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Transcending Borders

Selected papers in East Asian studies

edited by

IKUKO SAGIYAMA, VALENTINA PEDONE

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(DE)CONSTRUCTING BORDERS:
JAPANESE CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE AND
TRANSLATION IN THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

Caterina Mazza

CROSSING THE BORDERS OF THE PHENOMENAL WORLD:
BUDDHIST DOCTRINE AS A LITERARY DEVICE IN KŌDA
ROHAN'S EARLY WORKS

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Abstract

This paper attempts to present the literary personality of the novelist and exegete Kōda Rohan (pseudonym of Kōda Shigeyuki, 1867–1947) in the cultural context of modernity.

Behind the façade of old-style literatus, Kōda Rohan strives to seize the opportunity to reform the concept of fiction in his own way. His goal is that of proposing an alternative model of fiction that is distinctively unique in comparison to a sheer imitation of Western culture, particularly in its romantic stances. The main device he employs to pursue his goal at an early stage is a coherent and thoughtful reliance to the view of the doctrinal foundations of East-Asian philosophies as a literary theme. Rohan's case is exemplary in that his wide reliance on (and almost constant allusions to) pivotal Buddhist concepts as literary technique offer an allegory for the new significance that its author attributes to the creative process behind writing fiction at a time of reform and change. Moreover, in his early work, Rohan's preoccupation over presenting a view of Romanticism more coherent with his own's cultural asset was also at stake.

By means of a thorough rethinking of the broader significance of key philosophical concepts in Rohan's early fiction, I shall present concrete examples to back up the view that the heavy reliance on Buddhist doctrine informing Rohan's first attempts at literary creation conceals an eminently modern interpretation of the main stances of Japanese pre-modern culture, which testifies to the author's relevance as a modern thinker.

Keywords

Koda Rohan, *furyubutsu*, romantic mysticism, buddhism; Lotus Sutra, fiction.

要旨

本稿では、幸田露伴の作品と仏教との関わりを考察する。特に、『法華経』、『般若心経』など、東アジアの大乗仏教の主な経典から、小説家露伴はどのようなモチーフを取り入れ、それらの経典からインスピレーションを受けて彼の初期小説にどのような女性像が描かれたのかを検討する。更に、露伴の他の著作、エッセイなども考慮に入れつつ、『風流佛』という小説の譬喩的解釈を示す。『風流佛』の主人公珠運の美の探究と、その探求を妨げるかのような珠運の初恋というプロットの展開が、著者の思想の変遷においてどのような意義を持つかを検討し、

坪内逍遙などが小説の革新を唱えていた過渡的な時期の文壇に露伴はどのような貢献を与えようとしていたかを明らかにする試みである。

キーワード

幸田露伴、風流仏、浪漫派、仏教、法華経、小説。

1. The literary context: Rohan's personal view on the reform of Japanese fiction in the 1880s

As Donald Keene suggests in his well-known and acclaimed volume, ‘Dawn to the West’, Kōda Rohan, along with Ozaki Kōyō, was one of the more active writers in the last two decades of the 19th century (Keene 1999, 150). The onset of Rohan’s fervent literary activity follows after the tumultuous first decades following the Meiji restoration which infused new life in the country’s cultural milieu; particularly after the foundation of the first literary circle of any distinction, the Ken’yūsha, in 1885 (Keene 1999, 119–121), by a group of young writers which, although soon to be overshadowed by another popular trend, that of the Naturalist school, enjoyed wide popularity in the first few year after its constitution. The literary renewal of this era continued throughout the 1890s, marking an especially fecund period of literary flowering. A passionate call for a renovation of fiction was also being advocated by seminal critics such as Tsubouchi Shōyō and writers such as Futabatei Shimei, who did not belong to any mainstream movement per se. Newly introduced ideals of the novel, variously inspired by European movements, particularly Romanticism, Naturalism, and the psychological novel, had left young writers the difficult task of establishing a new identity for Japanese literature, pushing those who dared venture in the realm of new trends towards a vital rethinking of the overall value of literature, particularly prose fiction, in the new cultural context of modernity.

Although sometimes regarded as an old-style literatus, Rohan had gained a momentum as a prominent writer of new fiction already by the time of his debut novel *Tsuyu dandan* (*Drops of Dew*), which had appeared serially in the magazine *Miyako no hana* in 1889.¹ The novel’s setting in America matched

¹ Rohan’s literary debut features a Western contemporary setting and a simpler style but shares with the work that will be our main focus, *Fūryū butsu* 風流佛, published later the same year, a strikingly similar outlook as it emphasises the power of romantic love (*koi*, Kurita 2007, 382–391). It also shares the link between sensual love, compassion, and the fundamental quality – or character – of enlighten beings, see Kurita (*Ibid.*, 408). Rohan maintains the philosophical trend towards Buddhism and Christianity throughout the whole first half of his literary production (Okada, 2012),

the novelties of the Meiji era with a distinctive literary quality, reminiscent of Asian masterpieces such as the Chinese short stories collection *Jingu qiguan* (*Stories of marvels, past and present*), conjuring up in both readers and critics alike the impression that the author was most likely deemed to be one of the best candidates to the sound reform of fiction advocated by critics.² Nevertheless, with the publication of *Fūryū butsu* (*The bodhisattva of sensual love*), shortly after his first novel had registered such a considerable success, it may seem that Rohan had already decided to place himself against the flow. Although the setting is, formally, contemporary, as far as factors as crucial as the style, content, and literary techniques employed are concerned, *Fūryū butsu* seems to sum up a manifesto against current literary trends. The new novel was very well received too, but it was distant, in concept, from both his previous work and, seemingly, that of any of his contemporaries. The choice of a style resembling *gesaku* fiction, the plot, and the several quotations from earlier literature mark the beginning of Rohan's struggle to preserve the values of the Chinese and Japanese tradition against the ever spreading Western influence that had characterised the first two decades of modern literary history. Rohan maintained his general cautious view towards acritical substitutions of old models with new ones well into the latter part of his writing career, touching upon the subject in dedicated essays, such as *Shinkyū zen'aku shō* (Brief survey over the good and bad of old and new, February 1927).³

Being virtually the sole Meiji writer to survive WWII, it is possible that indeed Rohan felt at some point compelled to assume the role of Meiji Japan's living legacy in view of the circumstances and the public's expectations. It is also true that Rohan, compared to some of his contemporaries, has been under-represented in Western literary studies; this could be ascribed to the difficulty of his prose, as Rohan's prevalent mode of expression at an early stage lied in a pastiche moulded after Chinese and Japanese classic and, even in late works, the author displayed a mastery command of such 'classical' and obscure stylistic models that now seem totally anachronistic. A closer look at what has been

including short stories more overtly concerned with, and influenced by, Western literary models, such as *Taidokuro* (Encounters with a Skull), see Tanaka (2015, 89–124).

² As early as 1942, five years before Rohan's death, Yanagida Izumi, in his noted biography, stated that Rohan had been one a precursor (*senkūsha*) of the new novel of which Shōyō had been the first and foremost theoretician, confirming Rohan's canonization (Yanagida 1942, 70)

³ Now reprinted in the supplementary volumes of the *Complete works*, see Kōda (1980, 296–298)

termed the literary output of a ‘nostalgic’, nevertheless, suggests evidence that the respect professed by Rohan for Chinese and Japanese antiquity had not, in any case, prevented the author from innovating the concept of ‘fiction’ with original choices of content. Even more significantly, the key themes that Rohan derived from an apparently faithful imitation of classical models, and which constitute the recurring elements of his poetics, upon closer examination, do reveal an architecture that sensibly hints at presenting the author’s original re-interpretation of Japan’s cultural past in view of his perspective as a modern writer. The highly personal interpretation of even the more classic of themes in Rohan’s prose clarifies all the implications behind the façade of ‘classicist’ and ‘idealist’ with which Rohan seemed to mask his intents. The influence that his early efforts exerted on writers such as Higuchi Ichi’yō (1872–1896) — one of the first modern Japan’s first woman writers —, the Bungakukai (Literature club) circle, and writers as diverse as Tanizaki and Mishima should also not be overlooked. At an age in which a wave of unthoughtful nationalistic reactions to two decades of intense Western influence was raising, it may well be the case that Rohan, sensing the perils that laid ahead for the future of *belles lettres* amidst this cultural turmoil, had come to the conclusion that Japan’s new fiction would emerge not from reshaping Japan’s classical literature in form or content, but by implying a new, much broader outlook. The most striking example in this respect is precisely *Fūryūbutsu*: an exploitation of covert and overt references and recurrent allusions in the novel helps to detail how Rohan’s narrative incorporates key elements of Buddhist doctrines into a main plot devised to entice his readers into a fictional world pointing to quintessential truths.

Rohan himself sums up his attitude towards classic themes in one of the most noticeable essays of his mature writings, the short article *Koten shingan* ‘Classic texts for modern eyes’ (April 1921),⁴ perhaps his most lucid statement about the need to re-read the cultural heritage of Japan in a distinctively new fashion. The essay opens with an advocacy of the need to approach ancient works such as *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki* not so much for their relevance *per se*, but to offer a precise interpretative key in view of one’s sensibility and experiences as a contemporary man. This particular essay is illuminating in that the author seems to clarify here an outlook which, in his early works of pure fiction, is an implied — not an overtly declared — perspective. In other words, Rohan maintains the attitude of consciously choosing old themes and styles not because of a lack of knowledge or a rejection of newly introduced Western models, but out of a perceived necessity to seize the opportunity to introduce them to a Japanese public

⁴ 古典新眼, see Kōda (1954a, 349–353).

in the light of a new *forma mentis*. Several speeches and essays that the author delivered for the general public testify to his involvement in making the legacy of Japan's cultural heritage, that would have otherwise slowly disappeared, accessible. The novelist clearly sensed a modernity of tradition, and sensitive critics have, although rather inconsistently, already been questioning details in the interpretation of Rohan's literary stature as a nostalgic *persona* just because of his fondness for classical literature. Given the author's insistence on classical themes and styles as natural part of his cultural asset as a modern man and a Japanese man, this narrow interpretation of the author's significance in Meiji literature needs to be reconsidered.

2. *Crossing the borders of reality: Fūryū butsu as an allegory of the nature of literature and the truth beyond appearances*

As anticipated above, then, the main question here is how Kōda Rohan employed Buddhist doctrine as a literary device in *Fūryū butsu*.⁵ The novel features Rohan's peculiar *haibun* style and complex, sometimes puzzling, phraseology, but, unlike his earliest work, it has a Japanese setting, centring around Shu'un — a sculptor — and his love for Otatsu, an unlucky orphan he meets in the village of Subara, on the lively Kiso road. The setting is somehow consistent with Edo style literature, but the story unravels in current times, as the reader can hint by statements such as that Shu'un has made up his mind to seek artistic perfection so that “Westerners with alabaster noses like statues” will not look at his country in contempt. This initial remark, paired with a quotation from a sutra that we shall comment upon shortly, implies a rejection of the supposed intellectual superiority of Western view on the value of art, the kind of stance promoted by the *Bunmei kaika* movement throughout the first decades of the Meiji period. Thinking of Rohan's novel as a pamphlet against such trends should help to clarify the concerns that guided the author to pick up one such subject. It should also not be overlooked that this novella actually marks the onset of Rohan's ‘master craftsman’ cycle, and is one of several stories centred on artisans (*meijin shōsetsu*). Just a few years before the publication of the work, in 1887, Ernst Fenollosa (1853–1908) had received from the Japanese government the task of registering Japanese (particularly Buddhist) art treasures, and his lectures on the topic were changing the Japanese's perception of their cul-

⁵ For the original text of the novel the volume 1 of the *Collected works* (Kōda, 1952, 25–78) may be consulted. Keene (1999, *appendix*, 1227–1228) also offers an outline of the novel's plot.

tural and artistic patrimony. Fenollosa was strongly inclined towards a biased, ‘orientalised’ interpretation of the peculiarities of Japan’s artistic heritage, ascribed to a supposedly homogeneous “world art” category (Faure 1998b, 771–772). The landscape here resembles closely what was happening in the world of prose fiction, where the debate over whether the newly imported Western models would supersede Japanese’s customs of writing was still heated. The supposed “mysticism” (Donath 1998, 1059) with which Rohan reinterpreted such a pivotal theme as that of the ‘living Buddha’ images⁶ that had shaped Japanese aesthetic perceptions several centuries earlier could as well be alluding to his particular way of interpreting the stances of Romantic literature. The novel reaches its climax when the sculptor confesses his love for Otatsu, anticipated by a vision he had had after their first encounter, in which she manifested as an emanation of Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, while Otatsu, called away by her long lost father, flees the village without an explanation, and Shu’un, enraged, carves a statue of the Bodhisattva Kannon in her image. The statue is dressed at first but then he removes layer upon layer until it becomes a nude statue of the Bodhisattva. In a rage, when he hears Otatsu is to marry a certain nobleman, Shu’un almost destroys the statue, but, at that point, it miraculously comes to life and the pair ascends to heaven.

Despite the lack of realism — evident in an apparently unexplainable ending for a story with a contemporary setting — the novel had an immense impact, and it encompasses key themes upon which the author will continue to rely throughout his literary career; namely, the close intertwining of reality and art, the potential of sensuality as a driving force in spiritual awakening, and the focus on the individual’s personal growth. The choice of Kannon as an icon is deeply rooted in a longstanding tradition of cults centred on one particular figure, that of the so-called Nyoirin Kannon,⁷ and the author lends his consid-

⁶ The ‘living Buddha’ tradition alludes to a particular function of worship of Buddhist statues which took place around the end of the Heian period. According to the records, these were mostly wooden carved icons that the aristocracy ordered for private services, in a somewhat smaller size than the statues for public display in monumental complexes, where the execution, generally denoting a notable craftsmanship, was aimed at presenting the deities as both “lovely and living presences” (Mimi 1991, 330). As Rambelli points out, these particular sculpture were either put on display solely at particular times or even, at times, not displayed at all, and served “as a bridge between the visible and the invisible” (2002, 273), very much like, we shall see, the character of the living sculpture in Rohan’s *Fūryū butsu* represent the innermost essence of the artist’s creative quest for beauty.

⁷ The Nyoirin Kannon is a major figure of Japanese ancient religiosity, closely resembling the ‘Jade woman’. Her cult, developed in Shingon centres from a *topos* of

erable talent to make the character of several popular accounts into a subject fit for a modern, romantically oriented work of prose fiction. The result could startle the less educated audience, yet the author has to be credited for the coherence with which he tries to adapt an old narrative scheme to a new cycle of “narratives of enlightenment” (*godō no bungaku*, Donath 1998, 1059) which is, in fact, a new genre, wholly experimental in nature. The author would later develop his reliance on medieval sources into an even more complex architecture in another work involving the idea of an icon, *Dogū mokugū* (*Clay doll, wooden doll*, 1905).⁸

Chinese import, exerted considerable influence over local creeds in Medieval Japan. Perhaps the primary source of this religious and literary theme is a letter in which Eshin-ni, the wife of the Japanese patriarch of the Pure Land (*Jōdō*) school Shinran (1173–1263), reports how the prelate had secluded himself in retirement for hundred days to meditate on Kannon after a dream in which the deity had proclaimed that she would serve as a ‘jade consort’ to the monk in order to convert his carnal lust into the path, and even swore that she would eventually lead him to the pure land of his creed. Shinran is also credited as having been persuaded that the times were ripe for the cult of this particular bodhisattva, initially a secret doctrine, to spread popularly. The monk had also reportedly had a vision of Kannon as prince Shōtoku taishi towards the end of his retreat. Another medieval account, the *Kakuzenshō*, compiled by Kakuzen around 1198, also reported that the ‘honzon’ (true object of devotion, that is, the deity of the meditation mandala) would turn into a Jade woman, in order to become intimate with the practitioner, granting him mundane fulfilment and eventually leading him to the pure land of Sukhāvati (Faure 2003, 206–207).

⁸ The novel has been studied by Donath (1998, 1061–62). This latter work appears heavily influenced by the Yogācāra (*yuishiki* 唯識) school of thought, and postulates an inseparable interrelatedness of reality and the otherworld on a grosser perception, the ‘three existences’ (*sanze* 三世) of past, present, and future, but on a subtle, ultimate level, the three realms (*sangai* 三界) of desire, form, and formlessness, which arise simultaneously in dependence of the mind’s hindrances, defying the boundaries of time. According to this conception, deluded desire, particularly lust, stems from ontological ignorance (Faure 1998a, 34). This doctrinal background could account for Rohan’s consistent choice of key themes to question the nature of desire and sentiments. *Dogū mokugū* also introduces the theory of parallel worlds in which the living and the dead live close to each other which is exactly the same background in which Izumi Kyōka (1873–1939), another novelist of the new Romantic trend, depicted several otherworldly characters. Rohan’s obsession with animated statues of female characters also closely mirrors the structure of Kyōka’s first novellas, always centered on the dynamic relationship — a common pattern in Noh theatre also — between a male human and a female ghost. Although Rohan’s female characters lack the characteriza-

Rohan's involvement with Buddhism has indeed attracted the attention of many, and it is not surprising that the work, centred on the search for aesthetic ideals that the main character embodies, should contain many references to the *Lotus Sutra* (*Hōkekyō*⁹), one of the main Buddhist scriptures of East Asia. The way in which Rohan arranges these references around the main plot, however, starting from the very titles of the paragraphs, seems to have elicited, let alone one recent study¹⁰ little attention up to these days. Let us consider the novel's final scenes:

He jerked his body around to face the other direction. Then he heard someone speaking, sobbing. As the object of such doubt, such disgust, I have no reason to live. If it has come to this, I would rather my useless life were ended by your hand. The voice was indeed coming from the wooden image.

How bizarre! Could it be that my own soul has entered the image of Tatsu I carved out with such single-minded devotion? Say it's an obsession that now rules its host: then it's a monster seeking to prevent Shuun from severing all bonds of mutual love and returning to the beginning before I went astray. Come, come! I'll show you the acme of an icon sculptor's skill: both love and regret sliced into shreds!

So saying, he stood up arrow straight, hoisting high in his right hand a hatchet: the downstroke could cleave iron. But her own figure seemed replete, virtually overflowing, with nobility, compassion, love. In truth, her naked body looked so moist and tender that were he to cut it, warm blood would gush forth. How could he, brutally, ogre-like, visit upon her a cruel blade? His resentment, his anger, both froze: ice over flame.

The hatchet slipped insensibly from his hand. Unable to cut himself free of an unrequitable love, this man could not hold back his tears but gulped them down as his writhing body fell prostrate with a thud. That instant, a crashing sound, as of something falling: was it descending from Heaven? Erupting from Earth? Pearl white arms warmly encircled his neck; a cloud of hair fragrantly caressed his cheek. With a gasp of astonishment, he shot a rapid glance: it was

tion as *femmes fatales* that informs *Kyōka*'s works, these features clearly account for a consonance of interests, if not a mutual influence, of the two authors.

⁹ 法華經.

¹⁰ Here I am referring to the careful analysis of Rohan's religious conceptions and its reflections on fiction recently brought forth by Okada (2012). The quotations from the *Lotus Sutra* that I shall comment upon shortly are here discussed with reference to the slightly different order in which Rohan enlists the 'ten aspects' (see below) quoted in the second chapter of the Sutra, and the author reveals the rationale behind the pairing of each Lotus sutra's quotation in the novel's title paragraphs with their contents (Okada 2012, 241–247).

her as she used to be back then. Tatsu! Shuun returned her embrace and kissed her on the forehead. Had the image come alive, or had the woman come to him? The question itself is naïve; any reply, deficient (Kurita and Lipson 2005, 151).¹¹

This excerpt is definitely the most moving scene of the work. It also seems the last truly realistic passage of the novel, the last momentum in which the reader is still legitimately entitled to think that the supernatural events narrated may be in fact the product of Shu'un's imagination. The novel actually plays with the subtleties of a very diffused view in medieval Buddhist understanding that postulates that there is no real distinction between reality and fantasy. This has accounted for Rohan's fame as an idealist, but actually, it is possible to give a different interpretation of even the most refined allusion to traditional doctrines that he sprinkles his novella with. The search for the truth represented by artistic beauty, but fostered, in actuality, by passion, makes Shu'un's love struggles an allegory of the quest for the nature of reality, or "suchness" (*tathātā*, *shinnyo*¹²), mirroring the novelist's effort to discover the true meaning of art (another nuance, alongside that of 'desire', of the ubiquitous term '*fūryū*' featured in the novel's title). Shu'un's creation, once animated, embodies Rohan's fascination with a 'transcendental, ideal woman' (*kū no onna*¹³) that recurs in several of his fictions. In fact, Rohan's preoccupation with human emotions, and love in particular, is reflected upon in essays delivered at different stages of his career such as *Jō* (*On emotions*, 1916) and *Ai* (*On love*, 1939).¹⁴ In his

¹¹ For the original text see Kōda (1952, 76–77).

¹² 真如.

¹³ 空の女.

¹⁴ Both essays can be consulted in Kōda (1954b, 76–83 and 1954c, 664–669 respectively). In the 1916 essay Rohan questions whether sensual love too can be an expression of a broader compassion (a theme clearly implied in the Nyoirin Kannon's cycle), and although reticent to assimilate the two, the novelist clearly admits that the former can be a temporary step toward developing the latter. In wording his thoughts on the matter, Rohan uses rhetoric phraseology as "is therefore love just lust, and lust just love" (*jō soku yoku ka, yoku soku jō ka* 情即慾か慾即情か, Kōda 1954b, 77), mimicking the most noted passage of the *Heart Sutra*, to which we shall return shortly, or "in any case, it is unmistakably a truth that there are, in this world, schools of thought oriented towards valuing sentiments: according to these views, it is a gross mistake to either suppress desire entirely, as compassion will never develop fully, just as it is wrong to advocate that 'beings of this world are all our children' [a quotation from the *Lotus Sutra*] if one does not somewhat restrain from passion" (何にしても、情を信仰する情宗のこの世に存在して居ることは事實である。慾を殺さざれば情亦た圓滿ならずで、慾を退治しないで「一切衆生即是吾子」と叫ぶに至

first novel dealing with the above subject, the passage where the bodhisattva manifests closes with an obscure statement and the next section, the epilogue, opens with the words “Always, but always, Heaven answers the call of love,” and relates that the sight of the bodhisattva is experienced by several people in the surroundings, and each time she is seen, the love bodhisattva displays a slightly different look. The concluding chapter of the work is titled “the true aspect of all phenomena” (*shohō jissō*¹⁵). On general terms, this refers to one of the true aspects of reality in Buddhist epistemology: the voidness — or, in other words, interdependence — of all phenomena. Classic conceptions do stress two aspects of the nature of reality, voidness of the self, and voidness of all phenomena. Rohan’s novel apparently refers to the latter, whilst in an essay on another sutra — to which we shall return shortly — he also touches upon the speculative intricacies pertaining voidness of the self. The title of the epilogue in *Fūryū butsu* points to a key passage in the *Lotus Sutra*, which is crucial to a full understanding of the complex poetics underlying the novel. In its ending, the narrator relates how the creation of Shu’un is “beyond the slightest question (...) the myriad manifestations of a single Goddess of Enlightened Liberty, never mentioned in the Tripitaka: the very same one that Shuun carved.”¹⁶ The author seems therefore to suggest that there is indeed a truth even beyond the Buddhist (or any given) canon: i.e. that the passionate pursuit of the protagonist creates something more valuable than scriptures. I would at this point not hasten to conclude, as some do, that the creation evoked by Shu’un is so readily identifiable with the Kanzeon who manifests in thirty-three different aspects in one of the most famous chapters of the *Lotus Sutra* (Donath 1998, 1065; Okada 2012, 241–242). Rohan’s text states that the goddess is actually not to be found in any given scripture (*issai kyō ni mo naki*¹⁷), just like Shu’un’s falling in love complements his artistry in ways impossible in a traditional course of study, and, although drawing extensively from the living Buddhist images’

っては、それ危ない哉である) Kōda 1954b, 83. Rohan’s heroines are a concrete embodiment of these speculations as they are endowed with the power to rescue the male characters by means of their love (Okada 2012, 322).

¹⁵ 諸法実相. Burton Watson (1993, 24) in his classic translation of the scripture renders the compound “the true entity of all phenomena,” while Gene Reeves (2008) translates the expression as “the true character of all things,” see below the full quotation of the passage from Reeves’ translation.

¹⁶ “I should give her up completely and at once – renounce all worldly attachments and desire!” (Kurita and Lipson 2005, 150). 我(われ)最早(もはや)すっきりと思(おも)い断(た)ちて煩惱(ぼんのう)愛執(あいしゅう)一切(いっさい)棄(すつ)べし (Kōda 1952, 75–76).

¹⁷ 一切経にもなき.

canon, Rohan's novel is, ultimately, a new work, based on a unique idea. Its reference to tantric praxes, which were also part of the mainstream Buddhist thought, emphasizing the role of sensuality and often centred around the mystic union (yoga) of male and female deities to signify the union of method (*hōben*,¹⁸ *upāya*) and wisdom (*chie*,¹⁹ *prajñā*), nurture and embellish Rohan's poetics, securing to his novel a multi-layered perspective. It is relevant that one of the most noted 'living sculpture' of Japan, the Ichiji Kinrin sculpture, enshrined at a temple in Hiraizumi (Iwate prefecture), and associated with the Shingon tradition in which Rohan also professed an interest,²⁰ depicts Vairocana (Dainichi nyorai) as the principal deity of the *Vajradhatu* mandala (*Kongōkai*²¹). In this case the deity is male, but it is noted since ancient times as the Dainichi of Human Flesh (*Hitohada no Dainichi myorai*²²) because of its lifelike appearance. (Mimi 1991, 331). The choice of one such popular subject as that of an animated statue in Rohan's novel may therefore have sounded less bizarre than it is to contemporary readers, and the links to the philosophical speculation over the ineffability of the ultimate nature of things, beyond words and reasoning, unveils, given the context, a precise interpretation of the significance of literature. So the author deliberately chooses not to close its novel in an ordinary, conventional fashion, be it the definitive separation of the two lovers, or their still achievable, although improbable, reconciliation. If Rohan's novel is assumed to be an allegory of the search for a new meaning of art – a concern that had preoccupied the Meiji literati up to that point – its message becomes rather clear in spite of the elusive language, and seemingly old-fashioned choices of themes. The plentiful quotations from the *Lotus Sutra* yield an important key to the overall meaning of the story. Just before Shu'un's attempts at destroying his creation, the sculptor, sighing, laments his inability to exercise detachment towards the woman with which he has fallen in love.²³

¹⁸ 方便.

¹⁹ 知恵.

²⁰ Many essays mention Shingon Buddhism, among these we have the record of a speech (Kōda 1951, 312–331) that Rohan delivered for a public of youngsters concerning Shingon's founder Kūkai's contribution to literary criticism, in which the priest is defined an important figure in regards to Japan's immaterial heritage and development of thought (*shisō* 思想). One of Rohan's later novels, *Shin Urashima Tarō*, is also sprinkled with tantric imagery, mantras, formulas and rituals (see Donath 1998, 1066–1067).

²¹ 金剛界.

²² 人肌の大日如来.

²³ 是(これ)皆一切経(いっさいきょう)にもなき一体の風流仏、珠運が刻み

Shu'un's cry advocates detachment from *bonnō*²⁴ and *aishū*,²⁵ the desires and cravings of the deluded mind that characterizes the human condition in the realm of cyclic existence. It can be said that sensual love is the most concrete embodiment of such cravings and desires. However, the love that Shu'un feels for the heroine acts as both the drive to save her from her fate and his urge to seek aesthetic beauty. These could hardly be considered two worldly concerns, and, in addition, these are the two factors that ultimately enable him to actualize, in the closing passages of the narrative, a transfiguration of reality into the otherworld that highlights the writer's creative process.²⁶

3. *A (hidden) course in Buddhist Epistemology: the holistic view of Buddhist Doctrine as a literary device in Rohan's early fiction*

By implying that his poetics stem from the doctrine of the *Lotus Sutra*, Rohan seems here to allude to a distinctive vital aspect of the epistemological foundation of Mahayana Buddhism. Postulating the fundamental unity of *samsara* and *nirvana* is a distinctive medieval interpretation of Buddhist doctrine, a hallmark of East-Asian Buddhism, subsumed under the motto *bonnō soku bodai*²⁷ (worldly desires are enlightenment). Given the many overt references throughout the novel, it is likely that Rohan refers also in this case directly to the *Lotus Sutra*, which he must have thoroughly studied, since his family, before turning to Christianity, had belonged to the Hokkeshū, a school in the tradition of Nichiren. The Nichiren school is the Buddhist sect that, along with the Tendai school, maintains the *Lotus Sutra* as the highest expression of Buddha's doctrine. The motto, declined in a number of variants, such as *bonnō soku hannya*²⁸ (the deluded mind is the transcendental wisdom), *shōji soku nehan*²⁹

たると同じ者の千差万別の化身(けしん)にして少しも相違なければ (Kōda 1952, 77–78).

²⁴ 煩惱.

²⁵ 愛執.

²⁶ The allegory concretely points to the creative process of the writer himself, Rohan, who in an article completed a few months after Fūryū butsu, stated "Prose is fiction, but good prose consists of the collected shadows of reality" (quoted in Donath, 1998, 1059).

²⁷ 煩惱即菩提. From this terminology, found classic scriptures such as the *Yuimakyō*, germinated pivotal interpretations of medieval Buddhist conceptions, see below.

²⁸ 菩提即般若.

²⁹ 生死即涅槃.

(the cycle of life and death is nirvana) and *ketsugō soku gedatsu*³⁰ (the binding karma is liberation) sums up, in most medieval interpretations, the pinnacle of Mahayana thought; the concept is, in fact, repeated in many scriptures such as the ‘*kanshūsei*’³¹ section of the *Vimalakīrti-nīrdeśa Sūtra* (*Yūimakyō*³²), and the first fascicle of the *Viśeśacintābrahmapariprocchā sūtra* (*Shiyaku Bonten shomonkyō*³³). It is, in truth, the doctrinal basis that assigns a prominent role to the transformation of ignorant desire, as in the tantric traditions that Rohan also knew. It is surely not a coincidence that the novelist actually named the ten sections of *Fūryū butsu* after the ten factors, or aspects, that constitute ultimate reality; this is referred to in a specific passage of the *Lotus Sūtra* which is well worth quoting:

止舍利弗。不須復說。所以者何。佛所成就第一希有難解之法。唯佛與佛乃能究盡。

But this is enough Shariputra. No more needs to be said. Why? Because what the Buddha has achieved is most rare and difficult to understand. Only among buddhas can the true character of all things be fathomed.

諸法實相。所謂諸法如是相。如是性。如是體。如是力。如是作。如是因。如是緣。如是果。如是報。如是本末究竟等。

This is because every existing thing has such characteristics, such a nature, such an embodiment, such powers, such actions, such causes, such conditions, such effects, such rewards and retributions, and yet such a complete fundamental coherence.³⁴

This passage lists ten aspects (*nyoze*³⁵) or factors of suchness (*shinnyo*³⁶), the nature of reality: Rohan also lists all ten, one for each chapter’s title of his novel, even though these titles apparently have no direct connection with the unfolding of the main plot. In the passage quoted above, the *Lotus Sūtra* also clarifies how these ten factors constitute the “true aspect of all phenomena” (*shohō*

³⁰ 結業即解脫。

³¹ 觀衆生。

³² 維摩經。

³³ 思益梵天所問經。

³⁴ The English rendering of this famous Lotus Sūtra passage is that of the recent translation by Gene Reeves (2008, 76). For the original text from Kumārajīva’s Chinese translation of the sūtra I consulted the digital Taishō tripitaka by the University of Tokyo, see http://21dzk.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/SAT/T0262_09.0005c09:0005c10.cit (last consulted 15/06/2016), cfr. T0262_09.0005c11-13 in the digitized archive.

³⁵ 如是。

³⁶ 真如。

*jissō*³⁷). It is noteworthy that this nature, or suchness, to which this particular sutra refers as the character of all things, is precisely what the other scriptures define ultimate “emptiness” (*kū*,³⁸ Śūnya), the crux of the Madhyamika philosophy. Assigning the novel’s ten chapters according to the ten factors then confirms Rohan’s intention to recount a journey in search of greater truths. The fact that scriptures deem this ultimate nature of reality as unfathomable is what prompts the author to leave the novel unfinished by conventional standards.³⁹

So the closing passage of the chapter before the last is actually rooted in an apophatic vision of reality. In the doctrinal interpretation offered by the *Lotus Sutra*, the nature of reality can be “understood only between Buddhas” (*yui butsu yo butsu nai nō kū jin*⁴⁰); even the translation of the Sutra’s title in Kumārajīva’s version, *Myōhō renga kyō*,⁴¹ alludes to a transcendental principle of reality (*hō*⁴²) considered “ineffable, unfathomable” (*myō*⁴³). This dharma beyond any description is the reality conventionally described as the “true aspect of all phenomena,” and yields a particular interpretation of what, in the broader context of Mahayana thought, is the true meaning of emptiness, corresponding to the level of the ultimate truth (*paramārtha satya*). According to one edition of the novel, the assertion – probably expunged in most editions due to its obscureness – with which Rohan closes the passage of the work right before the epilogue, “this is truly the most unfathomable thing, the mystery of all mysteries,”⁴⁴ clarifies to what extent the author is indebted to the complex doctrinal framework that supports his prose fiction. In other words, drawing a pattern typical of the romantic European Bildungsroman, Rohan engages in a type of novel that exalts the search for a spiritual higher dimension, a distinctive feature of the East-Asian tradition of thought and manner of writing.

³⁷ 諸法實相.

³⁸ 空.

³⁹ Kōda (1952, 77), see above. One edition of the text — digitized by Aozora’s library, see <http://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000051/card2710.html> (last consulted 15/06/2016) — closes the passage of the chapter before last with the additional remarks *gen no mata gen, maka fushigi* 玄(げん)の又(また)玄(げん)摩訶不思議(まかふしぎ), see the comments below.

⁴⁰ 唯佛與佛乃能究盡.

⁴¹ 妙法蓮華經.

⁴² 法.

⁴³ 妙.

⁴⁴ See above note 29.

Let us now make a comparison with another aspect of traditional epistemology to which Rohan is drawn. The words that the author employs to describe the transfiguration of the deluded desire and feelings of the protagonist of his novel,⁴⁵ closely resemble a metaphor that Rohan employed in a commentary on another important Buddhist scripture, the *Heart Sutra* (*Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya*, *Hannya Shingyō*⁴⁶), titled “The deeper meaning of the *Heart Sutra*” (*Hannya shingyō dainigi chū*,⁴⁷ August 1890). In it, Rohan glosses the famous verse “form (matter) is not different from emptiness, emptiness is not different from form”⁴⁸ in this fashion:

然し誰も自己の色身のために色々様々のことをなして、錦欄緞子を纏はせたがり美味佳肴を食わせたがり、此正體不明のものに執着して堅く我身ぞとおもひ込み、之を随分可愛がりてやるなり。噫、即ち此處が顛底妄想、悔を後來に残す種子なり。此四大所成の身は、恰も水を堅めて氷となしたる其氷の堅くあるうちの如く果敢なきものなり。氷というもの、其堅きが氷の相なり。而して氷は堅きといへる相を有すれど、其相は永遠不變のものにあらず、元來寒氣によって成りたる堅相なれば、一朝春風の吹くときは其堅きといへる相は空となる。それと同じく我等が赤肉團は、五十年か六十年か暫時の間、因縁によりて業果によりて人の相をなし居れど、元來四大の和合によりて成就したるもの故、無常の風來り生・住・壞・空の順序に追はれて、いづれへか露伴も飛散り、誰も彼も飛散る。されど中々如是悟つては居られず、毎日毎日只今も昨朝も矢張り此色身を愛し、此色身の為に我等の働き居ること、實に残念心外の事なり。

But anybody is keen on doing things for this very body of flesh, like wanting to have it wrapped up in a fashionable and pleasurable attire, let it eat and drink deliciously; we contrive a strong conviction that this body, whose real nature stays unclear, represents our self, and we hold it pretty dear. Ah, this is it — the source of the fundamental delusion, the seed from which all future regrets are bound to spring out. This body, made up of the four elements like ice made of crystallized water has, in itself, no other intent than to stay hard for as much as it lasts; its only characteristic being that of being solid. And although a block of ice does possess a solid nature, it is hardly the case that this nature can be labelled eternal or unchanging. The sheer truth is that since it is the product of cool air, this apparently solid block is bound to vanish one morning when the spring breeze rises. Likewise, this mortal coil made of flesh and bones, let it

⁴⁵ “His resentment, His anger, both froze: ice over flame” (Kurita and Lipson 2005, 151).

⁴⁶ 般若心經.

⁴⁷ 般若心經第二義注, see Kōda 1958, 79–103. See also Mulhern 1977, 62–67.

⁴⁸ *Shiki fu i kū, kū fu i shiki* 色不異空空不異色.

be for some fifty or maybe sixty years, has solidified into a human appearance because of causes and conditions, of actions and their consequences, and yet, since this is originally the coming together of the four raw elements, it is subject to impermanence, compelled by the cyclic rhythm of becoming, staying, unravelling, and disappearing. One day this man, Rohan, will fade away, nor it will be different for any other person in this world. And yet, it is very difficult to realize this truth [*nyoze*], and we hold dear this body of flesh every day and every moment, undertaking any kind of endeavour on behalf of it, a pitiful thing indeed, regrettable beyond words.⁴⁹

This, in Rohan's words, is the reflection on the illusory nature of the self-inspired by the Buddhist scriptures. The essay offers a unique interpretation of what is perhaps the most noted Mahayana scripture, striving to focus on the general meaning of spiritual enquiry on the journey to awakening. Once again, Rohan reveals an eminently modern mentality, sustained by the kind of spiritual endeavour which could be summarized in the phrase "do not seek to fill in the footsteps of the men of old: seek what they sought." His main concern is to accomplish the goal of deriving a single meaning out of the *Heart Sutra*, a meaning valid beyond all traditions, perhaps even religions, rooted into actual experience. It is far beyond the scripture's literal meaning, and Rohan encourages the readers of the sutra to go beyond the words and straight into the actualization of the experience of the truth that the sutra signifies, in the firm conviction that the sages of the past have strived to synthesize in words and parables a truth that in reality cannot be expressed through such means. The similes and parables of the scripture just foster the urge to actualise this truth through reflection. Reasoning is part of the experience, although it does not subsume all of it.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, as early as the 1890s, Rohan already tackled consistently in his fiction the main concerns of East-Asian philosophical speculation, and he encompassed such speculations freely into his poetics. His novel, *Fūryū butsu*, could be interpreted as an allegory of the search for a new fiction, and, on more general terms, as a unique interpretation of the Romantic ideals stressing the power of imagination and the artist's quest for passion and beauty. At the same time, Rohan's carefully devised architecture of allusions and quotations yields multi-layered interpretations, testifying to his greatness as both a writer and a

⁴⁹ Kōda 1958, 86–87.

thinker. The opening of his novel, “Thus I have heard,” implies a substitution of the faith in Buddhist doctrine that characterises the spiritual path with the faith of the carver’s character, Shu’un, in his *shishō* (master)’s teachings. The sculptor thus represents a Japanized version of the Romantic hero, while his female counterpart is an even more complex entity, inspired by a mix of popular religious beliefs, high doctrines, and yet fundamentally a literary creation. The outlook on Buddhist doctrines that Rohan relies upon in his works reveals an eminently modern mentality, and he uses it consciously to build the poetical core of his first novels, making them all the more compelling. Moreover, Rohan’s syncretism of eastern and western’s spiritual traditions — as well as his sound enquiry on human nature — is evident in the fact that the story of Shu’un and Otatsu seems to bring together the Buddhist ideal of compassion with the Christian conception of piety. Many elements in Rohan’s early fiction trace back to Western notions, which were also slowly being incorporated into modern Japan’s cultural asset. A man of his time, Rohan turned to his own cultural tradition to draw further inspiration beside European Romanticism. The elements he derives from Buddhism, Daoism, as well as any other tradition in his original works are not an end but a means. The author, relying freely on his vast erudition, clearly sticks to his role as a novelist. His craft as a philologist and exegete does not prevail, at least in this first phase, over that of the man of letters. Clearly, ever since his early works such as *Fūryū butsu*, the writer strives to promote art for art’s sake, trying to restore the dignity of Japanese modern fiction, which was undergoing a process of change that was no longer reversible. More than any answers, he seems to raise questions for his readers. Therefore, reading *Fūryū butsu* — as the English translators note in the preface — we can ask ourselves the question this Meiji man is addressing to the benefit of posterity: can imagination liberate the spirit in a putatively “enlightened” era, in which freedom is stifled?

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