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Rereading “Literacy” and “Illiteracy”
Teaching Images of Japan in Foreign Literature

As a foreign language and literature teacher I am not only interested in improving grammatical and vocabulary language skills of students, but also in increasing their awareness of the otherness of the culture and language they study and of some tricky problems of intercultural communications they are bound to encounter. Therefore the question of how to conceptualize foreign words and ideas and how to deal with one`s own “literacy” and “illiteracy” has become an intriguing challenge. Usually we cherish “literacy” as a capacity to decode images of a foreign culture through the accumulation of cultural, historical, geographical, popular and other knowledge. However, this kind of “literacy” cannot but eternally lag behind the corpus of knowledge already accumulated in the language studied. It also falls short of the understanding of some idiosyncratic use of words one cannot help but encounter in any kind of communication. To regard the language that is being learned as a monolithic block is one of the dangers which come with memorized vocabulary and a naïve trust in dictionary information. I believe that a certain amount of “illiteracy” is helpful to overcome preconceived ideas and to open one`s mind to the otherness of the language, literature, and culture studied. However, “illiteracy” alone will not do either. A complicated balance of “literacy” as analytical technique and “illiteracy” as resistance to meaning is needed in order to not only understand, but to understand one`s own understanding, it`s potentials and it`s limits. This, I hope, may lead to a more careful approach when reading about foreign countries.

The two literary texts I have selected to illustrate the snares and pitfalls of literacy and the potentials and limits of illiteracy present introductions to Japan in the

shape of two short stories. One is the introductory text of a German collection of stories about Japan by Franka Potente, published in 2010: *Zehn* (*Ten*), the other is the first text of a collection of stories by the Hungarian author László Krasznahorkai: *Seiobo auf Erden*, published in 2010 (*Seiobo on Earth*; Hungarian title of the original: *Seiobo Járt Odalent*, 2008). Unfortunately both books have as yet not been translated into any other languages. Thus their exemplary use here may also serve as an introduction to these two interesting new literary publications on Japan, which will, no doubt, soon be published in English too. When reading literary texts, one can analyze the text body not only on the semantic level, but also on a broader level of discourse, imagery clusters, and even narratology in order to show where in the process of reading "literacy" and "illiteracy" come in to play.

The author of the short stories in *Zehn* is a German actress, probably best known for two movies, *The Fifth Element* (1997) with Bruce Willis and *Run Lola Run* (1998). Since she participated in the documentary film *Underground Art* in 2005 Potente has visited Japan again and again. Her book, though belles-lettres, is widely sold under the label "travel literature", introducing Japan to German tourists. The book reviews are basically divided: while most unprofessional readers enjoy the "miniatures" which they believe give an authentic idea of Japan, professional readers tend to be extremely critical of the exaggerated use of "tour guide explanations" of Japanese food, clothes, rituals, habits, styles, fashion and so on. One reviewer even argued that Potente`s characters are as "Japanese" as a German herring sandwich compares with sushi.

In Potente`s book the Japonica serve as stage requisites. In every second story the protagonists eat "gyouza" or "dumplings", yet the author gives neither a detailed

description of the food itself nor of its use and meaning in Japanese everyday life. Thus for the reader the lexeme “gyouza” remains empty except for the idea of it being a common dumpling-like dish for Japanese people, comparable to Russian “pirogi”, Italian “ravioli”, and German “maultaschen”. While “gyouza” does not pose such a problem to understanding Japanese culture, “bonnou” does. Potente`s translation of this word into “sin” when describing New Year`s Day Buddhist and Shintoist rituals, turns the whole celebration into a rather “Christian” event. Contrary to this, the effect of “illiteracy”, translating into an openness of mind towards the cultural rituals described, could have been upheld by keeping the original Japanese term and thus evading common Western understanding. While the use and translations of such Japonica terms should be circumspect and careful, they are in general actually neutral in the way they can transport meaning, and therefore contribute to a posture dominated either by “literacy” or “illiteracy” within the reader. It is the context that determines how we understand or whether we understand the meaning of such words and how we deal with our understanding and lack of understanding. In Potente`s text this context is often provided by imagery from famous Japanese movies, e.g. swinging paper lanterns in a dark rainy night. Again, this context, too in general remains open to interpretation: If the quotation is pointed out to the reader, it supports the idea of fictitiousness and enables the reader to see how words and images are used to create the “world of Japan”. In Potente, however, the cinematic quotation is stripped of its citation characteristics and offered as a “realistic” picture of Japan, the element of movie literacy – the possibility to reread the data – gives way to a naïve posture of direct pseudo-understanding of the other culture. The following quote from the first short story “The Winds of the Gods”, also a movie quotation, shows how narration techniques determine the readers posture

towards the represented material:

> Carefully she applied the painting brush.
> She had preconceived the lines in her head and shaped the picture in front of her inner eye.
> The delicate, waving line was drawn elegantly onto the rice paper which absorbed the ink immediately. The black silhouette of the Fujiyama was emerging out of the mist and towered over Tokyo skyline. Very often she had painted this motif. Today, however, it had turned out exceptionally well.
> The picture was done. While she was going to hang the paper to dry, the doorbell of the shop rang. (….)
> "Konnichi wa!" A European man in his fifties bowed politely. A "gaijin", an "outside person".
> "This is a nice shop", he said with an agreeably quiet voice. Usually the foreigners were very loud. That was especially noticeable in the small, silent shop. That was one of the reasons why Mrs. Michi often had difficulties in dealing with gaijins. They were too loud, too direct in their ways. There was always some confrontation in the air. Although she only sold fans. (Potente, p.7-9; transl.:H.H.).

From the narrative point of view the beginning of this story is quite successful: it remains open to interpretation and thus cautions the reader to be careful when ascribing point of view. The first lines could be the thoughts of the painting woman as well as the commentary of an omniscient narrator. There is also still the possibility of a first-person as well as a third-person narrator observing and commenting the act of painting. The continuation of the text, however, shows that the narration of this story is based on the internal focalization (Gérard Genette) of the Japanese fan dealer. Potente`s attempt to render the story from the Japanese point of view of the old woman proofs fatal, since with this act she usurps not only the outside scene but also the inside brain of her Japanese protagonist. Instead of offering the reader the curious and doubtful point

of view of a visiting European/German tourist (the entering “gaijin”), which could have called for acute speculation and careful interpretation of the scene presented to the reader, Potente (ab)uses the Japanese woman protagonist to corroborate her own view of Japan and to consolidate stereotype imagery of this kind. No wonder the little story ends with a heart-rending colonialist cliché of the bountiful Westerner helping the poor Japanese lady.

László Krasznahorkai is a well-known Hungarian author living in Berlin who has already written some books set in Japan, where he stayed at least three times for several months. His short story “The Kamo-Hunter” is a wonderful example of how to introduce a foreign culture while at the same time calling the reader`s attention to the constructedness of his account. He is neither relying on a naturalistic depiction nor on a discursive foundation of his text, but juxtaposing both in a complex net of attributing meaning and withholding it. The story starts with a reference to Heraclitos` famous “panta rhei”, which is in itself already a warning post for any attempt to force closure on the process of signification set loose:

> Around him everything is moving, as if from a world-wide distance, only once, and in spite of all unimaginable obstacles, with some kind of deep current Heraclitos’ message had arrived, because it is moving, the water is running, it is coming and going with thunder, here and there the silk of the wind is blowing, the mountains are wavering in the heat, yes, the heat itself is moving, trembling and shimmering in the landscape, as are the tall tufts of grass on the little islands in the riverbed, and every single plain ripple is, when stumbling over the low threshold, as is every intangible, centrifugal element of this continuing ripple and every single flash of light on the surface of this centrifugal element, as are the drops of light of this emerging and immediately disintegrating surface, sprinkling and spattering away, inexpressible by words, as are the billowing clouds, the nervously trembling blue skies high above, as is the

> dazzling and sparkling, radiating nature of the sun, expanding over the whole of creation in this very moment, concentrated by terrible force and nevertheless impossible to encompass, as are the fish and frogs and beetles and little reptiles in the river (….)
> Only he does not move, the Ooshirosagi, the mighty, snow-white bird, the hunter, himself attackable from every side, here not even hiding his own defenselessness – now leaning forward, extending his S-shaped neck and thus on the same line his head and his long hard beak and straining everything, at the same time stretching downwards, while pressing his wings close to his body and getting a fast grip for each of his thin legs under water and focusing his eyes on the water surface underneath him flowing away (Krasznahorkai, p. 5-7; transl.:H.H.).

This is not simply a description of the Kamo River running through Kyoto, but a lesson in perception and narration. The reader is confronted with an extraordinary, focused way of observing everyday life events and with a very attentive and tentative way of expressing this in words. Even though the river described is supposed to be the Kamo River, at this point in time it does not matter, because everything is flowing, everywhere, from ancient Greek to modern Japan. The reader of this passage experiences the flow of words and aspects. He is trying to catch its meaning, faltering, wondering, and then forced to recognize the one stumbling stone of the narrative flow: the Ooshirosagi, the Snowy Heron, which stands fast against the flow of meaning.

The following quotation shows how Krasznahorkai is able to give a concrete description of a city map, while at the same time opening up new dimensions of meaning in space and time, playing with the reader`s powers of perception and capacities of literary understanding:

> Kyoto is a city of Constant References, where nothing is identical with itself, and probably never was, because every part of this big community is pointing back, is pointing back to an unverifiable glory, it allows its present self to come

> into existence, in a glory that is situated in deep past or might have been only created by this past, so that here it is impossible to apprehend anything in one of its elements or to perceive it, because he who is trying to perceive, loses the very first element of this city, like the visitor who steps out of the Super Express called Shinkanzen from the direction of ancient Edo at the monumental Kyoto Station, steps out and strolls out finding the right exit in a chaos of amusement-park like underpasses, into the mouth of Karasuma-dori, and sees for example on the left side of this directly northwards pointing arrow-like street the long, yellow, awe-inspiring enclosure of the Buddhist temple called Higashi-Honganji already visible from the station, because right at that moment he has left the realm of possibilities, left the possibility to see the present Higashi-Honganji, because the present Higashi-Honganji does not exist, the glance at it immediately submerges the present into something which can however not be called the past, because the Higashi-Honganji has also no past, neither yesterday nor the day before yesterday, instead there are only thousands of references to a plurality of nebulous pasts of the Higashi-Honganji, only awe-inspiring references to that it is and that it was, interwoven in the whole city, while the visitor is walking through it, in order to pass through this fantastic wonderland, from Toji Temple to Enryakuji, from Katsura Rikyu to Tofukuji to finally reach that part of the Kamo River, quite close to the Kamigamo Jinja, the part where the river flows stronger, and where he is standing, the Ooshirosagi, the only one, strangely enough, who has as much present as past, as he has neither one nor the other, because in the progressing and regressing time he has really never existed, he, the artist, endowed with Attention in order to represent that which in this ghost town adjusts the axis of space and of things: the intangible, incomprehensible, because unreal, that is, unbearable beauty. (Krasznahorkai, p.11-12; transl.: H.H.)

How are we to read this text? There are the countless references to Japanese (Buddhist, Shintoist, Kyoto) history offered and denied at the same time, there is a phenomenological squinting blurring the meaning of every word. Krasznahorkai`s text is obviously a pleading for historical and scriptural “illiteracy”, because forthright literal knowledge alone does not help to understand existence. There is an omnipresent

Zen-Buddhist posture towards time and life grasping the whole text: the Ooshirosagi`s existence – the embodiment of Attention, the ultimate artist. Though it is “literacy” (Zen-Buddhist knowledge) that turns the Ooshirosagi into the embodiment of Attention, this concrete literary knowledge is not necessary for the reader to realize its meaning. Attention alone is necessary, as the text shows. Buddhism is traditionally deeply suspicious of the literariness of any enlightenment. Its distrust of words is famous and well-reflected in the many “nonsensical” koans and mondos of the great Buddhist masters. As an animal in any case this bird-artist is beyond or before any “literacy”. As a matter of fact, the Ooshirosagi is only concerned with “eeleatracy”.

References

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