

Japanese Gothic?: Genre and Translation in Izumi Kyōka

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The title of this paper suggests a project both comprehensive in scope and precise in methodology: one that would seek to relate translation theory to genre theory and then apply the result to the translated works of an individual author.¹ It should be stated at the outset that such a project is not yet wholly feasible. A solid theoretical base is lacking, and the author in question is one who has himself not been widely translated. At the same time, the issues involved are so central to the broader topic of cross-cultural communication that making even a tentative effort to explore them may be of use. Here, therefore, I propose to build an argument around a single keyword that I believe brings together the various strands involved in considering the relationship between the theory and practice of translation. That keyword is “resistance.” I intend, in other words, to relate translation theory, genre theory, and a recently published collection of translated fiction by Izumi Kyōka to the general concept of resistance—always with the understanding, however, that the effect may be to raise more questions than are answered.

To start with the theory of translation, it is instructive to note that the relatively new (and active) field of translation studies arose out of resistance to a perceived neglect of both the important cultural role played by translations and the activity of translating itself. The very term “translation theory” attained what might be called official stature only as recently as 1983, when it was listed as a separate entry in the *Modern Language Association International Bibliography*. As this date may indicate, the field of translation theory forms part of a general groundswell in contemporary critical activity that can be loosely categorized as structuralism and poststructuralism. This postmodern theoretical mode arises from a challenge to traditional Western metaphysics, a tradition that privileges or grants theoretical priority to the idea of some absolute truth—an original ground or source—upon which beliefs can be constructed.²

So that I can avoid rapidly getting in over my head, let me keep to the relevance of this theoretical stance for translation. Here the challenge to tradition takes the form of resistance to the traditional assumption that communication is (or even can be) a transparent process in which a speaker or author fully in control of his own intentions directly addresses a listener or reader fully equipped to understand him. The traditional position holds translation to be a secondary rather than a primary activity, regarding the translator essentially as a parasite feeding off the creative genius of the original author. With a few notable exceptions, it has led to the phenomenon of the disappearing translator, whereby those of us whose native language is English, for example, speak quite readily of having read Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Proust, Bashō, or Yoshimoto Banana while being unable to name any of the translators whose efforts allow us to make such assertions. Poststructuralist theory, on the other hand, holds that such concepts as intertextuality, literary convention, and even personal idiosyncrasy complicate the communicative process enormously, making each interpretive act (including the act of authorship itself) contingent upon a variety of circumstances. Translation theory thus reverses the traditional author-translator hierarchy by noting that a book by a foreign writer only lives for us in the first place because it has been translated—that it is, in fact, the translation that allows the original work to survive rather than the other way around, and that it is able to perform this function precisely because translation is an interpretive activity of the same order as any other. In other words, translation forms part of an interpretive web with no controlling center, and for that very reason rewards the same sort of critical attention given to any individual section of that web.

Now, I hasten to add that poststructuralist theory has its share of detractors, and in the same way as appears to be the case for literary theory, one sometimes gets the suspicious feeling that the theorists are out to call more attention to themselves than to the translators whose cause they ostensibly espouse (although the theorists themselves would no doubt deny the validity of any such distinction).³ In any event, the sort of resistance advocated by these theorists to the concept of translation as a mode of transparent communication seems valid enough, and can be justified by more traditional viewpoints as well. In fact, the first comprehensive English study of translation to be published since World War II adopts just such a humanistic standpoint. I would therefore like to refer to that study in order to briefly summarize the history of translation in the West and explain the relevance of the kind of resistance I have described to a writer like Kyōka.

The book is *After Babel* by George Steiner, first published in 1975 and issued in a revised version by Oxford University Press in 1993. Steiner takes the stance, eccentric in the view of some, that very little can be said about translation that has not already been said by a very small group of writers and translators. He lists a total of fourteen names, beginning with Seneca (4 BC-AD 65) and Saint Jerome (340?-420), continuing through Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Dryden (1631-1700), and concluding with Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) and Willard V. O. Quine (born 1908). (Steiner modestly excludes his own name from the list, but it seems clear from what he says elsewhere that he feels it belongs there.) More important than such a list of names for our purposes is to note that Steiner does convincingly show from just how early and with what persistence the same basic arguments have been put forward whenever the nature of translation has been discussed. Steiner subsumes these arguments under two sets of related oppositions: 1) the opposition between “monadistic” or relativistic approaches and universalistic approaches; 2) the opposition between free and literal translation. Focusing on the latter pair, for example, it may surprise some people to hear that the question of free versus literal translation has been a part of Western discussions of the subject since the time of Cicero and Horace, both of whom flourished before the common era. It informed Bible translation in the sense of striking a balance between the need to respect essential mysteries (in other words, the occult significance of certain specific religious expressions) and yet maintain general accessibility to the truth (in other words, the perspicuity of vernacular speech). It also contributed in large measure to the growth of European nationalistic awareness in the nineteenth century, and in the twentieth has provided the focus for questions of aesthetic and linguistic arguments centering on the problematic relationship between form and content.

Steiner’s point (which he also extends to the opposition between relative and universal) is that both the process and the products of translation have resisted efforts to define them solely in terms of these two poles, and that since the seventeenth century the possible types of translation have almost invariably been divided into three classes: 1) the literal or interlinear, 2) the faithful but autonomous restatement, and 3) the (free) imitation or imaginative recreation. What this distribution signifies, according to Steiner, is that we finally cannot look to theory to provide answers to the basic problems of interpretation. Rather, we must proceed on a case-by-case basis of painstakingly examining *semantic* rather than *metalinguistic* contexts and realizing that translation can never be more than what he calls “an exact art” in which each reader or student of translation brings a more or less historically informed perspective to bear on an individual text.⁴

Skippping over the way Steiner uses this conclusion to support his own partly intuitive hermeneutic method (based primarily, it would appear, on Walter Benjamin), we may pause to note the irony of a convergence between Steiner’s non-theoretical position and the ever increasing sophistication of poststructuralist theory, especially as represented by postcolonial studies and Polysystem theory. In historical terms, it seems fair to say that this convergence

reflects the movement over the past two millennia—with the key break coming in the middle of the eighteenth century—from an emphasis on the use of translation as a means of enriching the target language to an emphasis on the need to respect the independence of the source language. To put it baldly, for the Romans and Renaissance Europe, translation was a form of cultural imperialism whereby the dominant culture appropriated whatever it deemed worthy in the subject language text. Beginning with French thinkers in the middle of the eighteenth century (most notably Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert), respect for what is “foreign” in the original emerges, and this trend has continued—with some important exceptions and qualifications—to characterize subsequent theoretical outlooks.⁵ Steiner relates this awareness of diversity to a concept he calls “alterity,” which he posits as a necessary condition for mankind’s psychic survival. Polystem theorists and cultural theorists tend to relate it to the historicization of competing ideologies or world views. In both cases, resistance to the imposition of a single comprehensive scheme of values becomes an important part of the “meaning” of translation. Translation is seen as a transaction with the Other, and identifying the Other—or at least allowing it to make its presence felt—is an important function of translation.

It should now be fairly clear where this argument is leading. If we in the native-speaking English world are to find value in translating from another language, it will inevitably come in the form of a challenge—in other words, resistance—to values we already subscribe to. Steiner makes the provocative assertion that translations within a given culture are actually those which create the greatest resistance because a greater shared awareness also allows for more potential points of disagreement. Translations from other cultural traditions—Steiner specifically mentions Chinese—paradoxically encounter less resistance because both translator and reader share a common ignorance of the cultural background from which the source text derives.⁶ This is, I believe—and I hope—a weak point in his argument, for unless we are willing to grant the inevitability of permanent intellectual isolation within a specific culture, resistance can always be created by increased knowledge and experience. In other words, I fail to see how you can construct a valid argument for *intra*-cultural resistance on the one hand and exclude the possibility of *inter*-cultural resistance on the other.

Thus my first conclusion is that translation, like any other mode of interpretation, both reflects and generates interpretive resistance. What does this mean when we come to the subject of genre (in this case Gothic fiction)? Here it seems useful to enter by way of a discussion of the distinction proposed by Tzvetan Todorov in *The Fantastic* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975) between theoretical genres and historical genres. According to this distinction, which Todorov uses to develop his definition of the “fantastic,” theoretical genres are not derived from an inductive survey of the field but are only hypothetical categories which determine the probability of each new member of a species having more or less the same qualities: they are “deduced from a theory of literature.”⁷ Historical genres, in contrast, comprise those based solely on the observation of actual literary phenomena. Todorov feels that theoretical genres are the only ones that can yield sure knowledge, for historical genres tend toward mere classification. Todorov gets around the argument that observed instances may contradict theoretical categories by noting, first, that knowledge does not need to be perfect to be useful and, second, by stating that historical genres can be considered a sub-group of complex theoretical genres.

The definition of the fantastic proposed by Todorov is one that is quite persuasive, and one which I myself have argued can profitably be used to examine Kyōka’s fiction.⁸ But the point I wish to emphasize here concerns Todorov’s more problematic assertion that historical genres may be considered a sub-group of complex theoretical genres. Whether this assertion can actually be substantiated or not, I think it is important to note the admission of

complexity with respect to historical genres. Historical genres tend to be untidy affairs that very quickly offer resistance to simplistic descriptions, and the Gothic novel is just such a historical genre. A precise definition of the term “Gothic” itself, like most definitions of Romanticism, is hard to come by, and although there have been attempts to reduce that definition to a single quality (terror, for example), in light of the rapidly growing body of criticism that has gathered around the topic, that seems to be an unwarranted (if perhaps unavoidable) simplification. Like Romanticism, it probably makes more sense to discuss the Gothic as a genre characterized by a combination of features that can be more or less successfully applied to individual cases and that shift in relative importance over the course of time.

What, then, are the defining features of the Gothic?⁹ For the sake of convenience, I have broken down the English Gothic into three overlapping historical divisions. These are Classic Gothic, Later Gothic, and Gothic Diffusion. The first division begins in 1764 with the publication of *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole, and finds its representative voice in Ann Radcliffe, who wrote a series of extremely influential Gothic novels between the years 1789 and 1797 (*The Mysteries of Udolpho*, published in 1794, is considered the epitome of the genre). This period is characterized by such stock literary devices as a medieval and frequently Continental setting, usually a castle or abbey, and some dark secret associated with that setting; the presence of a supernatural element; a malevolent yet fascinating male villain; and a young, beautiful, persecuted heroine. It is this last element in particular, with its implied critique of domestic social relations, that has caused this first category of works to be referred to as “female Gothic.” And here also can be found the main source of the resistance this subgenre embodies. For with a plot centering on the attempt of a young woman to assert her individuality by refusing to enter into a forced marriage—essentially rebelling against male control—we find the expression of a subversive theme very much in keeping with the Romantic spirit, only from the woman’s point of view.

This proto-feminist strain continues throughout the Later Gothic—*Frankenstein* (1818) is arguably the most prominent example, even though (or precisely because) the main characters are male—but at this time the Gothic as a whole takes a decidedly lurid turn toward the broader theme of moral transgression in the work of two male writers, Matthew Lewis and Charles Maturin. In 1796 the former wrote a notorious novel, censured even by the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, called *The Monk*. The hero—or rather villain—of this tale is a hypocritical monk who rapes his sister, kills his mother, and finally meets a gruesome end at the hands of Satan himself, to whom he has sold his soul. Maturin, writing in 1820, produced an equally celebrated tale of moral corruption called *Melmoth the Wanderer*, about a man who has sold his soul to the devil for a specified period of extra life on earth, and must find someone to take his place before that time limit expires so that he can get out of his end of the bargain. Even these very brief summaries may indicate why the Later Gothic is called a literature of excess for the way its villains are portrayed as breaking the strongest moral taboos known to society. This is Gothic fiction as precursor to Freud, where distortion can be seen to reveal psychological truths and test the moral constraints imposed on individuals by the religious and cultural traditions of the societies to which they belong.

As a matter of literary history, Maturin’s book is commonly used to mark the chronological boundary of Gothic fiction as a distinct genre in English literature. This is a patently arbitrary cut-off date, for it excludes examples that can hardly be categorized as anything but Gothic fiction, including works by James Hogg, the Brontë sisters and, on the other side of the Atlantic, Charles Brockden Brown, Edgar Allen Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne. And then, of course, one must somehow account for the revival of Gothic fiction in the 1890s, which decade saw the publication of some of our most notable examples

of horror fiction, including *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) and *Dracula* (1897). Indeed, once you know what to look for, you can find it in a great many mainstream writers as well: in Dickens, for instance (*Bleak House*, 1852-53, and *Great Expectations*, 1860-61), and even in that consummate psychological realist, Henry James (*The Turn of the Screw*, 1898). And that is the point of including a third category, Gothic Diffusion: the devices and themes of early Gothic fiction continued to be used by authors whenever realism was found to be an inadequate mode of literary expression. Indeed, they continue to inform not only horror films and Stephen King novels but also the work of more “literary” authors and, especially in recent years, literary and cultural critics. In other words, both the themes and devices of Gothic fiction—themes such as gender roles, the alienation of the social outcast, the connection between desire and death, the meaning of fear; devices such as the malevolent villain, the shadowy double, the haunted house, dreams and visions, narrative ambiguity—continue to exert a powerful influence on contemporary interpretive horizons, although the precise nature of that influence can only be determined by taking into account our own unique cultural, social and historical situation.

Resistance in terms of genre, therefore, comes down to the need to view any single genre as a culturally and historically determined category. Even within the confines of the English Gothic—generally perceived to be a fairly clear genre—that category, as we have seen, demands careful interpretation. When we come to the attempt to classify the work of a writer from outside the specific historical and cultural context that gave rise to the definition in the first place, we might expect an even more cautious assessment. Again, I would like to stress that this does not mean any such attempt is doomed to failure: the definition of a genre is *not* always and forever limited to a predetermined set of conditions. If that were true, the English definition itself would have a single agreed-upon meaning, and it does not. Instead, the task is to take proper note of the resistance generated when the attempt is made—to resist the temptation, as readers and perhaps even as translators, to accept such classification too easily. To illustrate with reference to Japanese literature, for example, one critic has argued strongly that Western readers ought not to accept “I-novel” as a translation for *shi-shōsetsu*, since the two cultures define “I” in fundamentally different ways.¹⁰ His argument is that in the Japanese language the speaker chooses a term for him- or herself based on a shifting web of personal relationships, so that the Japanese “I” can be said to be contingent upon external circumstances whereas the unchanging English “I” presupposes a permanent, transcendental subject. He therefore prefers to use the Japanese term *shi-shōsetsu* to discuss his subject matter. It is a point well taken, although recent theory in the West has it that when you look into the matter, the English “I” is itself contingent: to suppose that it is not is merely due to an unreflecting acceptance of the dominant ideology of the time.¹¹ Introducing a qualification in this way, of course, is simply another way of saying that resistance builds on resistance. The process of creating resistance is continuous, not static: over time conditions change, definitions change, one’s level of awareness changes. Elucidating the nature of those changes both demand a significant intellectual effort and is the outcome of that same effort.

Resistance of the type I have been discussing, then, is produced by observing and analyzing the complex fit between particular works, the formal and thematic features of a specific genre, and broad questions of culture, history, and language itself. And that brings me to my final topic, a collection of stories by Izumi Kyōka that has been published under the title *Japanese Gothic Stories* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996), as translated by Charles Shirō Inouye. To tell the truth, I had originally planned to base this paper on a detailed comparison of these translations with the original Japanese. But the more I considered doing that, the more I found myself compelled first to address the theoretical issues involved and the more abstract my approach became. I therefore do not want to give

the impression that the translations in this collection are necessarily poor in themselves, or that the translator has not attempted to place them in a context that generates its own kind of cultural resistance. In fact, the translator makes what I consider a good case for considering the visual aspects of Kyōka's style as a uniquely personal, Japanese and premodern (if not antimodern) romantic mode of expression. But I think it *can* be argued that the collection fails to create sufficient resistance in the very area to which its title lays claim: the genre of Gothic fiction. It fails to do so precisely because the definition of the Gothic is taken largely for granted, allowing us to assume far too much about it and, in an ironical reversal of the translator's intentions, encouraging us to accept Kyōka too uncritically as a Gothic writer. It is a difficult area about which I cannot say I have drawn any final conclusions, but here let me focus on one point in particular.

Although the translator shows himself to be sensitive to what might be called Gothic tendencies, especially when it comes to discussing the central role of fear, it comes as something of a surprise to find that the only Gothic writer to whom Kyōka is compared is Poe. This seems to be primarily because of the translator's interest in symbolism as a mode of literary expression, and pertinent comments are made in that context. But it will be clear from the brief outline of literary history I have provided that the work of Poe by no means coincides with the definition of the genre as a whole or even that it defines the essence of that genre. Poe's first collection of stories was published in 1833, nearly seventy years after the Gothic emerged in England, which places him not only after the Later Gothic period but even after the subsequent fashion for historical fiction as represented by Sir Walter Scott, who died in 1832. What has happened to all this literary history? It may be possible to begin a discussion of the Gothic with Poe, but I hardly think it is possible to end it with him. In historical terms, Poe must ultimately be viewed against a background of British and American cultural and literary interactions; his work may perhaps best be characterized as a refraction of British Gothic—a method of dealing with the suffocating weight of the European cultural tradition.¹² Nor was Poe the only American Gothic writer engaged in such a struggle: Charles Brockden Brown (1771-1810) and Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-64) make equally valid claims upon our attention. And once these other writers are brought into the critical purview, we notice, for instance, that the comparison of Kyōka to Poe takes into account only short fictional forms and, moreover, only those short forms that place emphasis on abnormal psychological states, neither of which can be said to constitute the defining characteristics of Kyōka's work as a whole. We also notice the existence of important differences in thematic treatment among the American Gothic writers themselves, with Brown concerned more directly with the conflict between superstition and rational inquiry, Hawthorne interested in the influence of guilt and the burden of the past, and Poe committed to the exploration of repressed desire.

I believe that these differences even within the tradition of the American Gothic can and should be applied to any attempt to categorize Kyōka as a Gothic writer. To return to Steiner's argument about resistance, it is precisely because we can bring these differences to bear on the interpretive process that true resistance—including the potential to understand the Other—comes into play. And it is because such resistance occurs that doubts begin to arise about whether the four stories included in *Japanese Gothic Stories* are really Gothic stories or, if they are, what *kind* of Gothic stories they may be said to be. My own strongest doubts, for example, center on the inclusion of "The Surgery Room" (*Gekashitsu*, 1895), which, while it does present an extreme situation centered on an attractive woman, does not take place at night, contains no trace of the supernatural, and is quite heavy-handed in fulfilling its function as subversive social criticism. Inouye includes it as an early example of Kyōka's construction of an "aesthetic mythology," an argument which I have no special difficulty accepting. But this argument could also be supplemented by reference to the

(undeveloped) motif of guilt as suggested by the woman's status as the wife of another man, and by a discussion of why a story with so few of the standard Gothic devices ought to be regarded as Gothic rather than simply Romantic. Other tantalizing questions present themselves with respect to the other stories. To what extent can the priest of "The Holy Man of Mount Kōya" (*Kōya Hijiri*, 1900) be considered a variation on the hypocritical monks peopling so much English Gothic fiction? Does the double the main character sees in "One Day in Spring" (*Shunchū* and *Shunchū Gokoku*, 1906) reward close comparison with the double in James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) or in Poe's "William Wilson" (which Inouye does mention, but only in passing)? Can the sacrifice (both material and psychological) made by the woman for the man in the story "Osen and Sōkichi" (*Baishoku Kamonamban*, 1920) be taken as a comment on a certain type of obsessive love explicitly rejected by the major writer of Classic Gothic, Ann Radcliffe?

Or, to take the collection as a whole, might not resistance be more effectively generated by a different selection of stories altogether, one designed specifically to appeal to Western prejudices regarding the Gothic in order to subvert them? Such a collection might include an early story like "The Transformed Bird" (*Kechō*, 1897), which combines hallucinatory fantasy with a trace of incestuous guilt, but which lacks the presence of a father figure. It might continue with a more fully realized story like the "The Order Book" (*Chūmonchō*, 1901), which treats the passing down of guilt from generation to generation—a common Gothic theme—in the specific cultural context of the Yoshiwara pleasure quarter. Then it might move on to a different kind of double story such as "The Song of the Troubadour" (*Uta Andon*, 1910), which is an astonishingly effective joining of the stock figures of the double and the outcast with themes of personal guilt, the artistic impulse, incest, and romantic love. And why not include an outright ghost story like "The Ghost with Hidden Eyebrows" (*Mayukakushi no Rei*, 1924), where the conflict between the rational and irrational is reflected in the narrative structure of the story itself. Or better yet, and this also fits in with Steiner's argument, why not simply produce a larger collection of translated stories devoted to an author whose fiction alone fills more than twenty-five volumes and whose reception will inevitably be distorted by the selection of any four individual tales?

Without venturing to offer any final answers, I believe that doubts and suggestions such as these may begin to suggest the nature and importance of resistance. Resistance is a function of interpretation, and more resistance signals more thought. And that, essentially, is my point: I am making an argument for resistance as a measure of interpretive richness, and if commenting on the publication of a collection of stories by a writer who is considered outside the central tradition even in his own culture can help generate a similar form of resistance in the reader as well, this paper will have achieved its purpose.

Notes

¹ This is a written version of a paper read at the Annual JASEC Conference held on October 10, 1997 at Waseda University. A number of minor revisions have been incorporated.

² A good general introduction is Edwin Gentzler, *Contemporary Translation Theories* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993). Gentzler mentions the year translation studies was granted academic citizenship on his first page. Also useful, although rather polemical in tone, is Susan Bassnet-McGuire, *Translation Studies* (London and New York: Methuen, 1980). The most scholarly study of the history of translation up to the end of the eighteenth century is Frederick M. Renner, *Interpretatio: Language and Translation from Cicero to Tytler* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, Georgia: Rodopi, 1989). A number of primary texts in English, all except one taken from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, may be found in Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet, eds., *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

³ Major detractors of poststructuralist theory include M. H. Abrams, René Wellek, and Harold Bloom.

⁴ The substance of Steiner's argument is contained in the fourth chapter of *After Babel*, "The Claims of Theory."

⁵ Nineteenth-century German theorists who contributed to this shift include Friedrich Schleiermacher, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Wilhelm von Humboldt. Pertinent selections from these writers are contained in Schulte and Biguenet.

⁶ See Steiner, pp. 375-379, for his evaluation of Pound's translations from the Chinese.

⁷ Todorov, p. 21.

⁸ See Mark Jewel, "Night and Day in *Kōya Hijiri*" (*The Journal of Human and Cultural Sciences* [Musashi University], vol. 18(2), pp.39-59, 1987).

⁹ A brief and stimulating (if somewhat demanding) introduction to the genre is Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996). The most detailed survey is David Punter, *The Literature of Terror*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London and New York: Longman, 1996). My own divisions represent a considerably simplified summary of the information contained in these two works.

¹⁰ Edward Fowler, *The Rhetoric of Confession: Shishōsetsu in Early Twentieth-Century Japanese Fiction* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988).

¹¹ For a classic exploration of the contingency of the reading subject, see Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

¹² This is the position of Punter, who, without limiting Poe's significance to the Gothic, very neatly summarizes his place within that tradition. See *The Literature of Terror*, vol. 1, chap. 7, "Early American Gothic."