurabe* in her translation, I listened closely to every single word and felt as if the well-known Daionjima and its characters reappeared in front of me as distinct and bright as ever. They might have been changed slightly but substantially they remained the same. I remember having a similar reaction also to other translations by Enchi Fumiko (1981), Matsuura Rieko (2004), Akiyama Sawako (2005) and Yamaguchi Terumi (2012). Regardless different approaches towards Ichiyō's text, e.g. while Matsuura's follows the original punctuation, Kawakami rather changes Ichiyō's patterns, giving priority to the pace and the rhythm of the narrative, all the translations make the world of Ichiyō's story vividly re-emerge before the readers' eyes.

The strategies of Japanese modern translations of Ichiyō's short-stories are the effect of a conscious effort on the part of those who translate to recreate the experience the readers had in Ichiyō's times for the contemporary readers. Much of the existing criticism and scholarship may be said to serve a similar purpose. It is also the ideal goal of the literary seminar I have been conducting for the students of Japanese language and literature at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow. We read Japanese texts in the original and in numerous translations in order to savour the scenery, to meet the characters, to transcend our points of view and gain new experience. We frequently chose shorter narratives, because then we have more time to contemplate particular scenes, breath in the atmosphere, observe the characters walking along the shores of a tiny island, riding a cart in the mountains, playing a lute in a harbour town. In class, we focus on short fiction in a manner which Flannery O'Connor, a writer of short-stories herself, would recommend to her students: "The longer you look at one object, the more of the world you see in it; and it's well to remember that the serious fiction writer always writes about the whole world, no matter how limited his particular scene."<sup>10</sup>

O'Connor's words correspond with what is rendered in Natsume Sōseki's *Ichiya* (*One Night*, 1905), in which the narrator, having quoted one line from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: "O God! I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space,"<sup>11</sup> states:

I believe that you should consider a hundred years as one year, one year as a single moment, and if you know one moment, then you truly know life. The sun rises in the east and sets without fail in the west; the moon waxes and wanes. The man who attains hoar-headed status having

done no more than tick off the passing years on his fingers is the very person who vainly bears a grudge against the vast reaches of time for placing limits on his body and soul.<sup>12</sup>

My encounters with Japanese literature – the original texts but also the numerous translations into Japanese, English, French, German and Polish – generated a series of questions with regards to what it means to read a work of literature and, subsequently, what it takes to look at it from the perspective of a teacher and a scholar. If one considers translation, teaching, literary criticism and scholarship as something that enables the encounter with a work of literature, then – as C. S. Lewis notices – “their sole function is to multiply, prolong, and safeguard experiences of good reading”<sup>13</sup>. What, then, is the nature of reading? How does reading affect a person? Here, Lewis provides an answer which resonates with what Doppo’s narrator says about his meetings with the “unforgettable people”: “I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.”<sup>14</sup>

While reading Japanese literature with Polish students I always think of what makes a literary text alive, what makes the readers respond to it, want to read it again and again, in a manner resembling one’s attitude to a dear friend. I believe any answer given here would be incomplete at best. What is much easier to show, however, is how the texts live, how they inspire people to create new works, how they enlarge their lives. C. S. Lewis speaks about the intensity of the encounters with literary works which may change the readers just like certain encounters with other people do: “the first reading of some literary work is often, to the literary, an experience so momentous that only experiences of love, religion, or bereavement can furnish a standard of comparison. Their whole consciousness is changed. They have become what they were not before.”<sup>15</sup> Grushenka in Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* aptly notices that a good fable is a fable which stays with the readers: “It’s just a fable, but a good fable, I heard it when I was still a child, from my Matryona who cooks for me now.”<sup>16</sup> She speaks about the famous onion tale which bears striking similarities with a story about Kandata: ‘The Spider-web’ in *Karma: A Story of Buddhist Ethics* by Paul Carus (1894) and Akutagawa Ryūnosuke’s *Kumo no ito* (1918).<sup>17</sup> Yes, Grushenka’s tale has stayed alive.

Both Grushenka’s tale and Kandata’s story include “sparkling beauty, austere form, and visual power”<sup>18</sup> so often found in fairy tales. They also have a potential to touch their readers deeply and change their perspective on life. Moreover, they inspire new works of art. In this respect, fairy tales are a brilliant example as they tend to circulate in various versions depending on time, region and target audience. Maria Tatar captures this dynamics of fairy tales as follows: “If fairy-tale protagonists seem always to be on the move, travelling lightly and quickly, the tales themselves are constantly migrating into new cultures and new media, reinventing themselves

along the way.”<sup>19</sup> The reasons behind this dynamics are manifold and some light on the power of fairy tales is shed by J. R. R. Tolkien in his 1939 essay *On Fairy-Stories*: “It was in fairy-stories that I first divined the potency of the words, and the wonder of the things, such as stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine.”<sup>20</sup> In fairy tales concrete things are given their names which are both simple and powerful.

A brilliant example of such a migration of texts and concepts that have long existed and influenced the readers’ imagination may be found in Dazai Osamu’s *Otogizōshi* (1945), a collection of narratives based on such popular tales in Japan as: *Click-Clack Mountain*, *The Sparrow Who Lost Her Tongue*, *The Stolen Wen*, *Urashima-san*. Dazai’s narrator looks at a fairy book and addresses his five-year old daughter in the bomb shelter built in the garden but inside him tales of another kind are brewing. Many meta comments interwoven into the narration include interesting observations on the nature of fairy tales. Dazai is far less interested in the moral aspect of the tales than in the paradoxes of human existence they depict, the so-called tragicomedy of character (性格の悲劇).<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, in „Urashima san” a clash of two contrastive attitudes to fairy stories is highlighted. One is exemplified by Urashima, who – when invited by the tortoise to accompany him to Ryūgū – the Dragon Palace – laughs at the proposal claiming that The Dragon Place is merely a projection of dreams



Picture by Maria Lenarcik

and yearnings of the learned.<sup>22</sup> The tortoise – a living proof that Ryūgū is a reality – is, quite naturally, both amused and irritated by Urashima’s attitude.

I remember reading selected passages from “Urashima san” last year (2018/2019) with the third-year students who responded animatedly to Dazai’s text. They commented on many aspects of the story and the way it was retold: “Dazai’s version, in which old symbols are given new meanings, is rather addressed to adults who may easily identify themselves with Urashima” (Julia Cieślak); “At first it may seem that “Urashima-san” is merely a parody of the *otogizōshi*, but (...) it reveals itself to be more like an in-depth interpretation” (Julia Korta); “This new interpretation of an old tale is very thought-provoking (...) which is a sign of true literature which makes us think and search for new contents” (Olha Tuchapska); “Dazai uses psychological twists and enlarges the

story” (Agata Tekień); “ Like Albert Camus in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* Dazai argues that unhappiness of the main character is in fact his greatest happiness” (Piotr Nowakowski); “Dazai is playing a game with his readers in which he defies their worldview and forces them to revisit their current notions” (Lena Czesak). One particular example of how inspiring Dazai’s text was for the students is the picture drawn by one of them – Maria Lenarcik who showed it to me weeks after our reading of “Urashima san” in class. The picture then became the basis of the cover of the Polish translation of *Otogizōshi* published by DIALOG in 2019.

Such creative responses to literary works prove without a doubt that they are alive. They capture the readers imagination and invite them to look for their own means of expression. Tolkien writes about a similar phenomenon in his *On Fairy-Stories*. He notices the vastness, the boundlessness and the richness of the characters and the depth of fairy tales (which may stand here as a synecdoche of literature). But more importantly, he comments on the juxtaposition of enchanting beauty and ever-present peril, of joy and sorrow, inherent in human life, which are in fairy tales “as sharp as swords.”<sup>23</sup> The visitor to the realm of fairy tales is in awe but also at a loss for words as to how to express the wonder. He faces a mystery towards which he cannot remain silent as it resonates with his innermost intuitions and recognitions, but neither can he easily find any proper means to express it. This poses a never-dwindling challenge to new readers.

Reading, translating, researching and teaching Japanese literature in Poland also raises a question of what is universal and what is local in literature. To what extent the “Japaneseness” of the works influences the responses of the readers? Last year, I surveyed by questionnaire the concept of “Japanese literature” among Polish students. Most of them stated that the origin of the texts they had been reading in class was important for them. The majority focused on the “new sensations” they experienced while reading: “Japanese literature shows us new perspectives but also focuses on common experience”; “It teaches us patience as the plot develops in a manner we are not accustomed to”; “Japanese literature helps us understand Japanese culture and the way the Japanese view the world”; “It shows a slightly different approach to Nature”; “It may be a kind epiphany as a new perspective is revealed before our very eyes”; “Sometimes it is viewed as grim and gloomy but it also provides a sort of catharsis”; “It makes me think about the possible origins of a different perspective on life and society”; “It has different myths and legends as its background.”

The students’ responses are, of course, strongly influenced by the texts there are reading and I believe the comment: “It teaches us patience as the plot develops in a manner we are not accustomed to” may well be referring to Natsume Sōseki’s *Ichiya* and *Kusamakura* (1906) we used in class. The plotlessness or slow development of the events presented in the narrative were also emphasised by some Polish readers who expressed their opinions on the Polish translation of Hiraide Takashi’s *Neko no kyaku* (2001).<sup>24</sup> In fact, both *Kusamakura* and *Neko no kyaku* are often

referred to as “haikuteki shōsetsu” or haiku-like novels and Hiraide was without doubt inspired by Sōseki (*Wagahai wa neko de aru* and *Neko no haka* are two discernible sources of inspiration). In *Kusamakura*, Sōseki referred directly to the tradition of *haibun* – poetic travelogues, and to haiku and the narrator claims that he wants to imitate Matsuo Bashō in order to look at the world as if it were a work of art. Even if the subject matter itself seemed mundane – as was the case with Bashō’s writing about the horse peeing by his pillow – literature should enable the readers to detach themselves from the everyday commotion.

Both Sōseki’s *Kusamakura* and Hiraide’s *Neko no kyaku* are novels with long essayistic passages and numerous allusions to poetry. Both have an artist as a protagonist. The painter and writer in *Kusamakura* is frequently shown in the act of composing poetry and attempting to develop a picture of a beautiful woman – his ultimate goal. The readers are not allowed, however, to see any of his intended sketches completed in painting but are shown the landscapes rendered in words. The writer in *Neko no kyaku* reflects on the need to devote his time to writing and on the difficulty of accomplishing the task he is given by the publisher. He experiences a series of traumatic events and decides to look at his own life with a sense of detachment, finding inspiration not only in the realm of haiku but also in Machiavelli’s poetry. The whole book is an invitation addressed to the reader to delve in his creative process.

However, many students responding to the questionnaire, while referring to the same texts that made others focus on their “Japaneseness,” concentrated rather on such characteristics which were not Japan-specific: “Japanese literature shows the fundamental problems of human condition”; “it depicts human psyche in a realistic and detailed manner”; “It may help in the process of discovering one’s self”; “It gives voice to people who otherwise would not be heard in the world”; “It may be sometimes shocking but not without a reason”; “It excels in humour and irony”; “It is well suited for adaptations, has a great cinematic potential.” Such voices reflect the attitude mentioned by Professor Numano in *Sekai wa bungaku de dekite iru* (The World is Made of Literature, 2012/2014) which – despite existing differences – searches to understand and respond to literature, regardless whether it is from Japan or from the rest of the world.<sup>25</sup>

I have set out on my journey with Japanese literature in Poland and, as I keep meandering between what is local and what is universal, I like to repeat to myself after C. S. Lewis: “(...) in reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.”<sup>26</sup> I am very much grateful that in the course of this journey I had an opportunity to meet Professor Numano, who has inspired me to think about borders not as limitations but as possibilities.

## 注

1. Kunikida Doppo (1972). *Unforgettable People*. Transl. Jay Rubin. In: *Five Stories by Kunikida Doppo*. *Monumenta Nipponica*, Vol. 27, No. 3, p. 303.
2. Higuchi Ichiyō (1960). *Growing Up*. Transl. Edward Seidensticker. In: *Modern Japanese Literature: An Anthology*. Ed. Donald Keene. New York: Grove Press, p. 70.
3. *Ibidem*.
4. Higuchi Ichiyō (1897). *Takekurabe*. In: *Ichiyō zenshū*. Tōkyō: Hakubunkan, p. 405.
5. Flannery O'Connor (1969). *Mystery and Novels. Occasional Prose*. Ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, p. 57.
6. Higuchi Ichiyō (1960). *Growing Up*, op. cit., p. 75.
7. Ichiyō might have known the song. See: Aoki Kazuo (1972). *Takekurabe kenkyū*. Tōkyō: Kyōiku Shuppan Sentā, p. 9.
8. Ichiyō's *Wakaremichi* is also included in the Polish translation.
9. *Higuchi Ichiyō – Takekurabe* (Transl. Kawakami Mieko) / *Natsume Sōseki / Mori Ōgai. Nihon bungaku zenshū / Ikezawa Natsuki kojīn henshū*, vol. 13. Ed. Ikezawa Natsuki. Tokyo: Kawade Shobō.
10. Flannery O'Connor (1969). *Mystery and Novels. Occasional Prose*, op. cit., p. 49.
11. *Hamlet*, Act II, Scene ii.
12. Natsume Sōseki (1978). *Ichiya. 'One Night.'* Transl. Alan Turney. *Monumenta Nipponica*, Vol. 33, No. 3, p. 297.
13. C. S. Lewis (2012). *An Experiment in Criticism*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, p. 75.
14. *Ibidem*, p. 97.
15. C. S. Lewis (2012). *An Experiment in Criticism*, op. cit., p. 3.
16. Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1992). *The Brothers Karamazov*. Transl. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. London: Vintage, p. 298.
17. J. S. Miller (2001). *Adaptations of Western Literature in Meiji Japan*. New York: Palgrave, p. 2-3.
18. Maria Tatar (2015). „Introduction.” In: *The Cambridge Companion to Fairy Tales*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 20.
19. *Ibidem*, p. 23.
20. J. R. R. Tolkien (1997). “On Fairy-Stories.” In: *Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. Ed. Christopher Tolkien. London: HarperCollins, p. 147.
21. Dazai Osamu (2019). *Otogizōshi. Shinshaku Shokoku Banashi*. Tōkyō: Iwanami, p. 31.
22. *Ibidem*, p. 40.
23. J. R. R. Tolkien (1997). “On Fairy-Stories,” op. cit., p. 109.
24. The title is translated into Polish as *Kot, który spadł z nieba* as the Publisher decided to follow the title of the French translation.
25. *Sekai wa bungaku de dekite iru* (2014). Ed. Numano Mitsuyoshi. Tōkyō: Kōbunsha, p. 25.
26. C. S. Lewis (2012). *An Experiment in Criticism*, op. cit., p. 97.



## 物語の力。ポーランドでの日本文学との出会いについて

カタジーナ・ソンネンベルク＝ムシャウ

---

本論文は、ポーランドで日本文学を翻訳するおよびポーランドの学生に日本文学を教授する、海外で日本文学に携わる立場からみた日本文学との「出会い」について考察することを目的としている。樋口一葉の『たけくらべ』、国木田独歩の『忘れえぬ人々』、夏目漱石の『一夜』・『草枕』、太宰治の『お伽草子』、平出隆の『猫の客』などの作品に触れながら、特定の文化的文脈で作られた作品を「読む」・「理解する」過程を明らかにすると同時に、C. S. ルイスが述べる「偉大な文学を読むとき、私は千人の人になるが、しかし同時に私自身であり続けることができる」（『An Experiment in Criticism』1961年）という文学一般の効用をも検討する。