THE POEM THE OCTOPUS THAT WOULD NOT DIE BY SAKUTARO HAGIWARA: AN ANALYSIS

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Abstract: The purpose of the paper is to analyse the poem The Octopus that Would Not Die by Modernist Japanese poet Sakutaro Hagiwara based on a reader-response approach. This approach is further completed by textual analysis, knowledge of Modernist literature, knowledge of specific features of Japanese culture, such as indirect communication and reliance in their traditional poetry on the visual means of expression, as well as pragmatic competence, which refers to the way in which literary works are similar to dialogues between authors and readers. The poem by Hagiwara is an example of experimental work specific to Modernism, challenging the every known form of the poem, the borders between poetry and prose, literary and figurative language, abstract and concrete meanings, as well as real world and fantasy world.

Keywords: Pragmatics, reader-response criticism, free associations, indirect communication culture, conceptual metaphors.

Sakutaro Hagiwara (1886-1942) is a Japanese poet belonging to the Modernist movement. He is, as we Western culture members infer, one of the major figures of Japanese Modernism, as he supports “free verse,” together with liberation of “Japanese poetry from strict form and traditional rules” (Hagiwara, 2023).

First of all, we should mention, as we understand from Wright (1965), that poetry is a strong component of Japanese culture, from the earliest times of history and all throughout its historical ages. Wright (1965) states that everyone in Japan is interested in reading poetry, and that even the Japanese prose relies on "poetry as a device of narration," as in the case of the novel *The Tale of Genji*. *The Tale of Genji* has appeared approximately in the year 100, and contains 800 poems.

Due to this state of affairs, it may not be surprising, but, on the contrary, it can make perfect sense that the poem *The Octopus that Would Not Die* has the appearance of prose, based on its form, as well as on its content, at least on some occasion. We could call it a prose poem. Western culture members are familiar with the Modernist mindset focusing on experimentalism, mixture of genres, as well as on the participation of the reader in creating meaning, as well as in finding his or her way out of the game or challenge put forth before him or her by the author of the text. The Japanese Modernism is very familiar based on this perspective to Western culture readers (Eysteinsson, 2018). Defying and challenging conventions of all kinds (Siddiq, 2023), of the way in which literary works have looked like until then, as well as the content of the literary works and art, is an attitude that is associated with Modernism and with Postmodernism, the latter being considered a continuation of the first.

We had dialogue in literary works established between author and readers before, as any text is a form of communication between writer and readers, since it wishes to present a perspective on a topic or information related to the respective topic. Yet, some texts can be perceived as more impersonal objective, and neutral than the others, prompting a serious attitude for their readers. In the case of poetry, the emotional component is stronger than in technical texts, which only present facts. The poem *The Octopus that Would Not Die* challenges even this distinction, since the tone of the poem is, apparently, detached, cold, and neutral, as if observing facts, and nothing more. The reality that is presented in a factual

manner, however, if we can call it reality, belongs to the realm of fantasy. It is a reality which does not belong to the real world, but to the world of stories, apparently. Readers are presented by the poet with simple, everyday language, without, apparently at least, any figures of speech. The figures of speech are not, actually, the usual ones we Western culture members encounter in lyric poetry. The language is also strongly visual, with no abstract thinking, at least not mentioned directly. Knowledgeable readers of Japanese culture can relate the way in which the specific communication style of the members of this culture is indirect communication. Indirect communication cultures have as a specific feature the fact that its members do not say directly what they mean. They allude to what they intend to say, by offering various clues, such as moments of silence and hesitation in their speech, as well as body language. The difference is stronger than in cases of polite language or in cases when pragmatic competence is asked of the interlocutor to interpret the meaning of words in a real-life situation of communication. The Japanese culture, as an indirect communication culture (Ciubancan, 2015; Drobot, 2021), relies of additional subtleties which as not immediately visible and decodable as in the case of polite language in Western cultures, or the difference between the semantics, or the literal meaning of a word or more words, and the pragmatic level of meaning, which is the implied meaning, or what the words expressed mean specifically when connected to the particular context when the words are uttered (Leech & Thomas, 1990). The Japanese culture, being an indirect communication culture, relies on a stronger difference between semantic meaning and pragmatic meaning. Otherwise, the mechanism of pragmatic competence (Domaneschi & Bambini, 2020) is activated in literary works as well (Al-Hindawi & Saffah, 2019), especially in poetry, when readers need to decode the meaning of figurative language.

The analysis given in this paper relies on the point of view of reader-response criticism (Mart, 2019), which explains that readers rely on what emotions a text they read can make them feel and on their background knowledge to give interpretations of the text.

This approach is justified by the fact that the poem by Sakutaro Hagiwara is read, in its English translation, by an international audience of Western culture members, as English is a global language. These readers will apply the mind frame of the Western-culture perception of Japanese culture to this poem, once they know that it is the work of a Japanese poet. Western readers may, to this extent, be familiar with the strongly visual language of the haiku poem (Argyropoulou, 2021) a poem which has been taken over by Western culture poets, and which is now currently being practices by poets from all over the world. What is striking for Western culture readers and writers of haiku poems, a type of poem which is originally Japanese, and which appeared there in the seventeenth century and it is still being practiced today both in Japan and in the Western world, is that abstract ideas, as we are told by websites offering general information, are not part of this type of poem. In the so-called rules of writing haiku poems, the Western culture members are presented with differences between oriental and occidental poetry, in general lines, which are the ones between the predominance of concrete vs abstract images, feelings presented indirectly in the haiku poem, based on the way they are suggested by images or situations, and a pronounced absence of direct language in the case of the haiku poem. The haiku poem is portrayed as offering an accurate description of the reality around us, those who are writing it, yet the elements belonging to the scene we are observing are carefully selected for their powers of allusion and suggestion of a complex idea and complex train of thoughts which are prompted from readers. The haiku poem is very short, traditionally being made up of three lines, 5-7-5 syllables. The difference between haiku poems and the poem by Sakutaro Hagiwara lies in the length, yet in Hagiwara's poem we notice the same carefully selected visual details function of their power of suggestion. The Western culture members can call this type of style which is concise, short and to the point, and which consists of carefully selected details

based on their power of suggestion economy of style, and it is familiar for them from the writing style of American author Ernest Hemingway (Marroquin & Cole, 2015). Hemingway used to prune his texts and not to leave anything that was not absolutely necessary for the comprehension of the text. One reason for this preference of his for writing may have been his profession as a journalist, where he had a limited number of words for his articles. Western culture readers can also be familiar with the economy of style used in flash fiction, which is practiced in online readers' communities all over the world, and which consists in writing prose being given a certain number of words or characters that are available for using based on a given writing prompt or topic. The result of this economy of style is its power of suggestion, based on the impact which an image has over the readers, and which suggests more to it. The images can often be symbols, which are visual representations standing for something else, in the case of economy of style writing for abstract thoughts and ideas. The reliance on the power of impact and allusion of words that are actually present on paper is related to this style's leaving room for the readers' interpretation, on which it relies. Readers fill in the missing details to complete the story.

In the case of Sakutaro Hagiwara's poem, readers fill in the missing abstract reflections which are suggested to them by the poet based on a poem which is, at first sight, made up or several rows of sentenced made consisting only of visual details. However, just like in the case of the haiku poem, it does not deal with a simple, static description, but with one which prompt strong emotional reactions in the readers, which are meant to further prompt reader to reflect on them and, as a natural consequence of these reflections, to give their interpretations of the poem. Interpreting the poem becomes, therefore, a very natural act, just like in the case of communication, relying on pragmatic competence, when speakers and interlocutors engaged in a conversation interpret usually with not much effort the meaning of the spoken words in the precise context of communication, based on various visual elements of the setting and of the language of facial expressions and gestures, as well as based on the voice tone and intonation. Background knowledge, at least when it comes to personal experience, making interlocutors relate to and sympathize with the feelings and thoughts of the speaker are necessary to understand various references made to these, as well as references to their personal relationship, or even cultural references, or at least references to incidents or events going on in their society. The same mechanism is at work in literary works, as readers imagine the missing details in similar ways in which the interlocutor and speaker in a dialogue are imagining what is not said, as it is, after all, just as in the case of the economy of style in literary works, not even necessary. The amount of work a reader is going through, however, is a bit larger.

The central visual image in the poem by Sakutaro Hagiwara is presented right from the title, and this is the image of an octopus and, in particular, one "that would not die." Literally, readers are aware that this is not possible, since all beings are mortal, and the expressive meaning is decoded right away, being one that suggests the way in which the image of the octopus remains strong in the memory of those having witnessed it while it was alive. However, even this expectation is challenged, since the octopus goes on almost unnoticed most of the time while it is alive, and it is forgotten in a tank. It is only after its death, after it is gone, that it feels more present than even, as this is the moment when everyone remembers it and looks for it. This state of affairs has, of course, a real-life analogy which is based on the idea that we may not pay enough attention to those around us while they are still alive and present in our lives, yet, when they are gone, they gain central stage for us, realizing how much we are missing them. This is a first example of how the visual language has an abstract corresponding language, the latter which is decoded by the readers.

The fact that we rely on a large proportion on our receiving information on the visual sense, as human beings, and not on smell, or hearing, like certain animals, makes it easy for

us to decode, and interpret, almost effortlessly the poem by Sakutaro Hagiwara. It was with the movement of Imagism that the visual aspect gained prominence in American poetry, and when the strongly visual component became the main means of expression. This analogy with what Western culture readers have in their culture as a symbol of a similar case with the poem by Hagiwara makes it easy for them to identify and react naturally to start the process of interpretation, providing them with a familiar ground for beginning their process of understanding, in this way the different means of expression, through visual images, becoming less uncomfortable. Hagiwara relies on both familiar and unfamiliar elements in his poem, the familiar ones helping readers not to get entirely lost in his poetic world.

The first stanza starts normally enough, introducing readers to the main image of the poem, the octopus, and the setting in which it lives, as well as its situation, that of being kept in the aquarium for a long while without being given any food: "In a tank at a certain aquarium an unfed octopus was kept for a time. The thin, underground shade of a rock was fused with sad beams of pallid light from the crystal ceiling" (Hagiwara, 2023).

The first sentence is one that could easily belong to the real world, as it is a possible situation to occur in everyday life. While, apparently, a detached description and nothing more, this sentence can imply emotional reactions of readers towards the neglect of the octopus by those supposing to take care of it, since it is placed in an aquarium. Additionally, there can be an emotional reaction to the fact that the octopus, as a wild animal, was taken away from its natural environment, closed in an isolated space, and further on isolated even more and ill treated. Readers can feel pity towards the octopus and revolt at the behaviour of those human beings having done this to the octopus, considering that it is unethical and inhumane. At the same time, readers can make free associations (Schachter, 2018) with the image of the isolated octopus, like in a prison, neglected and abandoned by everyone, considering that it could be a means of reflecting a similar feeling of isolation of any human being, finding him or herself in an unfriendly and even hostile environment, where he or she is even treated badly, not just with indifference. Knowledgeable readers can make connections with the image of the isolated and even alienated individual in the city, a place where one does not think only about comfort and better living and job-related opportunities, but also about not adapting to the new environment and even being treated with hostility. The octopus is far away from its natural environment and from other octopuses, the image of it being in an enclosed space, alone, and with nobody able to relate to it underlining the differences between the animal and human species. These visible differences translate into differences of mentalities, and further on in the way of rejecting someone who is not like the others. The octopus does not even receive any sympathy throughout the poem, or, at least, it does not seem so, not even based on the inferred meaning. The octopus remains a curiosity and an outsider throughout the story presented in the poem. Nobody is getting close emotionally to it; this is left to the reader. Being a detail left to the reader to consider, the lack of empathy for the character of the octopus becomes all the more striking through its completely suggested absence, based on the factual description. Another possibility would be that the poetic persona is pointing this out, suggesting how the poetic persona notices this lack of empathy for the octopus of the others, as the poem focuses on presenting the situation objectively. The presence of so many details can allow readers to imagine at the end of the poem a discussion between poetic persona and readers as interlocutors, where the focus is this precise lack of empathy for the octopus, symbolizing an outsider that is both ignored and rejected. At the same time, based on their background knowledge, readers understand that the octopus, in its natural environment, would be a complete danger for any human being. It would likely attack them, at least based on all the stories circulating in world cultures. Yet, the poem presents an animal, otherwise dangerous, in a vulnerable position, even one of a victim. The poem invites readers to think about the octopus from a completely different point

of view than the usual one, suggesting fear of the octopus. This change in perspective can be considered based on the theory of defamiliarization put forth by Shklovsky (1917), according to which art presents reality or an objects or situation from an entirely different, fresh, unexpected perspective, reaching as far as making things and reality strange. This is clearly visible in the poem by Sakutaro Hagiwara.

This perspective can be considered as showing a reversal of situations between victim – aggressor. At the same time, the reversal can be one of changing the roles which still suggest, indirectly, that the guilt and violence is attributed to someone else. The violence of the octopus is transferred to the human beings. This can make sense, since in reality animals cannot feel guilt. They are instinctive beings. The poem suggests that human beings also have an instinctual side. The situation could also refer to the psychoanalytical concept of introjection (Cariola, 2020), where, in the case of victim – aggressor, the victim can take over the behaviour of the bullies. The human beings, as they feel threatened by wild animals, pick up their own behaviour to avoid being threatened in the future.

The second sentence in the first stanza sounds like a usual slide towards lyrical, figurative language in a poem, yet the presence of this poetic element will be less prominent, less striking than the presence of a harsh sense of reality, based on the very vivid descriptions. The artificiality of the environment in which the octopus is placed is clear in this second sentence. The octopus becomes vulnerable in an environment which is not its own, the same way as we human beings feel in an environment where we find it hard to adapt.

The second stanza presents the octopus as neglected, to the point where everyone believed it was gone: "Everyone had forgotten that dimly-lit tank. Everyone thought that the octopus had long since died, and that only stagnant sea water was left in the glasswindowed tank with the dusty sunlight shining down on it" (Hagiwara, 2023).

Details about the artificial, man-made environment are further insisted upon in this stanza, showing that the man-made world, and the highly technologically developed one during the time of Modernism, could be understood as a means of human beings to feel both overpowerful, having managed to defeat nature and to rise above it, being not only protected from its threat, but also being able to control it. At the same time, the way the octopus is forgotten and dies in this artificial environment could be associated by readers with the fact that technology can be seen as dehumanizing, as well as threatening our own health, both physically and mentally, if we consider the octopus a reflection of human beings themselves and of their instinctive side. Human beings can be understood to have lost contact with the natural world. In addition, they intervene on nature and harm it, as it is suggested by the octopus which is left to die in its tank.

The third stanza marks the slide from the real world to a fantasy world, in a manner reminding of Magic Realism (Rajabi et al, 2020), which starts with detailed description, anchoring us, at least, at visual level, in a world that could not be more real, only then to slide into strange happenings which are part of a fantasy world, breaking free from what is realistic:

> However, the animal had not died. It was hiding in the shade of the rock. And when he awakened, he had to endure, day after day, the dreadful starvation of that ill-fated and forgotten tank. There was nothing to prey on so, when all source of food was gone, he plucked off one of his tentacles and ate it. One to begin with. Then a second. Then finally, when there was nothing else left, he turned his body inside out and started eating parts of his internal organs. Little by little, from one part to the next. In order. (Hagiwara, 2023)

This part of the story clearly belongs to a fantasy realm. Yet, just like the part of the poem which referred to elements and descriptions from the real world, this one too is visual and the visual language can be interpreted by readers at an abstract, figurative level, thus at the level of ideas. This part of the story, of the octopus eating itself, or consuming itself, can be translated under the metaphoric meaning of phrases such as "something is eating someone," "this feeling of loneliness was consuming someone," which are associated with the harmful, both psychologically and physically, consequences. Newman (1997) refers to the metaphors using eating in English as meaning "psychological torment, distress, stress etc" along with examples such as: eat away at, gnaw in, and others. According to Newman (1997), the feeling of psychological torment "is conceptualized in terms of eating." This is, thus, a conceptual metaphor (Lakoff, 2006); Tay, 2014), one which is used by making analogies with one area of experience and another domain of experience, like other ones, e.g. like is a journey, happy is up, sad is down, and these are just a few. We notice how, in the case of the conceptual metaphors given here as additional examples, abstract terms, such as life, happiness, sadness are translated into a concrete image, into a visual form. In the case of the octopus eating itself in the poem, the process is one that goes the other way around, which is reversed, compared to the way the conceptual metaphors start from abstract concepts and ideas and change them into concrete, visual images. The poem presents the abstract expression of having something, in this case the feeling of isolation and alienation, eating someone presented in its literal form, while mimicking the mechanism of the conceptual metaphor.

The fourth stanza further details, visually, and literally, the all-consuming process that the octopus goes through, as a reflection of loneliness, isolation, and alienation: "In this way, the octopus ate up all of his body. From his skin, from his brains, from his stomach. Everything – every bit and piece to the very last morsel. Nothing was left" (Hagiwara, 2023).

This stanza makes readers consider that emotions, and our psychological perspective on life, can lead to us having physical issues as well. We are made aware in popular psychology and popular health articles in print and online media about the very strong connection between mind and body, between the way we think and the way our physical health is affected, between the way in which a negative outlook on life can lead to an actual negative outcome, and the way in which an optimistic attitude can attract positive life outcomes. One of the topics which had been under discussion and brought to the attention of the public was the one which considers physical illnesses reflections of psychological traumas and emotional wounds.

At the same time, another interpretation of the imprisoned octopus which is forgotten and left to die without food in the tank could be the one related to the way in which we human beings depend so much on the others. In individualistic societies (Hofstede, 2011)), which were the consequence of the rapidly developing technology and change in living conditions, the reliance on the feeling of community is no longer so strong, at least not for basic needs of survival, yet the absence of genuine human connection and close connection for that matter can be very harmful. In rural areas, there was a strong dependence on the others both for basic survival needs, as well as based on the genuinely close human contact. In the city, this dependence on the community is, however, still resented by individuals. The situation of the octopus in the poem by Sakutaro Hagiwara makes readers reconsider the supposed independence of the individual in individualistic societies, and in the highly technologically developed city. The loneliness the octopus feels, or which is the feeling attributed to it by the readers, can be seen as a proof for this. By moving, at the time of the Modernist Age, from rural to urban areas, individuals were faced with the sense of loneliness, isolation and alienation, as the strong community ties from rural areas were absent in big cities, and the individuals would be in the city without their family and friends, not knowing

anyone. They would be just as displaced as the octopus, alone in the tank, alone by itself, with nobody else from its natural environment. The story of the octopus makes readers question the advantage of individualist societies versus collectivist societies, and whether individualist societies are actually of higher benefit to the individual.

The fifth stanza consists of just one stanza, and it marks the return to the world of reality, leaving fantasy behind, making readers wonder if the imaginary world was not just part of the poetic persona's imagination: "One morning, when the attendant went there by chance, he found the tank empty" (Hagiwara, 2023). The presentation is again based on a factual description, yet the implication is clearly one of loss. Readers are suddenly faced with the loss of the octopus, the character in the title of the poem. At the same time, this loss is an expected consequence of the story, no matter how fantasy-like it had become at some point.

The sixth stanza reinforces the disappearance of the octopus, starting with a slightly poetic description of the water and the personified seaweed, in the first sentence, and moving on to the loss of all signs of life, and ending with the surprising directly expressed reality of the octopus having disappeared: "In the murky, speckled glass, the inky, blue sea water and the slender seaweed swayed to and fro. There was no longer any sign of life in any of the nooks and crannies of the rock. The octopus had disappeared" (Hagiwara, 2023).

The readers feel persuaded that the fantasy-like vision of the octopus eating itself was only a fantasy and a way of putting it figuratively. However, the too many details, apparently trying to anchor readers in a real world, are in the end of the poem challenged again, making readers slide once again into a fantasy world.

The seventh, and last, stanza, contradicts the otherwise common-sensical observation that the octopus had died: "However, he had not died. Even after he had completely vanished – even then he lived on in that tank. In that old, empty, forgotten aquarium tank. For ever and ever no doubt over many centuries – a creature that no human could see, living on in terrible want and discontent" (Hagiwara, 2023).

The death of the octopus, therefore, readers understand, was not a neutral, objective observation. It was not a fact. It was just the impression of the attendant, and which had likely been shared by other persons as well. The ending slides from a realistic perspective on the world to a figurative understanding of the world, and on abstract thoughts about it, and finally to a fantasy world. However, all of these worlds, or meanings, are interrelated. The memory of the octopus is what connects all these levels: literal, figurative, realistic, and fantastic. It is the human mind the one which gives a certain perception of the world, and this perception of the world is presented in its various forms in this poem.

This poem by Sakutaro Hagiwara could be seen as a practical application of the Dual Coding Theory (Paivio, 1991) from the field of psychology, according to which we human beings process both abstract ideas and concrete concepts in our brains differently. Abstract ideas are more difficult to visualize, being linked to the linguistics level, with their linguistics representations, while concrete concepts are connected to images and are easier to process. As a solution, or as a practical application of this theory, we can resort to connecting symbols or concrete images to abstract idea, which is precisely done by this poem.

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