

Literary Sways

FROM EAST TO WEST AND BACK AGAIN: TRANSCULTURAL INFLUENCE AMONGST LITERARY CLASSICS

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Abstract

Since the dawn of man, storytelling has been a mechanism of cultural and intellectual transmission from one generation to the next. At the very beginning, storytelling was solely an oral practice to entertain, to pass time, and to hand down tribal traditions meant to enhance group identity. Later, with the revolutionary creation of writing systems and thus, with the development of the art of translation, it became the main means to spread knowledge between very distant geographical areas.

*Cultures, peoples and civilizations have influenced each other through the ages not only via cultural and religious practices but also via literature, be it in the shape of poetry, plays or fiction. We shall investigate these influences by focusing on two literary fluxes: on the one hand, the one linking the Islamic Golden Age with the Modern European narrative via the classical compendium of tales under the well-known name of *The Arabian Nights*; on the other hand, the one linking the Modern European narrative of Nikolai Gogol and Jane Austen with the Modern Far East narrative of the Chinese and Japanese authors Lu Xun and Natsume Soseki, respectively, who were heavily influenced by literary techniques imported from the West, namely *skaz*, free indirect style and interior monologue.*

Thus, we shall analyze the current that flows from East to West in terms of objective narrative structure and subjective perception of exoticism, whereas the opposite current that flows from West to East will be seen through the prism of rhetorical devices and literary techniques used by the abovementioned Asian writers to push their national literature into the 20th century.

Keywords: *Jane Austen, Nikolai Gogol, Nikolai Leskov, Natsume Soseki, Lu Xun.*

Of the many ways of handing down the cumulative knowledge that allows us to move forward as cultures and civilizations, one not insignificant manner is the literary tradition in its broadest sense, encompassing all possible forms, from epic poetry to memoirs and epistolary fiction. Thanks to the development of the art of translation, literature pervades geography, ages and mind-sets, allowing the transmission of narratives and the blossom of new forms of expression which crystallize, firstly, in avant-garde movements, and secondly,

in stable traditions, to be fully absorbed after the first impact under the shape of novelty. We shall see here how very specific literary styles and themes flowed from one cultural tradition to another, even from one civilization to another, leading to the creation of Modern and Contemporary fiction as we know it on a global scale today. Our voyage will take us from Ancient India to Modern China and Japan following two fluxes. First, we shall see the influence of Eastern literature in European literature via the classic text *The Arabian Nights*; then, we shall go in the opposite direction by travelling from Europe to the Chinese and Japanese Far East.

We shall also investigate how these two fluxes of creativity hold distinct particularities. Whilst the first one flowing from East to West is based on an objective narrative structure – namely the frame story – and a subjective perception of exoticism, the second one flowing from West to East is based on rhetorical devices and literary techniques. Or in other words: the first one focuses on the big picture whereas the second one delves into the details. The former follows an iterative structure wrapping stories in settings that happen to be – it could be otherwise – thoroughly subjective for cultural reasons. The latter resorts to concrete and objective literary techniques related to how consciousness is portrayed in modern fiction.

Before proceeding any further, it must be clarified that this article¹ does not intend to present an alternative literary canon to those already existing, be they Charles Van Doren's *The Joy of Reading* or Harold Bloom's more academic masterpiece, *The Western Canon*. The present intention is to provide the reader with an insight of the status of mutual dependence between culturally distant literary worlds that become connected through the art of translation.

Even accepting the old saying *Omnia exeunt in mysterium* (“All things fade into mystery”), we have to begin the analysis somewhere. The most suitable point is the Ancient Indian classic titled *The Panchatantra*, which means “Five Treatises.” This book, redacted in Sanskrit by someone purportedly named Vishnu Sharma and probably around the 3rd century BC, is a morally and politically educational collection of old Hindu animal fables aimed at preparing young princes for the requirements of adult life and governing positions. It displays a structure made up of frame stories – stories within stories. For at least two thousand years, it has been one of the historical Indian bestsellers, not only in local Indian translations but also abroad in translations to other languages. Some of the fables written by the Greek author Aesop (6th century BC) resemble those from *The Panchatantra*. The fables probably spread orally from India or else they constituted a common heritage as old as storytelling itself.

In those times, we also find the innovative structure of frame stories in Lucius Apuleius' novel *Metamorphoses*, also known as *The Golden Ass*. Apuleius lived in the 2nd century CE and his work excels as a Roman masterpiece in the Latin language, displaying a frame story structure that was already a well-known narrative method during the imperial epoch. This framework was likely imported from India. To understand the relationship between the Romans and the East (and by “East” we mean the geographical axis comprising Greece, Persia and India), we must bear in mind that during the emergence of Latin as an intellectual tool of the Roman power, first in a republican form and later in an imperial form,

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there were absolutely nothing but “barbarians” to West of Rome. Eastern knowledge and culture had been filtered into Rome through Greece, and Greek was the fashionable language of the wealthy who could afford a Greek private tutor, much as would happen centuries later in the Russian Empire with the French language as a symbol of cultural refinement, diaphanously exemplified by Tolstoy in *War and Peace*, a classical masterpiece with a certain amount of dialogue directly redacted in French for the sake of authenticity and verisimilitude.²

The epitomes of the frame story structure are two colossal compendia of tales: Somadeva’s *Kathasaritasagara*, also known as *Ocean of Streams of Stories*, which was put together in Sanskrit around the year 1070 CE, and *The Arabian Nights: Tales of 1001 Nights*, written by several literati in multiple styles across the entire Islamic Golden Age (8th-13th centuries). The Indian influence on Middle Eastern Arabic storytelling through Persia is evident, not only in the usage of the frame story structure but also regarding the narratives. Moreover, apart from the influence in the field of fiction, the Indian influence in scientific fields has been thoroughly documented through the analysis of the cultural and linguistic policies of the Abbasid Caliphate during the Early Islamic Golden Age, with Baghdad as the brand new world capital of the art of translation,

Indian scientific material in astronomy, astrology, mathematics, and medicine passed into Arabic mainly through Persian (Pahlavi) intermediaries during the Abbasid period, and as such it is to be seen in the context of the translation movement. Direct translations from Sanskrit appear not to have been made or, if they have, to have been limited mainly to astronomical texts, some of which, according to Pingree, were translated in Sind and Afghanistan in pre-Abbasid times.³

The Arabian Nights, as collection of tales, is a titanic work that stands out as one of the most sublime examples of creativity regarding fiction. Its impact on the Western literary canon was huge. It mesmerized European writers for several reasons, amongst them: the manner of linking tales to develop a complex web, the fantastic situations with unfathomable characters that pushed imagination to the extreme and the scenes of erotic and alcoholic debauchery, all wrapped up in a continuous sense of old Oriental exoticism that works as a literary drug for the Occidental mind.

Apparently, some of the tales from *The Arabian Nights* began leaving its imprint in Europe as early as the 14th century, when European translators used to resort to the Arabic language for intellectual purposes. Nonetheless, even if it probably pervaded Italian literature, influencing Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375) and his *Decameron* –which follows a frame story structure that was very fashionable in Europe during those times – the main structural inspiration for Boccaccio regarding embedded stories seems to have been *The Panchatantra* itself,

If, as seems likely, Boccaccio knew the *Panchatantra*, it was probably in the considerably modified Latin version of the work, *Liber Kelilæ et Dimnæ*, otherwise known as the *Directorium Humanæ vitæ*, which John of Capua produced around 1270. John’s version was based, by way of a

² As it is clear in Richard Pevear’s and Larissa Volokhonsky’s English rendition (London: Vintage, 2009), which keeps the French text in the main body of the narrative.

³ Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture* (Oxon: Routledge, 1999), pp. 24-25.

Hebrew translation, upon the eight-century Arabic version of the text, *Kalilah wa Dimnah*, which in turn was based upon a sixth-century Pahlavi, or Old Persian, translation from the original Sanskrit. The names Kalilah and Dimnah were those of two jackals in the first of the *Panchatantra*'s five books, which, designed originally as a Mirror for Princes, or *Fürstenspiegel*, uses the Aesopian device of narrating animal fables in order to impart a moral—in this case, that guile and cunning are essential in the management of human affairs. In view of the prominence accorded to the role of intelligence in the *Decameron*, it could be argued that the affinity between Boccaccio's collection of tales and these oriental fables is not only structural but also thematic.⁴

A few years later, the Londoner Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400), influenced by the notion of frame story, composed *The Canterbury Tales*, probably after reading Boccaccio's work during his stay in Italy.

When the orientalist Antoine Galland's (1646-1715) first systematic edition and translation of the *Nights* into French opened new literary ways in Europe, the count Jan Potocki (1761-1815) wrote his masterpiece *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa*. Potocki, who had read Galland's translation, did not conform to setting his narratives in the shape of frame stories. He also wished to renew the sense of exoticism by transferring it to 18th century Spain, which he, as a Polish aristocrat writing his novel in French, deemed the quintessential setting available in Europe for that purpose.

Some decades after Potocki's death, Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894) would remain so overwhelmed by the creative explosion that was *The Arabian Nights* that he would write the *New Arabian Nights*, a fascinating novel, the title of which clearly intimates the heavy influence of the Arabic collection upon his spirits. In turn, the Welsh novelist Arthur Machen (1863-1947), impressed by Stevenson's *New Arabian Nights*, wrote his supernatural classic *The Three Impostors*, imitating the narrative model of the Scottish author.

The abovementioned three literary giants employed their individual approaches to reshape exoticism to fit a literary taste more suitable to the prevailing fashion of the time. If Potocki chose the *mysterious* Spain for his purposes, Stevenson chose to introduce an Indian Rajah and a Bohemian Prince in his narratives, tokens of the British imperial policy in the *exotic* Asia and of the newly Austro-Hungarian power in Central Europe (here it must be recalled that "Bohemian" in English is an adjective that strongly connotes not only a person from Bohemia but also a "free spirit" and a "gypsy"). Lastly, Machen did what he always does: he narratively reintroduced the old Celtic and pre-Christian worlds, seasoned with his personal Decadentist style firmly grounded in the Aesthetic movement to which he belonged together with his friend Oscar Wilde, the true star and enfant terrible of those times.

Hence, we can summarize the influence of the Eastern classics upon European writers in two main points: first, the adoption of the frame story as a narrative structure that can be mechanically imitated; second, the reproduction of a subjective sense of exoticism meant to be exotic for Western readers like themselves.

Let us delve now into the opposite current, the one flowing from West to East. A suitable place to begin is with the novels of Jane Austen (1775-1817), who is credited with being the first author to consistently use free indirect style, also called free indirect speech or free indirect discourse,

⁴ G. H. McWilliam, introduction to *The Decameron* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), p. LIX.

The other method, called free indirect style, goes back at least as far as Jane Austen, but was employed with ever-increasing scope and virtuosity by modern novelists like Woolf.⁵

A few decades after Austen's literary bloom, Nikolai Gogol (1809-1852) would develop a technique named *skaz*, a word derived from the Russian verb *skazat*, which means "to tell." As we shall see, these two narrative devices would have a tremendous literary impact both in Eastern and Western literature.

On the one hand, free indirect style is one of the staple methods to convey a sense of consciousness and individuality to a story. It is a standard narration in third person that suddenly displays elements typically belonging to a narration in first person. The contrast breaks the boundaries between the reader and the minds and the feeling of the characters. One example from Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is,

Elizabeth had frequently united with Jane in an endeavour to check the imprudence of Catherine and Lydia; but while they were supported by their mother's indulgence, what chance could there be of improvement?⁶

The question closing the citation introduces the reader to Elizabeth's innermost thoughts without changing the fact that the narration is told in third person.

On the other hand, *skaz* is a colloquial narration in first or third person. It has to be noted that the characteristics of the speech differ depending on the grammatical person to which the writer resorts. Gogol himself preferred the former, but his *skaz* heir in the Russian letters, Nikolai Leskov (1831-1895), preferred the latter, given his clear preference for a narrative tone focused on echoing the old Russian tradition of oral folk tales. According to Walter Benjamin,

Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn. And among those who have written down the tales, it is the great ones whose written version differs least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers.⁷

Let's begin this part of the analysis by clarifying that, generally speaking, *skaz* speech relies on a colloquial style to convey a sense of freshness and improvisation. This style can be more or less intense, according to the intention of the author, and it is manifestly more colloquial in the first person, given the immediacy transmitted via the direct impression of consciousness. As an example, we have a few lines from the commencement of Gogol's masterpiece *The Overcoat*,

In the department of... but it would be better not to say in which department. There is nothing more irascible than all these departments, regiments, offices—in short, all the officialdom. Nowadays every private individual considers the whole of society insulted in his person. They say

⁵ David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (London: Vintage, 2011), p. 43.

⁶ Jane Austen, *The Complete Novels* (London: Penguin Classics, 2006), p. 326.

⁷ Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," *Illuminations*, trans. H. Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), p. 84.

a petition came quite recently from some police chief, I don't remember of what town, in which he states clearly that the government's decrees are perishing and his own sacred name is decidedly being taken in vain.⁸

It is highly remarkable the way Gogol achieves the literary reproduction of a rushed speech that we could be casually overhearing on a train from the lips of an utterly unknown individual. It is a crystal-clear example of how skaz can work.

Regarding Leskov, the usage of skaz is not linked to the rhythm via first person speech as in Gogol, but to the recreation of a fairy tale style with a certain magical air via third person speech. The first lines of his narration *Lefty* illustrate this,

When the emperor Alexander Pavlovich finished up the Congress of Vienna, he wanted to travel through Europe and have a look at the wonders in the various states. He travelled around all the countries, and everywhere, owing to his amiability, he always had the most interecine conversations with all sorts of people, and they astonished him with something and wanted to incline him to their side, but with him was the Don Cossack Platov, who did not like such inclinations and, longing for his own backyard, kept luring the sovereign homewards.⁹

Hence, it is evident that skaz as a style allows considerable variation in the treatment of literary motifs and plots.

That said, Gogol's tale *Diary of a Madman* had a tremendous influence on the renewal of Chinese literature at the commencement of the 20th century, as we shall soon see. The following extract is another example of skaz in first person,

These letters will reveal everything to me. Dogs are smart folk, they know all the political relations, and so it is all sure to be there: the picture of the man and all his doings. There'll also be something about her who... never mind, silence! Toward evening I came home. Lay in bed most of the time.¹⁰

In this paragraph, we find two pieces of evidence of the use of skaz. The first is the usage of the colloquialisms "there'll" for "there will" and "lay" for "I lay." The second is the self-exhortation "silence!" We could certainly argue that the bibliography used is not the original Russian text but an English translation, and thus the evidence cited in the previous paragraph would not be enough because we have not seen how Gogol used skaz in Russian. To that objection, we can reply that we have to rely on the translation skills of Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, as we would have to with any other reputed translators when dealing with diverse languages.

Before moving from Europe to the Far East, we shall round up the exposition by mentioning two masterpieces of Western literature composed in skaz. Both of them happen to be American classics that have exerted an enormous influence on subsequent literature, within

⁸ Nikolai Gogol, *The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol*, trans. R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 394.

⁹ Nikolai Leskov, *The Enchanted Wanderer and Other Stories*, trans. R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky (London: Vintage, 2014), p. 348.

¹⁰ Gogol, *The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol*, p. 286.

and without the United States. The novels in question are *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, by Mark Twain (1835-1910), and *The Catcher in the Rye*, by J. D. Salinger (1919-2010).

Free indirect style and skaz became crucial literary techniques in the renovation of Japanese and Chinese literature during the early 20th century, as we shall see focusing on the Japanese novelist Natsume Soseki (1867-1916) and the Chinese short story writer Lu Xun (1881-1936).

Soseki is the epitome of the Japanese literary renewal during the Meiji Era (1868-1912), a period of openness and approach to the West, intending to break the traditional isolationism of Japan. He lived in the United Kingdom for a couple of years and was heavily influenced by the works of Laurence Sterne, Jonathan Swift and Jane Austen. After his return to Japan, he began a literary career that would change the history of Japanese literature forever. To a certain extent, he may be credited as the progenitor of the Modernist movement not only in Japan specifically but also in the Far East generally. While, chronologically speaking, literary Modernism definitely crystallized in the West right after his death, the way he understood literature, and moreover, the way he understood the social function of his new expressivity, is a playbook example of a programmatic Modernism aimed at transcending itself.

Being an individualist, Soseki focused his work on depicting individuality and subjectivity. To fulfil such purposes, free indirect style and skaz are extremely useful techniques. The commencement of his novel *Botchan*, composed in skaz, will serve as an example,

From the time I was a boy the reckless streak that runs in my family has brought me nothing but trouble. Once when I was in elementary school I jumped out of one of the second-storey windows and I couldn't walk for a week. Some people might wonder why I'd try such a daredevil stunt.¹¹

Two pieces of evidence of skaz can be identified, signaling the style employed in the composition. The first is the lack of commas in places where we would expect to find them in a more formal writing style: after “boy,” after “once” and after “school.” The second is the colloquialism “I'd” instead of “I would.”

Regarding free indirect style, we can resort to his novel *Sanshiro*,

He took two, three bulging mouthfuls of rice, and still it seemed she had not come back to her seat. Could she be standing in the aisle? He glanced up and there she was, facing him.¹²

As in the previous example taken from Austen, the question we see in *Sanshiro*'s lines reflects the technique of free indirect style.

Regarding the Chinese author Lu Xun, who was in favor of diminishing the power of traditional Confucianism in Chinese cultural life, his knowledge of the Russian language allowed him to read Gogol, whose tale *Diary of a Madman* influenced him to the point of making him believe that it would be a good idea to write a tale with the same title and a

¹¹ Soseki Natsume, *Botchan*, trans. J. Cohn (London: Penguin Classics, 2013), p. 3.

¹² Soseki Natsume, *Sanshiro*, trans. J. Rubin (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), p. 5.

similar plot. Lu Xun resorted to a less dynamic form of skaz, still praiseworthy though, as we can read in this token,

If only they could leave it all behind them, how easy, how comfortable their lives would become. Such a tiny thing. But they are all part of it – fathers, sons, brothers, husbands, wives, friends, teachers, pupils, enemies, perfect strangers, pulling each other back.¹³

The interval beginning with “fathers” and ending with “strangers” is an example of synathroism, a rhetorical device which consists of placing semantically equivalent terms in succession, so as to convey a rhythmical sense typically belonging to oral speech.

As far as the representation of consciousness is concerned, Lu Xun also resorts to free indirect style, but not only to that. The opening of the tale *A Happy Family* reads,

‘...whatever he writes – or chooses not to write – is an expression of the self; a shaft of sunlight blazing out from an infinite light source, not the occasional spark struck from a flint. This – only this – is the true art, written by the true artist... while I... What does it all mean?’

He interrupted his stream of consciousness by leaping out of bed. He knew what he had to do: sell some articles to sustain life. *Happiness Monthly* was his organ of choice – because they paid well. But he needed a big idea to get them interested. The right kind of big idea... What are the youth of today thinking about?¹⁴

In the first line of the second paragraph, we find the expression “stream of consciousness” characterizing the first paragraph. For that to be truly accurate, the first paragraph should lack quotation marks. But in any case, it is a good attempt to perform the brilliant trick of doing what you say and saying what you do without breaking the textual continuum.

Regarding the second paragraph, it closes with a question in free indirect style. Questions are always a good way to embed free indirect style into a story, as we have seen in the example taken from Jane Austen.

As far as we are concerned in this paper, we have already summarised the influence of Eastern narrative styles and themes on Western literature. Thus, we can summarise now the influence of Western classics upon modern Far Eastern writers as the borrowing of rhetorical devices and literary techniques from the West by Chinese and Japanese avant-garde authors to express subjectivity, in order to overcome what they perceived as Asian cultural traditionalism, deeply embedded in fiction. In the particular case of Natsume Soseki, this subjectivity can be somewhat linked to the Modernist movement that swept across Western artistic and cultural circles in the first third of the 20th century. Even if considering the Japanese author the progenitor of Modernism in Japan may be debatable, at least on an explicitly conscious Modernist level, the idea is not entirely dismissible due not only to the Western literary techniques he mastered but also the strong sense of individuality displayed in his novel *Kusamakura*, narrated both in first person and in present tense, thus conveying the immediacy that characterizes consciousness and first-hand experience.

¹³ Lu Xun, *The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China. The Complete Fiction of Lu Xun*, trans. J. Lovell (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), p. 28.

¹⁴ Lu Xun, *The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China. The Complete Fiction of Lu Xun*, p. 188.

Hence, to complete this exposition, we must not forget that the art of translation is a basic and indispensable tool to wake up local literary traditions and force them to cross frontiers into other cultures and civilizations, eventually enriching foreign literatures and allowing them to push far beyond in the realm of creativity and self-recreation. Literature is, after all, a manner to comprehend ourselves.