

# DISTORTIONS OF TIME AND SPACE IN JAPANESE LITERATURE - FROM A NEW PERCEPTION OF LITERATURE AND CULTURE TO A NEW CONCEPTION OF EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** *The paper explains certain “fantastic” elements in myth and folk stories – such as dilatation of time or travel to other realms – by comparison to similar concepts in modern quantum physics, as being not so fantastic but possibly perceptions of real facts. Quantum physicists have already acknowledged that oriental philosophy has similar concepts to them. A new conception of reality can and should be derived from them. Moreover it is time to accept at a general level the fact that our scientific theories are not descriptions of reality as it is, but rather, some ever-changing forms of understanding that can show or indicate a reality which is implicit. If this view is incorporated as a principle in education, the gains for society at large are enormous.*

**Keywords:** *Tokoyo no kuni, Urashima Taro, quantum physics, unified field theory, philosophy of quantum physics, oriental philosophy, esoteric knowledge, education.*

Although it would seem that an awareness of time (and even space) perception and of the possibilities inherent in playing with it are a modern development, actually these are as old as literature itself.

I will deal with two instances of such awareness and distortion of “natural” time boundaries in classical Japanese literature. There are two main and very different cases of distortion in the perception and rendering of time in Japanese literature. One is a distortion of time which has no stylistic, literary functions, but is inherent in the subject of the story, or in the destiny of the characters, so to speak. It occurs in the Urashima Tarō type of story<sup>1</sup> and in the *fukushiki mugen* noh plays, where

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<sup>1</sup> The same pattern appears in the Irish saga “Imram Brain maic Febail” (*The Adventures of Brain, son of Febail*) and a Romanian folk story, “Tinerete fără bătrânețe” (*Everlasting Youth*), which we summarize in an appendix to this article.

one of the characters is always a phantom and performs a movement back and forth through time and the *Rokudo* (realms of reincarnation), bringing two worlds in the eye of the audience: this one and the other, be it a Buddhist hell or an eternal Tokoyo no kuni.

The other instance of time distortion is the literary, conscious manipulation of time by a narrator of diaries or *monogatari*, often a court lady of Heian times. Sei Shōnagon or Izumi Shikibu play with such psychological perceptions of time, lengthening the happy periods that set them out in a favorable manner, and dwelling briefly on other parts of their life. These Heian writers had a sensitive, keen perception that time is an inner, psychological experience, rather than a constant, real, external flow. Thus, the things that one likes can be expanded and made to last longer, at least in fiction or memory, as is the case with the arrangement of subject matter in the Imperial Anthologies of poetry. Although the poems are strictly arranged by season, in a progression of spring, summer, autumn and winter, the favorite seasons of the Japanese, spring and autumn, have a double number of poems – two books on spring and autumn, as compared with one each for summer and winter.

Objective narration, with a strict, chronologically progressive (logical) timeline was never a favorite with Japanese writers, and is far from being the norm in Japan even now.

On the other hand, in the myths and legends that make up the stories from *Kojiki* and *Fudoki* of Urashima no ko and Tajima Mori we have instances of persons who go to another world and experience a different flow of time. They think they spent a few days in the other world, but upon returning home realize that many years have elapsed in the usual world. This experience of theirs seems a direct illustration of Einstein's theory of the relativity of time.

Legends about the mysterious Country of Eternal Youth over the Seas – Tokoyo no kuni – whose dwellers are called *hijiri*, meaning „demigods“, appear in the second Japanese chronicle, *Nihonshoki*. These are the stories about Urashima no Ko, who later became Urashima Tarō in the folk story, and Tajima Mori, two heroes who come to travel in this land. In Chapter VI of *Nihonshoki* we are told that Emperor Suinin ordered Tajima Mori to go to Tokoyo no kuni and bring him the exotic fruit that grows in winter, called *tachibana* (mandarin). Tajima will return after many adventures, but only after the Emperor's death, lamenting the fact that this country is the realm of the *hijiri*, to which mortals cannot even aspire.



We currently relegate the above stories to the domain of Myth as „fiction“, but should we really consider the adventures of such heroes only as miracles or fancies? Theories of modern physics confirm that such an abolition of time and space are possible. By presenting some views of modern physics on time and space we can argue that these distortions are not fanciful imaginations (*kyōgen kigo*, „wild words and ornate phrases“, as the medieval Buddhist writers put it), but perfectly possible situations and developments, by the standards of current physics.

On the relation between education and the way we misconceive the modern sciences such as physics to give absolute truths, I would have the following observation to make: textbooks for the primary and secondary education in general, even high school (that is the most widespread form of education) give very definite affirmations concerning the structure of our world, of atoms, chemical elements, and so on. But physical science itself is not so certain of all these things:

„Thus, we should be very careful with the fact that our theories are not *descriptions of reality as it is*, but rather, some ever-changing forms of understanding that can show or indicate a reality which is implicit, but not describable in its totality.

These subquantum processes will probably very often imply new types of physical entities, as different from electrons, protons, etc., as the latter are from the macroscopic systems.

Of course, we do not expect to determine actually all the subquantum variants. Rather, we hope to show, through a few crucial experiments, that the subquantum level exists.”

This is David Bohm, physicist at the University of London, at in his crucial book, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, published by Routledge in 1980. And yet, our textbooks give definitions that seem to be fixed in stone. We all know how the atom, the protons, the electrons are described in a school textbook. We could compare our memories with what French physicist G. Bogdanov has to say on the subject:

„What is the *substance* of a photon or electron? Until the middle of the 20-th century no one could answer this question. Before, we could judge through two powerful instruments of thought, the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics. Or, a complete description of matter implies a fusion

of these two theories in a new ensemble. ... Thus, after years of trials and efforts appeared the quantum relativist field theory."<sup>2</sup>

This, I hope, proves well that we put in our textbooks as true some very incomplete notions that induce false ideas about the world in the young minds exposed to them.

Moreover, the field theory, which postulates that a field does not possess substance, but is just a vibration, an ensemble of potential vibrations to which are associated the quantons, that is the most elementary particles of various natures is saying the same thing as oriental philosophy: a profound reality made not of matter but of spirit.<sup>3</sup> By oriental philosophies we mean Hinduism, Buddhist and Taoist religious philosophies, whose value and similarity to modern physics was stressed over and over by all great scientists of the past century: Wilhelm Heisenberg, Niels Bohr, J. R. Oppenheimer, to name just a few, from whose books I would like to quote:

Oppenheimer, *Science and the Common Understanding*:<sup>4</sup>

„The general notions about knowledge ... illustrated by the discoveries from the field of atomic physics, are not completely unknown or new. They have a past, in our very culture, and in the Hinduism and Buddhist philosophies have even a more important role and a central place. What we will discover will be only an exemplification, an encouragement and a refining of the old wisdom.”

Niels Bohr, *Atomic Physics and Human Knowledge*<sup>5</sup>:

„To make a parallel to the lesson of atomic theory, we need to go back to those epistemological problems that thinkers like Buddha or Lao Tse had confronted in their attempt to harmonize our position of actors-spectators in the great drama of existence.”

W. Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy*<sup>6</sup>:

„The most important contribution to theoretical physics that came from Japan after the Second World War was to point out that there is a

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<sup>2</sup> Guitton, J. *Dieu et la science*, Ed. Grasset et Fasquelle, Paris, 1991, cited by Florin Gheorghiuță, in *Treptele inițierii*, pag. 32.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, pag. 32-33.

<sup>4</sup> Oppenheimer, *Science and the Common Understanding*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1954, cited by F. Gheorghiuță in *Treptele inițierii*, pag. 31.

<sup>5</sup> N. Bohr, *Atomic Physics and Human Knowledge*, Ed. J. Wiley, New York, 1958, cited by F. Gheorghiuță in *Treptele inițierii*, pag. 32.

<sup>6</sup> W. Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1963, cited by F. Gheorghiuță in *Treptele inițierii*, pag. 32.

connection between the philosophical ideas of the Far East and the philosophical substance of quantum theory”.



The sources of the knowledge of such physical phenomena by the ancient authors that produced the stories in *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki* and in other mythical traditions are difficult but not impossible to trace. They come from even older esoteric traditions that needed to be hidden in myth in order to survive. The Egyptian *Tabula Smaragdina* and other materials concerning Hermes Trismegistus are examples of such hidden traditions that still exist.

And these mythical stories also come from other sources that our rationalistic (scientific) minds consider fanciful, unrealistic and hard to accept: contact with other, much more advanced civilizations from outer space. It is difficult for a literary critic or an educator nowadays to accept as valid these myths or the huge corpus of transmissions through channeling from other “entities” than ourselves that has gathered during the past century. An apology of the esoteric tradition for our modern mind is still badly needed, as this tradition is yet too little known, and even when sometimes revealed to the public eye, it is soon derided by what I would call, not unkindly, but quite lovingly, the rationalists of our times. It is important to know that scientists like physicist Fritjof Capra have written books<sup>7</sup> demonstrating that modern science and traditions like the Vedic one say the same thing, and we need to incorporate this reality into our world view and education system. It would be even more important to bring this knowledge down into curricula of our current education system.

### **Conclusion**

I think it is necessary to change our current rationalistic view of the world, which tells us to believe only what we perceive with our senses, and to place the greatest importance to the material world. It is time to acknowledge that there is an unseen world which is ultimately more important than the one we see, because it overrules it and dominates our fate in it, by its sheer complexity and infiniteness.

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<sup>7</sup> *The Dao of Physics*, The Shambhala Publications, Boston, 1991.

It is time to accept in our everyday life the mathematical demonstrations of Kurt Gödel that closed systems (like our current scientific views are now) are incomplete and cannot provide us with the truth, as they all need an external criterion to ascertain this truth. It is time to accept this into our educational system, where we claim to provide each generation with a set of "truths" that form a world-view, and a set of moral rules. But if we accept the impossibility to know any ultimate truth except by revelation, that comes when we have reached a certain spiritual level, our main rule of conduct should become that of tolerance, understanding, accepting diversity, the "other" and the "unknown" (the ultimate mystery of the world).

**Appendix:** (1) Summary of the subject of *Imram Brain maic Febail* (*The Adventures of Brain, Son of Febail*).

The Celtic hero Brain finds near his castle a silver bough with white flowers and takes it home with him, where a strange woman appears out of it. She sings to him twenty two quatrains about a mysterious island placed in the sea on four bronze legs: the island of Emain, where there is no sadness, disease, old age or death, inhabited only by women. Brain sails with his crew to look for this island, and at sea Manannan, the sea god chants him another twenty two oracular quatrains. Finding the island, Brain is entertained by the women and has an excellent time, but he starts to miss home. He takes his crew back home but there nobody recognizes him anymore. Brain realizes there is a distance of a few centuries between his "subjective time and the objective time that passed since he left home".<sup>8</sup>

(2) Summary of the subject of *Tinerete fără bătrânețe* (*Everlasting Youth*)

There was an emperor who had no children. He and his wife appeal to a wise old man for a cure, and have a child, who starts crying loudly before being born. He will only stop crying when his father promises to give him everlasting youth. As the boy grows up he is very brave and intelligent, but on the 15-th birthday he claims his promised "Everlasting Youth". His father explains that he only promised that in order to appease his crying, and that he knows not how to obtain that.

The prince will start in search of the Everlasting Youth. After overcoming many perils, he finds the palace where Everlasting Youth

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<sup>8</sup> Kernbach, Victor, *Dicționar de Mitologie Generală*, Ed. Albatros, București, 1983, pag. 114.

lives, more exactly three beautiful fairies. He marries the youngest one and lives happily with them. There was one place where he was not supposed to go, namely the Valley of Sorrow. But one day while hunting, he inadvertently crosses over to the Valley, and starts to miss his parents very much. The fairies warn him that he will die if he gets back home, and plead with him not to return. But he decides to go, and on the way back home his hair and beard turn grey then white, and he becomes a feeble old man by the time he gets there. Finding his palace a ruin, in the throne room, searching for memories he finds Death in an old trunk and he is instantly swept off with a blow from Death.

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