Chapter Twenty-Five

An Early Reading of "The Black Cat" in Japanese

J. Scott Miller

The works of Edgar Allan Poe seemed primed for a welcoming reception in Japan from even before their first translation into Japanese. Poe’s influence on European writers during the mid-nineteenth century involved two nascent genres—science fiction and the detective story—that became prominent in the first Japanese translations of Western literature from the 1860s onward. For over two centuries, beginning in the early 1600s, Japan had severely limited its contact with the outside world, allowing only a small trickle of information to come through the strictly regulated port of Nagasaki, vetted by a handful of carefully trained translators working primarily in Dutch. However, in the mid-nineteenth century as Japan’s ruling shogunate sought to retain its position in the face of threats from the outside, more and more things Western began to seep into the country. By the time Japan opened fully to the outside world in the 1860s and 1870s, some Japanese officials—and even private scholars financed by competing warlords—were already becoming familiar with English, French, German, and Russian. Medical texts, geography primers, and technical treatises were their primary targets for translation, but works of philosophy and history, such as John Stuart Mill’s On Liberty, also caught the attention of scholars and budding publishers who saw, in the general Japanese modernization efforts that came on the heels of opening to the West, an opportunity to prosper in a market composed of newly literate masses with a curiosity for things foreign.¹

The first literary translations began appearing in the 1870s and included Aesop’s Fables, works by Shakespeare, and Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe.² Owing to the large cultural divide between the West and Japan at the time, these first translations were often more adaptation than correspondent translation, both because Japan’s tradition of literary importation had, up to that time, included a great deal of adaptive flexibility in regards to works coming
from Chinese, and because readers were completely unfamiliar with the body of Western background knowledge necessary to make sense of the source texts. By the time Poe’s first stories appeared in 1887, Japanese readers were growing more familiar with Western culture, and translations were growing more and more correspondent. Nevertheless, when “The Black Cat” and “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” were serialized (as a pair) in a popular Japanese newspaper, they were published in the language of transcribed adaptations that were being performed by professional storytellers upon the Tokyo stages. This is not surprising when one considers that oral storytelling was a vibrant performance genre at the time and had been the vector for several Victorian novels and other Western tales redone into Japanese. What is interesting, however, is that the very use of colloquial language, the narrative style of the storytelling stage, stood in such great contrast to contemporary Japanese literary discourse. During the 1880s, written Japanese literature partook heavily of classical grammar and syntax, still in the beginning stages of what would prove to be a rapid shift toward using vernacular style in narrative.

This context gave “The Black Cat” a double dose of novelty: it was both a foreign psychological horror story as well as an example of printed Japanese colloquial narrative. The immediacy and novelty of the colloquial style, no doubt, added to the overall impact of the story itself, which captured the popular and intellectual imagination to such a degree that, over the next four decades, “The Black Cat” was redone into Japanese at least six times. The tale’s popularity in Japan continued throughout the twentieth century, and “The Black Cat” had at least a dozen new Japanese incarnations after 1911. However, examining the translations yields several interesting observations that shed light upon the challenges of translating Poe across such a broad cultural span.

In this essay, I will compare early Japanese translations of “The Black Cat” by Aebi Kōson (1887), Uchida Roan (1893), Honma Hisashirō (1907), and Hiratsuka Raichō (1911) to demonstrate the accommodations and adaptations these translators performed for their readers who did not share Poe’s Western cultural horizon. In the process, I will show both how complex and broad the translation spectrum can be for literary works carried across widely diverging cultural and linguistic traditions. I will examine the way the tale took on something of a new identity, one that stems, in part, from unspoken cultural assumptions in the source text that required articulation in translation, as I explore the possible reasons for the tale’s popularity in Japan.

It is essential to consider several points while offering a comparative reading of these translations. First, these translators have varying styles. They are not machines, and so, just as there may be ten people who see the same spectrum of light wave frequency as ten different colors, style variations may
at times reflect the idiosyncrasies of the translators rather than cultural adaptations. For example, as noted above, the choice to use colloquial rather than literary narrative is a translator’s stylistic choice rather than one necessitated by fidelity to the source text.

Second, these translators saw the act of translation from two perspectives: adaptation and correspondence, neither of which was necessarily seen as the more correct approach. The history of Japanese literary borrowing is replete with examples of revered adaptations [hon’ei] that take great liberties with the source text and differ quite dramatically from rigid, correspondent translations [hon’yaku]. Consequently, components of the original tale may disappear in translation, change dramatically, or even expand.

Third, because of the shift occurring at this time from classical-style language to colloquial narrative [genbun’ichifu], these translators had a wide range of narrative styles to choose from, each of which carried with it certain expectations and conventional contexts. We have already seen that there were classical/rhetorical and colloquial styles, but to this list may be added, in the 1880s, documentary style [kanbun], and a combination of rhetorical and colloquial styles [gazoku setchi buntai].

My approach will be to highlight innovations, similarities, and significant differences between early translations of “The Black Cat.” In the process, I will touch upon several aspects of accommodation that such a comparison reveals and conclude by noting how each translator, in his or her own unique way, dealt with some key elements of the source text. In doing so, I will show that in an English-to-Japanese translational flow, certain identifiable cultural constructs or elements present obstacles in translation, responses to which reveal assumptions about both the target audience’s ability to receive the work in translation and the translator’s presumptions and perspectives regarding the translation process. My ultimate goal is to add some geographical texture to the current rough-sketched map charting the terrain between adaptation and correspondent translation.

Although the exact details of how “The Black Cat” made its way to Japan are still unclear, it was not unusual in the 1870s and 1880s for works of literary interest in Europe and America to capture the attention of Japanese writers and intellectuals. With French translations of Poe having such a profound impact on contemporary writers, it is not surprising to find Poe appearing in Japanese translation by 1887. Aeba Koson, a writer and theatre critic who did not speak English fluently, undertook the first translation of “The Black Cat” into Japanese, relying upon a friend’s decipherment of the original. Aeba’s version, “Seiyō kaidan Kuroneko,” was serialized over the course of two days in November 1887 in the Yomiuri Shim bun, one of Japan’s leading newspapers.
Aside from the novelty of Poe's story, the translation was itself unusual at the time for two reasons. First, prior to the mid-1880s, Japanese literature was written primarily in classical rather than vernacular style. Aeba's version of "The Black Cat" stands among the earliest attempts by Japanese writers to craft their narrative in a style that reflected speech rather than written discourse. Second, the translation's colloquial language would have linked the tale with traditional oral narrative [rakugo and kōdan] rather than with belles lettres, the latter being written in a very formal classical language. Three years earlier, in 1884, the famous professional storyteller Sanyūtēi Enchō had pioneered the first successful publication of colloquial prose in his serialized transcription of the ghost story Kaidan Botandōro, "The Ghost Tale of the Peony Lantern."¹⁰

Two aspects of Enchō's story might have influenced Aeba to imitate its colloquial narrative style. The first of these was generic. Both "The Black Cat" and "The Ghost Tale of the Peony Lantern" deal with the supernatural and are constructed in ways that build suspense leading to a dramatic conclusion. Storytellers shifted between a variety of genres, such as war tales, romances, and humorous stories, but the ghost story was one of their dominant forms, and Enchō in particular was renowned for his masterfully spine-tingling performances. Aeba's translation of "The Black Cat," with its storytelling style and ghostly content, signaled to contemporary readers the likely presence of the uncanny [Das Unheimliche] that would have complemented the tone of Poe's tale.

The second aspect of Botandōro that would have recommended itself to Aeba is stylistic. The storyteller's predominantly colloquial language reflected contemporary Japanese as it was spoken, giving it accessibility and a sense of immediacy to a much wider audience than the more formal prose of the day, which required training in both the Japanese and Chinese classics to master. We see this effect in an early passage. Poe's source text, regarding the dubious nature of the protagonist's story, reads "Mad indeed would I be to expect it."¹¹ This line, far from vernacular, is carefully crafted, using inverted, poetic structure. Aeba's colloquial translation, however, reads, "And I'd have to be absolutely crazy to expect others to believe it." [Mata, kono koto wo shinjitte kure to nozumu no wa kyōki no sata da.]¹² Aeba's use of the casual verb phrase nozumu no and the informal, colloquial copula da stand in great contrast to both Poe's style and the way written Japanese had been generally used for centuries.

Newspapers were divided at the time into those published for the elite and those for the masses, the latter using a style similar to that of Enchō's stories. Aeba was a journalist working for the fledgling press, which at the time was less than two decades old, so he would also have seen, in the commercial...
success of Enchō’s vernacular tale (published serially), the wisdom of making his translation equally user-friendly by publishing it in the more popular news media of the day. One of the characteristics of Aeba’s journalistic bent, an overt concern for less-literate readers, shows up in the extra, explanatory passages he adds to “The Black Cat,” such as interpolating an explanation of the importance of the name “Pluto” that is otherwise absent in Poe’s version. Although we know little of the contemporary reception of Sейё кайдан Куроке, its popular newspaper venue, accessible colloquial language, and elements of the macabre guaranteed the translation a wide readership.

Six years following Aeba’s translation, in 1893, Uchida Roan, a writer and translator of Western literature, also set his sights on “The Black Cat.” Uchida’s personal knowledge of English led to a much more correspondent translation than Aeba’s earlier version. Uchida’s version reflected the language of traditional literary narrative, a style that bordered on Sino-Japanese, with classical phrases and endings that are far removed from that of Aeba’s earlier colloquial translation. For example, Uchida’s translation of the same early phrase compared above (Poe: “Mad indeed would I be to expect it”; Aeba: “And I’d have to be absolutely crazy to expect others to believe it”) reads, “I would indeed be insane to expect others to believe it.” [Ta ni kore shin ryō wo motomen suru wa kyō seri to iwanu. 他に此信徳を求めんすると狂せりと云はむ。] Uchida’s word choice and structure, both in this example and throughout the story, are replete with highly wrought, well-balanced rhetorical flourishes that characterize classical Japanese style.

By the mid-1890s, more and more of Poe’s stories were appearing in Japanese translation. Uchida’s version of “The Black Cat,” in a more classical idiom and published by a serious literary translator at a time when contemporary detective stories had begun to appear both in translation and written by Japanese authors such as Kuroiwa Ruikō, signaled that the tale was seen as more than just entertainment for the masses. It also suggested that Poe, in general, was being recognized for both his literary and commercial value.

Just over a decade later, in 1907, after native Japanese experiments in detective fiction had grown even more prominent, Honma Hisashirō translated “The Black Cat” as the first story in an anthology of translations entitled Metcho shin’yaku [New Translations of Famous Writers]. Honma’s translation employs a recent Japanese narrative innovation, the de aru style of verb endings, and represents a third, independent translation style for Poe’s macabre tale. The de aru style, which had occasionally been used prior to the Meiji period, became the standard neutral narrative form around 1900. Works coming into Japanese often came from literary worlds that used the narrative past or other marked, or even exclusive, literary styles to signal narrative discourse, and one of the challenges for contemporary writers in Japan was
to come up with a style that would allow them to negotiate the perilous and rocky crags of the Japanese system of honorifics. As Edward Fowler notes, “The formal de aru style was developed as a compromise in the absence of a truly universal colloquial idiom.”

Homma’s use of this style is apparent from the very first line of his translation, which reads *Watakushi ga ima kore kara kakidasō to suru monogatari wa, ararashii watakushi no shogyō no jihaku de aru* (emphasis added). [私が今これから書き出そうとする物語は、あららしい私の所行の自白である。“The tale which I am about to write is a confession of my violent deeds.”] This new style stands in great contrast to that of Uchida, who conflates the opening sentence with the next using the classical continuative form *nareba* and concludes his first sentence using the classical negative form *zu*. Aebā’s second sentence ends in *da*, the colloquial version of the copula that influenced the eventual adoption of the *de aru* style. The new style employed by Homma was a fortuitous hybrid that allowed for the vernacular familiarity of storyteller’s style to accommodate a higher, narrative-neutral, register. The fact that his translation of “The Black Cat” in 1907 uses this style shows how important a role it played for translators as well.

Four years later, in 1911, poet and author Hiratsuka Raichō, a strong and flamboyant writer who, like Natsume Sōseki, endeared herself so much to her readers that she was referred to by her first rather than her last name, presented her translation of “The Black Cat” to Japanese readers of her pioneering feminist journal *Seitō* [Bluestockings], named in honor of the Bloomsbury group. Raichō’s translation is also in the *de aru* style, demonstrating the degree to which this newly popular style was becoming the standard for modern literary narrative in the twentieth century. Her first paragraph and later word choices suggest the influences of both Uchida and Aebā. For example, her translation of the passage compared above reads as follows: “I would have to be absolutely crazy to expect others to accept something about which I myself am dubious.” [Jibun jishin sae shin’yō no dekinai mono wo hito ni motomeru no wa kyōki no sata de arō. 自分自身を信じた者が信じるのを狂気の沙汰であろう。] She uses an idiom, “would have to be absolutely crazy” [kyōki no sata], that is identical to the one used by Aebā, except for her use of the *de aru*-derived dubitative form *de arō*. Her word choice in the opening line, on the other hand, is essentially a modernization of Uchida’s classical-style language: *Ima, fude wo torō to shite iru no wa motomoto kōtō-fukei na monogatari*. [今、筆を執らうとしているのは最も荒唐不經な物語 “That which I now take up my pen to write is an incredible, unbelievable tale”]. Raichō employs characters and phrases identical to those used by Uchida, and in the same positions, with only the conjugations updated. Apparently by 1911, Uchida’s version may have been
familiar enough to most readers that Raichō either sought to capitalize upon the allusive value of its opening line or felt a need to acknowledge Uchida’s translation as she began her own. In either case, while the earlier translators seem not to have had much influence on one another, Raichō appears to have overtly referenced her predecessors’ translations in the process of creating her own new version.

Although separately each of these translations appears as a rough, albeit impressive, step toward correspondent translation, together they served to anchor “The Black Cat” firmly among the influential early works of modern Japanese literature. This is evident in the number of subsequent retranslations and adaptations that quickly emerged during the following century and continue to appear today in Japan.

Correspondence, however, can be something of a chimera, especially since the Japanese language itself continues to undergo tremendous changes. One sees that, at the beginning, a number of changes were necessary to make the text intelligible to the contemporary Japanese reader. For example, the allusion built into the cat’s name, Pluto, though obvious to American and European readers in Poe’s day and even in our own, required of the first translator, Aeba, an appended explanation within the Japanese text that Pluto was “an inauspicious name, Pluto being the god of the underworld in the religion of the Greek era” [nekō no na wo Purūto to yobishī ga, ima omoeba fushō no na de Purūto wa Girisha jidai no shūkyōchū ni aru jigoku no kami no na de atta monon].

Despite both seventeenth- and nineteenth-century Japanese translations of Aesop’s Fables and a contemporary Japanese experimental novel set in Greece, classical Greek mythology and allusions to it were beyond the pale for most readers of Japanese in the 1880s. The later translators, interestingly, provide no such gloss, perhaps because their translations were aimed at a more elite readership, or because, by the dates of their translations, a majority of now mass-educated readers would have been somewhat familiar with allusions to classical Greek mythology.

As evidence of other cultural accommodations, some of the early Japanese translations downplay several Christian concepts, such as notions of a “Most Merciful and Most Terrible God” and the idea of “perverseness” so central to Poe’s English text. In describing God, Uchida and Raichō use the Shintō term kami, while Homma is more inclusive and uses the phrase shinbutsu kami, referring to both Shintō and Buddhist deities. Aeba, however, avoids categorization and simply has his narrator calling upon ogres [oni 鬼] and devils [akuma 惡魔] instead. Likewise, in dealing with the concept of “the spirit of PERVERSENESS” that Poe highlights in his story, Aeba opts to
transliterate the English word, leaving it as simply \( paabaasunesu \) with the modifying appendage “that vice!” \( \text{[to iu warui mono といえば悪いもの]} \).\(^{25}\) Other early translators describe the motive for the narrator’s crimes using Japanese words that range from a sense of irrationality (Hōmura: \( bōrei no kokoro \) 暴戾の心) to outright wickedness (Raichō: \( ja-aku no kokoro \) 邪悪の心).\(^{26}\)

Some of the accommodations reflect conceptual proximities that lend themselves to greater richness than might have existed in the source text. Some early Japanese translators introduce the very Buddhist notion of karma into their texts. Whereas Poe’s version is concerned with the idea of reality versus fantasy and with the varying reliability of its assumedly mad narrator, the Japanese translations tend to orbit around the notion of causality and fate. An awareness of the Buddhist view of karma, the belief that action initiates a cycle of cause and effect that reverberates across past and future lives, was very much part of the culture of Meiji Japan, and the narrator’s volitional choices throughout “The Black Cat” point, in a Japanese cultural context, toward the links between actions and their subsequent consequences. Whereas Poe’s text can be read as a sketch of the mind of someone who summarizes his loss of morality in the face of alcoholism and madness because of PERVERSENESS, in Japanese translation that perverseness, rather than being an inversion of rational motivation, becomes instead inga [因果, “karma”], the causal outcome of bad action—an accretion of karmic retribution that leads, naturally and inescapably, to the fatal conclusion.

And what a conclusion Poe’s tale gives its readers in the Japanese cultural context. The narrator’s overconfident tap on the wall, the inhuman scream, the rush to tear the wall apart, and the gruesome visage of the menacing cat perched on top of the wife’s decomposing corpse is chilling enough in Poe’s nineteenth-century U.S. context. However, by linking the narrator’s fate to karma, the cat takes on elements of karmic retribution that add another layer of terror to the story. Although in today’s Japan the term for black cat, karoneko, elicits the name of a huge moving and transport company, which sports a simple logo of a mother black cat carrying its black kitten gently by the nape of its neck (as they implicitly promise to move their clients’ goods), black cats have not always been considered cute in Japan. Cats have played interesting roles in Japanese folklore, including the image of the changeling cat, bakkeneko, which has been a particularly dreadful specter from the Japanese Middle Ages onward. According to some threads of Japanese folklore, if a woman is murdered and a cat licks her blood, the cat will assume the victim’s form and take revenge on the killer.\(^{27}\)

The earliest translators of this story would likely have recognized the subtext of vengeful cat spirits in Poe’s tale, especially once Pluto is dead and...
his “reincarnation” appears on the scene since karmic bonds often manifest themselves across the span of two lifetimes. Poe’s original narrative sequence itself reads much like a Buddhist parable, in that each bad deed seems to cause an evil effect: killing Pluto leads to the fire, for example. Uchida’s translation overtly links the tale to karmic retribution in his use of the term “karmic bonds” [inga no kankei 因果の関係]. His use of this term, as well as his classical style, with its scholarly Chinese phrases and classical rhetoric, links organically with Confucianism and Buddhism in a way that would give his translation a sermon-like tone that would underscore traditional notions of sin and karma. Although Raichō does not use the term for karma, her phrase “cause and effect” [gen’in-kekka 原因結果] carries with it the notion of karmic retribution. Moreover, Raichō has built into her translation an allusion that hints at the vengeful cat motif. In the penultimate paragraph Poe’s narrator exclaims, “But may God shield and deliver me from the fangs of the Arch-Fiend!” Raichō’s translation, however, reads “Oh, God, shield and deliver me from the Devil’s paws!” [Kami yo, akuma no tsune yori wogami wo sukui, moroasetanae! 神よ、悪魔の爪より我身を救ひ、守らせ給へ！] The use of the term “claws” instead of “fangs” is a subtle difference, but in keeping with the notion of bakeneko cat demons, this word choice shifts the identity of the devil away from the anthropomorphic and toward the feline.

It is, however, in the very first Japanese translation of “The Black Cat” that karmic retribution is most overtly identified. Aeba achieves this most effectively in the final line of his translation. Poe’s tale ends with the phrase “I had walled the monster up within the tomb!” Aeba, underscoring the karmic nature of the cat’s revenge, goes further, adding, “My transgression, my inner demon! In the end, I was arrested, tomorrow I die, and that is why I am here tonight!” [Tsukutta tsumi, kokoro no oni. tsui ni watakushi wa toraerarete asu shimu koyoi no mi to natta. 作った罪、心の鬼、終に私捕られて明日死ぬ今宵の身となった。] The added phrase—“My transgression, my inner demon!”—appears as an overt reference to the causality implicit in the narrator’s actions. The use of tsumi for sin is important, since it is a Buddhist term that carries all the cultural weight of karmic cause and effect. Likewise, Aeba’s use of the term “inner demon” suggests to his readers the idea of spiritual possession, another native Japanese folk concept that implies the need for reconciliation of actions across multiple incarnations. Finally, Aeba’s choice to simplify Poe’s opening paragraph, “But to-morrow I die, and to-day I would unburthen my soul,” and relocate it to the end of the narrative fundamentally alters the function of the phrase and the narrative logic of the tale itself. Poe reveals the end of the story at the beginning as a tantalizing way to whet the reader’s curiosity, build suspense, and give power to the narrator’s final exclamation. Aeba, on the other hand, withholds this information until the end.
of his translation in order to emphasize the outcome of the narrator’s actions, concluding, as we see above, with a grand recapitulation of his karmic theme. He states, in effect, that it is precisely because of what he has done that he will die on the morrow.

When “The Black Cat” was first translated into Japanese it was one of a fleet of literary transport vehicles engaged in the process of relocating Japanese narrative style from a classical idiom into a modern colloquial one. So the story, in its various translations, helped move Japan’s narrative style from the traditional to the modern. It also introduced contemporary elements of U.S. literature to Japan. I would like to suggest that Poe’s “The Black Cat” also became, in a way, a transcultural moving van that relocated irrational fears and emotions into fin de siècle Japan. Poe gains something in translation through the serendipity of the preexisting, ominous metaphor of vengeful cat spirits. If we imagine what a late nineteenth- or early twentieth-century Japanese reader might have experienced reading “The Black Cat” in translation for the first time, we see a conflation of Poe’s metaphor with a literary heritage of Japanese vengeful tales wherein the cat licks the blood of a murdered woman and turns into a demon, then sets out to avenge the victim’s murder. Contemporary Japanese readers of Poe’s story might very well, through the imagery of the cat and the murder, have been tempted to read the reincarnated black cat Pluto perched on the top of the narrator’s wife’s corpse, walled up inside the basement, from a traditional Japanese perspective. They might have expected that the cat would lick the wife’s blood (or, after being in there for days, something even worse), transform into a demon, and then, unable to escape, avenge the wife’s murder by screaming and bringing the foul deed to light. With this added possible reading, the finale of the story in Japanese takes on more than just Poe’s original sense of irony, gaining ghoulish karmic overtones as well. “The Black Cat” as moving van brings terror and the fear of justice across an ocean of difference, relocating the narrative into a place where some elements need re-situating while others garner even more intense power.
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