

Kyōgoku Natsuhiko, a rhetoric beyond the second degree

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1. Introduction

“Describing” represents one of the central issues in the relationship between the writer – or, more in general, the artist- and the reader. On the one hand, the author constantly strives to develop new descriptive writing strategies. On the other hand, we find the reception of the literary works, which, as also theorized by Eco¹, is quite a difficult process in itself. However, it may get even more complex when the described object breaks away from the concept of known and approaches the fascinating and exciting world of the “supernatural”².

This is the challenge taken on by Kyōgoku Natsuhiko (京極夏彦, b. 1963). An active author since 1994, he has been widely rewarded and acclaimed by the public and critique at national level³. His production constantly sways between fantasy and *mystery* and is characterized by the peculiar trans textual dimension in which it develops. The works consist in hypertexts derived from selected hypo texts from within the literary and iconographic patrimony of pre-modern Japan. This study aims at analysing rhetorical methods derived from such rearrangement. In particular, we will focus on the collection entitled *hyakki yagyō* (“night parade of one hundred demons” 百鬼夜行), which appeared shortly after the burst of the *bubble*

¹ See Eco 2000

² As Todorov points out, Fantastic requires the reader to adopt a certain attitude toward the text, rejecting poetic and allegorical reading which destroy the pure Fantastic. See Todorov 2000

³ Among the numerous awards given to the author, we here mention the Izumi Kyōka Award – granted to mystery novels – and the Naoki Award the most prestigious prize for Japanese popular literature.

economy with *The Summer of Ubume* (*Ubume no Natsu* 産女の夏, 1994). The peculiar dimension of the latter highlights a “crisis within the crisis”. The lost decade⁴ is the product of a particularly tense historical period and is set in Tokyo in 1952, year that marks the end of the American occupation⁵. This is the background to the spiritual possessions by fake supernatural creatures and the distortions of individual’s perceptions that follow one another in the works. An investigator is therefore in charge of re-establishing normal conditions. He deals with the culprit by applying a Freudian technique, to which the writer’s hand adds his background knowledge in the field of exorcism both from Buddhist and Shintō perspectives. The debut novel of this collection – to which we will here dedicate a separate case study – focuses on a creature whose image is the result of a layering of elements taken from the cultural folklore of geographical regions which are different from East Asia, and which Kyōgoku reorganizes in order to describe a typically feminine psychological drama. In *The Summer of Ubume*, in particular, we observe a Freudian perspective in its view of fantasy genre – the “return of the repressed” – which is expressed by the imaginary twenty-month long pregnancy experienced by the protagonist of the novel, the woman “possessed” by the supernatural creature which inspired the title of the work. In this novel it is the rhetoric of fantasy itself which represents the most amazing element: Kyōgoku’s pen goes far beyond the idea of “literature in the second degree” seen as a rearrangement of different texts⁶, and penetrates the iconographic and supernatural production in post-modern Japan. The journey into this dimension is characterized by various forms and different shades of colour, which can frighten and at the same time amaze the reader. The result of such a journey is a literary subject in which the strokes of the old *emakimono* – the “painted scrolls” – melt with the tradition of Japanese Medieval ghost stories.

⁴ With *lost decade* we mean the years following the *bubble economy*, namely from the early 1990’s to the beginning of the 21st century. See Saxonhouse 2004

⁵ See Schaller 1987

⁶ Génette 1997: 5-10

2. Kyōgoku and the *hyakki yagyō* series

The *yōkai ungaku* (妖怪文学) – the “literature of Japanese monsters” – is the context in which we must place Kyōgoku’s poetry, a separate dimension within the Japanese fantasy literature (*gensō bungaku* 幻想文学)⁷, a style whose narrative dynamics and rhetoric draw inspiration from the complexity of autochthonous supernatural creatures (*yōkai*) and make it the focus of their aesthetic research⁸. Midway between folklore, spirituality and art, with their evident symbolism, *yōkai* communicate fears and feelings in a way that is often more incisive than human protagonists, thus constantly proving the close connection between these supernatural creatures and “society”, as well as the link between “old” and “modern”. Over the last two centuries, the *yōkaigaku* – the Japanese “demonology”⁹– has made various attempts to systematization. These have produced different and often contrasting results, probably due to the very nature of these creatures, often unsteadily swinging between “good” (*zen*) and “evil” (*aku*), while avoiding to be definitely classified in any way in either of the two spheres.

At the moment, Kyōgoku’s re-writing efforts amount to about forty works –mainly over a thousand page long novels. The core of its work is the material concerning these creatures. His poetry is the result of his studies on the *yōkaigaku* carried out together with important figures in the field¹⁰, to which he has applied his previously acquired designer’s skills, in order to

⁷ Together with the *kaiki shōsetsu* (“mystery novel”) it is one of the most common ways to refer to fantasy novels. Napier 1996: 10-25

⁸ In an essay of 2002 the critic Higashi draws the attention to the term, to then analyse it in detail in later works. Others will use it with the expression *yōkai shōsetsu* (“*yōkai* novels”). See Higashi 2002; Ichianagi 2006

⁹ The beginning of the *yōkaigaku* can be said to be the year 1886, when Inoue Enryō (1859-1919) - founder of the discipline - set up the Yōkaigaku Kenkyūkai (Association for Research on supernatural creatures) at the Imperial University of Tokyo. Komatsu 2007: 20-23

¹⁰ Kyōgoku’s production includes scientific articles, which show an important interest for aspects of the history of *yōkaigaku* and its secularization. Kyōgoku 2002: 547-582

reinterpret the *yōkai* from an iconographic point of view¹¹. In fact, it is Kyōgoku himself who has realised the resin models that appear on his books' covers and from which we perceive the hand of his maestro, the famous *manga* author Mizuki Shigeru (1922-2007)¹². Similarly to writers belonging to previous eras¹³, he draws from the stylistic features of *kaidan* productions (“ghost stories”) and *zukan* (“illustrated volumes”)¹⁴ from the second half of the Edo period (1603-1867) and applies them to a new type of innovative novel created for 21st century readers, in which past superstitions and modern society meet.

As regards identifying palimpsests, Kyōgoku himself provides us with information and details, by offering quotes in the text and in-depth analysis in the afterword. In the *hyakki yagyō* series, which opens with *The summer of ubume* and is still in progress, for a total of fourteen elements, he develops a method of modular re-writing in which references to *yōkai* belonging to a particular palimpsest are made, in a narrative context that is chronologically distant from the dimension of the hypo text. The result is a work based on a specific superstition, in which the “supernatural” element withdraws within the logical processes and scientific knowledge that characterize the modern era in which the novel is set.

Kyōgoku's palimpsest is Toriyama Sekien's work (鳥山石燕, 1712-1788), *Gazu Hyakki Yagyō* (*The Illustrated Demoniac Horde* 画図百鬼

¹¹ Following his studies in figurative and plastic arts, before devoting himself to writing, the author works for many years for a designers' studio.

¹² Mizuki Shigeru is one of the best interpreters of contemporary world's *yōkai-ga*. He influenced many generations of Japanese people with his *Gegege no Kitarō* (*Kitarō of Graveyards*, 1960), a series in which the main character is a boy who is half human half *yōkai*. It was first launched as a *manga* and has then become *anime* in many remakes. See Papp 2010b

¹³ Among the many authors, here comes to mind the famous writer Akutagawa Ryūnosuke who, on top of his numerous re-interpretations of indigenous popular novels, he also wrote works that revolve around the image of a *yōkai*. See Ceci 1995

¹⁴ It is an encyclopaedic production developed from the *honzōgaku*, Chinese “herbalism” in the Six Dynasties Period (220-589). In this and similar works, every type of life known to man is recorded, animal or plant, and often the text is accompanied by an illustration. Komatsu 2007: 5-30

夜行, 1776)¹⁵, a catalogue of *yōkai* – for a total of 206 – in which each creature is represented by a *sashi-e* (“illustration”), and in some cases, it is also followed by a brief note on the relative superstition. Sekien’s work offers a broad view over ghosts and widely known legendary creatures such as *tengu*, *kappa*¹⁶ and *tsukumogami* (“animated tools 付喪神)¹⁷ as well as less famous figures – maybe even created by the author himself¹⁸ – such as *shirachigo* – the “white valet”¹⁹ – and *shiranui* (lit. “unknown flame”), a Japanese monster belonging to the group of “supernatural flames” (*kaika*)²⁰. As we are writing, thirty-six *yōkai* have been brought back to life in Kyōgoku’s pages. Thirty of those have been created since 1999, while in the first five years of work only six had been produced. This is due to a variation in the literary format of the *hyakki yagyō* in the course of production. If in the “first period” (1994-1998) the author chooses the “long novel” style, in 1999 – year marked by the publication of *Demoniac Horde – Shadow (Hyakki Yagyō – In)* – he launches a parallel style of *tanpenshū* (“collection of short stories”), in which he includes various narrations with different *yōkai* thematic focus, without, however, ever mixing them. Already in the Muromachi period (1337-1573) we find rolls depicting parades of demons and other grotesque creatures. However, Sekien and Kyōgoku’s approach to *emakimono*, based on *yōkai* themes and previous

¹⁵ The catalogue is composed of four elements, each one of which is divided into three sections containing a variable number of *yōkai*, from nine to a maximum of twenty-two. See Toriyama 2010

¹⁶ Very popular figures in the folklore: the first is an altered crow, whose origins are in India, while the second is a river dweller who enjoys making fun of men. See Miyake 2006 and 2008

¹⁷ *Tsukumogami* are *yōkai* born out of artefacts and other objects of various types, in particular musical instruments and household furnishing connected to Buddhist practices. See Reider 2009

¹⁸ According to a study carried out by the scholar Kondō, some *yōkai* which make up the series are not taken from pre-existing material, but are rather created from scratch by Sekien who got his inspiration from obsolete toponyms and personal names. Kondō 2012: 79-83

¹⁹ A peculiar *yōkai* of which we find traces only in Sekien’s work. It is portrayed as a young man with grotesque features busy writing down on paper what dictated by his boss, an *inugami* (“dog-god”). Toriyama 2010: 16

²⁰ Toriyama Sekien 2010: 88; Mizuki and Murakami 2006: 177-178

to *Gazu Hyakki Yagyō*²¹, is to isolate the single creatures, meaning that they are not shown as a single flow, they are rather framed in individual settings, thus giving each one of them total independence. The title given to each short story corresponds to the name of a Japanese monster, just as for the *sashi-e* of Edo's *zukan*: the connotation intrinsic to the creature allows Kyōgoku to set up his narrative frame on the solid foundations of a social imaginary that has taken shape over the centuries and which is flexible enough to be re-interpreted. The result is a fragmented “parade of demons” –or, using a contemporary expression, a *slide show* – in which the symbolism typical of *yōkai* sets the topic of the novel, from the concept of “jealousy” in *Jōrōgumo no Kotowari* (The Spider-woman's Mind, 1996) to the “broken promise” expressed by the *narigama* – the “crying pot” – by *Tsurezure bukuro - Ame* (Stories of Inanimate Objects – Rain, 1999).

If a rewriting process that emphasizes content over form seems limited because the palimpsest itself lacks textual parts, it is rather in the formal aspects and in the peritextual choices – such as the introduction of Sekien's *sashi-e* in the title page – that it is most evident. The sequence in which creatures appear is here turned upside down: among some of the examples we could give, we here mention the fifth *yōkai* described by Kyōgoku, the “spider-woman” (*jōrōgumo*)²², which is found in the second element of the first volume of Sekien's series; moreover, *Stories of animate objects*, which, despite drawing exclusively from the third *maki* of *Gazu Hyakki Yagyō*, it completely changes the internal disposition of the narration. On the contrary, Sekien's choice of dedicating a separate section to the *tsukumogami* is maintained and the image of the *yōkai* as an outsider to the rest of the world, is thus shared by the two authors.

The series is composed of original narrations created by Kyōgoku, who has distanced the spatial and time setting from the dimension of the hypo text in order to locate it in 1950's Tokyo: mysterious events, only apparently connected to the supernatural, but rather explained through Freudian psychoanalysis, follow one another in a constant relocation between reality and superstition. The elements connected to the *yōkai* are presented as

²¹ Among the many examples, we here refer to the *Hyakki Yagyō Emaki* (Illustrated rolls of the demonic horde, 15th cent.), an important work for Sekien and consequently Kyōgoku's writings. Tanaka 2007; Lillehoj 2007

²² It is a female *yōkai* who looks like a hybrid being half human half-spider. Toriyama Sekien 2010: 27

“possessions” (*hyōi*), distortions of the perception which lead the individual to act unconsciously thus following the path traced by myth. The technique used by Chūzenji Akihito – the series’ mystery solver – is referred to as *tsukimono otoshi* (exorcism 憑物落とし) and – according to the critic Nagase²³ – seems partly retrieved from Jungian therapy. This theory is supported by the numerous references made to the Swiss psychoanalyst in Kyōgoku’s pages. The investigator gains the upper hand by sowing the seed of doubt in the “possessed person’s mind”. He thus takes down the wall of superstition, in line with the motto he often pronounces «Nothing is supernatural in this world, Sekiguchi!»²⁴. When the “identification” has successfully taken place, the “patient” regains possession of his or her own free will. If this does not take place, the “patient” projects onto him or herself the total responsibility of their actions without, however, getting rid of the “shadow”²⁵. An example of this is represented by the protagonist of *Jōrōgumo no Kotowari*, now incapable of wiggling out of the web that she has herself made in order to carry out a carnage.

The *hyakki yagyō* series portrays a country that is making a vain attempt to leave its past behind: change is everywhere- at political, social and urban level- and in this spirit of renovation, “identity” seems so unstable that the characters fall prey to superstitions typical of an old world that “modernity” does not manage to undermine, thus showing how strongly the supernatural is again felt in Japan at the time of the American occupation. The characters’ dialogues reveal their liable psychological conditions, and the repeated use of terms referring to Japanese monsters, also by people who are alien to the supernatural world, thickens the ghostly veil that wraps the novel. In the words of inspector Kiba – the “representative of the law” in the *detective story* -, for instance, we find images concerning the Supernatural used to pass judgement on the represented society. In the man’s speech, a survivor of World War II, the very idea of “justice” (*seigi*) is correlated to the concept of “ghost” (*obake*), thus underlining the idea that past values are now only a vague ghost of what they once were.

²³ Nagase 1999: 7- 28

²⁴ The sentence often appears in this collection. Sekiguchi Tatsumi, instead, is the *side character* that sides in the various narrations as a sort of Watson for Sherlock Holmes.

²⁵ See Jung 2010

“Look at me, Harasawa. I was one of those people who thought the war was right. When I heard the Emperor give his speech on the radio, I didn't know what to think. But now that I've had time to cool off, I understand that we were a little crazy back then. And I think that the democratic thing we're doing now is the right way. So maybe justice isn't anything more than a ghost of an idea” (Kyōgoku 2009: 388-389)

From the dialogues pronounced by the characters we detect a world of disappointment. These are “ghosts” who look for “ghosts” in the vain attempt of exorcising their own fears about the future. Still puzzled about the country's conditions following the American troops' retreat, Kyōgoku's Tokyo citizens fall victim to a disease that consumes them from within and which is called “uncertainty”, until the person who is in charge of both ancient Japanese wisdom and Western Science comes to free them from such a psychological domination.

3. Rhetoric of Supernatural: the “ghostly parturient”

As far as the image of women in *yōkai* is concerned, narrations and iconography often touch upon ideas such as descent, pregnancy, maternity and sexuality. On top of representing some transformations often undergone by the female body, there are also clear references to psychological processes and social hierarchy, to women's power to generate life and to the “impure” nature of menstrual blood. The female dwellers of streams and bridges – the *hime* (young girls) -, for example, are often associated to the idea of “virginity” as they are known for protecting their territories against men's passage. Others, such as the *futakuchi onna* (“slit-mouthed woman”) and the *rokurokubi* (“spiral neck”), instead are granted with a strong erotic component, which is expressed through their physical characteristics: in the case of the first woman, we notice a further mouth on the top of the head- a reference to the sexual organ- the second woman uses her long and sinuous neck to peek at men from behind screens or small windows in public toilets²⁶.

²⁶ Takemura 2006; Foster 2007

We then have the *ubume* (産女)²⁷, the “ghostly parturient”, the creature at the centre of *The summer of ubume* – Kyōgoku’s best known work both nationally and internationally²⁸. Here the conveyed image is clear and, as the author himself often points out by quoting old works, it corresponds to the ideas of “pregnancy” and “maternity”.

... occurring when a woman dies with a child unborn in her womb, and the body is then discarded improperly. Should the child not perish, but emerge in the wild, than the soul of the mother will take form, and clutching her babe to her walks at night. The crying of the babe is called the birth-wail. The *ubume* appears weak and drenched from the waist down in blood... (*ibid.*, 6)

Moreover:

Of all tales told, that of *ubume* is the most confounding. It is said that, when a woman who is with child passes away, her attachment to the babe takes physical form. She appears then as an apparition, drenched in blood from the waistdown, and crying like a bird, saying “*obareee, obareee*”. (*ibid.*)²⁹

The passages included in the translation belong to the *Kiizodanshū* (*Collection of Miraculous Tales*, 1687) and to the *Hyaku Monogatari Hyōban* (*Report of One-hundred Stories*, 1686). These two works are particularly emblematic of pre-modern fantasy genre, in which an important number of superstitions and representations of creatures converge: the numerous

²⁷ There exist different superstitions, but the common approach would be to describe it as the ghost of a woman who has died while giving birth to her child. Mizuki and Murakami 2005: 47

²⁸ There is an English version of this novel. Other translated works include *Rū Garū* (*Loups Garous*, 2001) and the *manga* of the novel *Mōryō no Hako* (*Box of Goblins*, 1995). Kyōgoku 2009 and 2010

²⁹ *Obareee*, together with *urameshiya*, is the commonest sound produced by Japanese ghosts.

references made in the first two pages of the book³⁰, represent a diachronic path, in other words, milestones placed by Kyōgoku in order to allow the reader to get familiar with the cultural background behind the novel's *yōkai*. At the end of this journey across pre-modern Japan, the reader is then transported to the reality of 1952 Tokyo, and thus experiences the same sensation of displacement and cognitive dissonance felt by the characters.

In the indigenous folklore, the *ubume* is a woman who has died before being able to give birth, and that has then been buried while still carrying her baby in her womb. Torn by pain and regret, after her death the young lady's spirit becomes a *yōkai* destined to wander in the world of humans. She is usually portrayed with her body covered in blood while she holds her infant tightly to her breast. According to superstition, she usually manifests herself to male passers-by near some crossroads or a bridge, at sunset (*tasogare* 黄昏)³¹, and asks them to save, or more simply, to hold her child. The latter seems to possess particular powers: according to the situation, he can make huge fortunes appear or disproportionately increase his weight so as to become an unsustainable burden for the unlucky man who has accepted the *ubume*'s request. In other cases, he may even end up killing him³². The version of the *Kiizōdanshū*, in which the infant bothers the unlucky man, sees the intervention of Buddha Amida who comes to calm the woman and child's unsettled souls³³.

The choice of associating, in the title of this work, the idea of "summer" (*natsu*) to this *yōkai* takes on an extremely symbolical meaning. As the ethnographer Yanagita Kunio (1875-1962) pointed out, in Japanese culture summer corresponds to the "ghosts season", in connection to the day of the

³⁰ On top of the two already mentioned works, Kyōgoku introduces passages taken from the *Honzōkōmoku* (*Compendium of Medicine*, 1578) and from *Nanashichigusa* (77493, end of 18th cent.).

³¹ As Andō underlines in the volume *Tasogare no Kuni* (*The Land of Twilight*, 2010), it is believed that ghostly appearances take place at sunset, when the distinction between "light" and "darkness" is less clear. Andō 2010: 13-27

³² Mizuki and Murakami 2005: 46-47

³³ According to the Buddhist tradition, a woman who dies without experiencing pregnancy would end up in the "hell for women unable to bear children", while women who die during childbirth will populate the "pond of blood hell". See Stone and Namba 2008

dead, Obon³⁴, in the month of August. The *ubume* of indigenous legends is in fact classified in *yōkaigaku* as *yūrei* (ghost), whose season corresponds exactly to the hottest period of the year. This setting has also been chosen by Kyōgoku for most of the stories told in the main plot of his work. In a nutshell, the novel describes how some ghosts sneak into a group of characters just in the period of the year in which they manifest most strongly. These spirits bring disarray in the group through appearances that follow the unsettled rhythm of possessions.

The Summer of the Ubume reveals a typically feminine psychological drama. A hospital located in the deep wood and managed by a family of doctors who have been practicing medicine since feudal times, is the centre of strange events. Kids are born with malformations, a man disappears, a woman carries her baby in her womb for over twenty months, infants mysteriously disappear from the maternity ward. The basic plot is focused on the ménage “a quatre” of two couples of lovers who are torn by external influences and strange coincidences. In contrast with this structure that plays around the concept of the “double”, we have the *yōkai* dichotomy based on the characteristics of the “ghostly parturient” and its counterpart in the Chinese imaginary, the *kokakuchō* (lit. “bird-woman predator” 姑獲鳥)³⁵, which is also present in the story. The latter is a woman who uses the powers of a feathered rope to kidnap children and bring them up as if they were her own. In order to describe this myth Kyōgoku recurs to an ancient Chinese text of an encyclopaedic nature, *Honzōkōmoku* (*Compendium of Medicine*, 1578)³⁶.

³⁴ In Yanagita’s works we find the expression *yūrei no kisetsu* (“ghosts’ season”) referred to the hottest months of the year: in the traditional view, the after world is placed near the world of the living and dead people’s souls come back to visit their families during Obon. See Yanagita 2007

³⁵ The prototype brought by the Chinese iconography that consists in a hybrid creature half woman half bird whose name is composed of three characters: the first defines a higher class woman or an older lady, depending on the situation it may be interpreted as “mother-in-law”. The second represents the idea of “predator”, while the third is a “bird”, with reference to the characteristics that are partly similar to a bird. The same creature appears also as “celestial girl” and “night girl”. See Komatsu 2009 and 2010

³⁶ Ascribed to Li Shizen (1518-1593) it is the text from which develops the *hakubutsugaku*, “cataloguing science”, spread in Japan among the neo-Confucian elite in the Tokugawa period. Komatsu 2007: 5-30

Being a type of demon, often possessed of human soul, frequently seen in Jingzhou in Hubei. When the ubume wears feathers it becomes a winged bird, and when the feathers are removed, it becomes a woman. When a woman who is with child dies, she becomes an ubume. Thus, the ubume has two breasts upon its chest, and wants nothing more than to steal the child of living woman and make it her own. Therefore, houses with infants should never hang their clothes outside at night, for the bird will come and mark them with a drop of blood. The infant will then be visited by fright convulsions and disease, these being called maladies of misfortune. It should be noted that these birds are, without exception, female. They come at night in the late summer to bewilder men. (Kyōgoku 2009: 6)

While writing his work, Kyōgoku is aware of the existing dichotomy between the Chinese and the indigenous myth, and, through Chūzenji's words he presents new issues on the subject:

The Chinese kokakucho are said to steal away girl infants and raise them as their own, which is the complete opposite of how the ubume behaves, yes? That, and you usually write ubume with the characters for “giving birth” and “woman”. (*ibid.*, 40)

We are faced with a *yōkai* which has a triple symbolic value, each one of which represents the main characteristics that in the East Asian region are given to the creature. The *ubume*'s origins are traced back to China. However, once imported in Japan, the latter finds a substantially independent development. Chūzenji himself informs the reader about the different aspects of the myth:

To a man's eyes, the “ghostly parturient” appears as a woman; a woman, instead, sees in her the image of an infant, finally, if she has to be considered by the sound she makes, she could be seen as a bird. All these different views correspond to the same subject. (*ibid.*, 50)

Reading on, we then notice how such perplexities become more manifest:

But why would someone mix up the kokakucho and the ubume? Stealing a child and giving a child away are completely opposite things. (*ibid.*, 41)

Based on ideas that are strongly opposed to each other, the two creatures well reflect the images of “biological mother” and “psychological mother” suggested by the anthropologist Kawai in a piece written on “maternity” in the *yōkai yamanba*, the “old lady from the mountains”³⁷. The first is a direct image of the maternal instinct of protecting the child and continuing the species, as she herself will keep on living in the following generation. The other, the “psychological mother”, arbitrarily imposes herself as the mother of a child with whom she does not have any biological connections³⁸. The *ubume* is the symbol of a life that has been interrupted at its very beginning, a horrifying oxymoron between life and death, from which it is impossible to escape. On the contrary, the “bird-woman” desperately tries to change the course of her life by following an illusion. Starting from the title, *Kyōgoku*, tracing Sekien’s footsteps, places alongside the Chinese characters *kokakuchō* the interpretation in *hiragana ubume*, thus recreating the ambiguity concerning the palimpsest of the two superstitions. Therefore, if his predecessor reaffirms the fusion between the two creatures by carving the *ubume*’s hair so as to bring back to mind the wings of the bird-woman, *Kyōgoku* instead chooses a double possession in which two women belonging to the same family– the sisters *Kyōko* and *Ryōko* – re-live the myths of the “ghostly parturient” and of the *kokakuchō*.

Both in love with the same man, *Makio*, the two girls live the drama that he and their mother *Kikuno* are suffering: on the one hand, we have *Ryōko*, who gives birth to a child conceived in rape, who is in turn killed by his grandmother in order to hide the incestuous event to the world. Following these tragic events, the young woman develops multiple personalities, one of which, the angry *ubume*, kills *Kikuno* e *Makio*, while the other re-lives the myth of the bird-woman and kidnaps children from the maternity ward of the family clinic. On the other hand, *Kyōko*, whose marriage with *Makio* is in crisis, decides to hide her problems by unconsciously staging a pregnancy that lasts over twenty months, thus embodying the other side of the *ubume*, which is the idea of “gestation”. The woman aspires to a happy marriage and sex life, made impossible by her husband’s continual refusals. Her relationship with *Makio* drives her crazy to the point of stabbing him. It is, however, the sister

³⁷ Kawai 2007: 41-60

³⁸ See Wakita 2006; Glassman 2001

who commits the crime, thus sealing the sisterhood that is the framework of their relationship³⁹.

The myth of the *ubume* consists in the spirit of a woman who has come back from the world of the dead – in this specific case from the “blood pond” (*chi no ike*) - in order to place the child in the safe hands of someone who may look after him on her behalf. The relationship with blood (*chi*), that emerges in the passage «the woman is covered in blood from her waist down» taken from the *Hyaku Monogatari Hyōban*, is one of the *yōkai*'s distinctive traits, and in some diegetic segments Kyōgoku highlights this detail:

Her hair had come loose. Her face was pale and expressionless. The veins rose on her forehead. Her white blouse, soaked with the rain, clung to her. I could clearly see the lines of her body. She was red with blood from the waist down. She was beautiful. She was not of this world. She was the *ubume*. (Kyōgoku 2009: 310)

It is in passages such as this, concerning the *ubume*'s appearance, that Kyōgoku's stylistic choices are best understood: compared to the brief utterance of the *Hyaku Monogatari Hyōban*, the text that should be its direct expansion seems greatly influenced by the iconography concerning the *ubume*. In particular, the image that takes shape through the words of the author seems similar to the “ghostly parturient” portrayed in the *Hyakkai zukan* (The Illustrated Volume of a Hundred Demons, 1737) by Sawaki Sūshi (1707-1772) and in the *Bakemonozukushi* (*List of Monstrous Creatures*, early 18th century). Both works emphasise the lower part of the girl's body through shades of deep red and the drapery of the material that partly hides her. In actual fact, the description provided by the witness of the appearance gives the impression of being the result of calm and ecstatic contemplation of a painting made of perturbing lines, rather than a reaction to the sudden appearance of a ghost.

The style adopted by Kyōgoku is based on brief and precise utterances by Chūzenji to describe the *yōkai*'s various states, and draws liberally from the tradition of the *hyaku monogatari* (“one hundred stories” 百物語), a custom emerged in the Edo period as a form of “séance” in which groups of people gathered in a room to tell stories about ghosts. The dark atmosphere in which these stories are told, the bookshop specialised in old texts on Asian religions managed by Chūzenji, reminds of the dark rooms in which – at lantern light –

³⁹ Nagase 1999: 49-72

the *hyaku monogatari* meetings took place. Similarly to the final appearance of a supernatural creature in the tradition of “one hundred stories”⁴⁰, Kyōgoku structures the fatal meeting among Chūzenji, Sekiguchi – the side character – and Ryōko, whose umpteenth overlapping personality this time combines the Chinese bird-woman and the Japanese *ubume*. Again, the author develops a text by taking inspiration from an iconographic product- this time we are referring to a painting by the famous Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) inspired to the story about the “ghostly parturient” and Urabe Suetake (950?-1022?)⁴¹ found in the *Konjaku Monogatari* (*Anthology of Tales from the Past*, late 12th century)⁴². The author redevelops the “triangle” of personalities on which the superstition is founded, a woman, a man and an infant:

The police officers had come up the stairs behind me. They held back, and Kiba and Kyōgokudō ran out ahead of them.

“Sekiguchi! It's Ryōko! Don't be scared! It's just Ryōko standing there, holding a baby. You have to take the baby from her. Only you can do this!”

Of course. Because I gave her the letter.

⁴⁰ According to superstition, once the last light has been extinguished, a supernatural creature manifests itself. See Foster 2009; Figal 1999

⁴¹ Urabe Suetake is a famous leader under Minamoto no Yorimitsu: his endeavours with the “supernatural” are celebrated in a huge number of sources. Ad-diss 2001: 56-60

⁴² It is the most famous among the collections of Buddhist anecdotes (*setsuwa*) written in Japan. According to it, the leader finds himself with his comrades near the gravel bed of a river which they discover being home to a *ubume* and her infant killer: untouched by such superstitions, Urabe Suetake pushes his luck and crosses the river. As he is half way in his endeavour, he hears the voice of a woman and the wailing of an infant: a female figure manifests itself beside him, begging him to take the child to a safe place. Urabe welcomes him in his arms, but after each step the burden gets heavier and heavier: his great persistence prevents him from giving up. However, as he is about to accomplish his goal, the woman asks for her child back. Urabe ignores her and takes the child to the campsite, as he wants to show him to his comrades. However, wrapped inside the bundle he finds only a bunch of wet leaves. Ikegami 1993: 189-205

I took a step forward. Ryōko took a step back. Then another. If she went any further-----, “Give me the child”

“... mother”(ibid., 310-311)

In the narration of the *Konjaku Monogatari*, the legendary leader Urabe Suetake is the elected man who has been called upon to undo a curse that is apparently impossible to extinguish. The man breaks the physical link mother/son by revealing the inconsistent nature of the latter. Similarly, Sekiguchi ends up being essential to the exorcism practiced by Chūzenji on Ryōko. As the author graphically underlines (he actually draws a line under the passage), Sekiguchi – with whom Ryōko has a strong empathic connection- is similar to Suetake as he is destined to snatch the child from the bird-woman’s arms. In the man’s conclusive remarks are all the various aspects of the supernatural figure: the word *kāsan* (“mum”) that he pronounces is in fact used both by children to call their mothers and by husbands to address their wives, thus granting her the role of parent and central female figure of the family. The reported passage, therefore, on the one hand seals the husband/wife relationship that should have taken shape between Sekiguchi and Ryōko – once lovers –, on the other hand, it alludes to the existence of a son born out of this union and who, in the woman’s mind, corresponds to the child who has been kidnapped and held.

In front of an audience – the transfiguration of Yorimitsu’s bodyguards, which appear in the hypo text – the contemporary leader accomplishes his mission in a succession of highly emotional moments in which violent distortions of perception follow one another. As far as she is concerned, the woman, after being deprived of even the last aspect of her bird woman’s personality, spreads her wings into the void. Her life ends like this, in the last attempt to free herself, which, instead, leads her to meet the same destiny she had imposed onto her mother, meaning a violent and brutal death.

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