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JAPANESE CLASSICS IN TRANSLATION

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1. Literalism versus Translation versus Adaptation

Translation should not be either too literal or too free. Prof. Donald Keene is partly right in saying: "As I have noted, the translations in this book are meant to be literary and not literal. For example, names of persons, titles, and places not essential to a story have sometimes been omitted in the interest of easy reading for Westerners not able to absorb large quantities of Japanese proper names. Puns, allusions, repetitions, and incommunicable stylistic fripperies have also been discarded whenever possible."*

Ease of reading should be all right in so far as the style of the original is characterized by fluency. Faithfulness to the original in point of mood and style should be regarded as the most important. If poems in the *Manyôshû*, for example, are rendered into English of an easy, fluent style, they will sound ridiculous, for they are mostly grave and heavy in cadence compared with those in the *Kokinshû.*

A happy balance between literalism and free adaptation can be kept only by the collaboration of a Japanese and an English-speaking writer. The former ought not to spare any efforts to turn into English every detail of the Japanese original as literally as he can, not minding whether the translation may read like what is called Japanese English. He ought not to be daunted by drudgery in this line. The latter must have enough knowledge of things Japanese and of the Japanese way of thinking to understand his companion's unconventional English. He must choose between the indispensable and the redundant. He is naturally quite capable of writing correct English. His English, however, ought to be fluent or faltering as the case may be, according to the style of the original.

The Japanese collaborator is apt to overlook some details of the original and resort to idiomatic English expressions, slurring over the original without making any effort to retain the Japanese traditional way of thinking. It is quite natural that he should be afraid of being laughed at for writing English in a style so queer and unidiomatic. Consequently he is often satisfied with some established English phrases when he ought to do his best to convey in English ideas peculiar to the Japanese. For example, "*Utsukushi to ieba oroka nari*" ought to be translated, "It would be foolish to say that she is beautiful" instead of a fluent and more intelligible sentense : "It goes without saying that she is beautiful" or "Her beauty is beyond description. ""*On-namida wo tsukusase tamau*" had better be put into English: "He exhausted his store of tears," rather than "He wept bitterly."

If one's object is to encourage one's countrymen to "delve into the literature of a

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* Preface to *Anthology of Japanese Literature*, com. and ed. Donald Keene (Rutland & Tokyo, 1971).

** (p. 140)——Ivan Morris, "Why Read Japanese Literature?" *The Times Literary Supplement*, No.3, 625 (Aug. 1971).

country that seems so alien and peripheral, "** one ought to expect them to be somewhat confused at some strange phrases and ideas. Expressions that sound too English may lose their attractive exoticism. "To sob 'oi-oi'" is sometimes preferable to "to cry bitterly." "Broke with a 'futsu, futsu'" seems better than "broke with a snap."

How happy the original writer would be if his work were to be translated by a foreigner who is mentally, emotionally and socially capable of handling stylistic techniques that can transmit subtile shades of meaning he intended to express! How could one express in English the flexibility, fluidity, delicacy or hesitancy which, happily combined, characterizes works of lady writers of the Heian period unless one were as much gifted with their genius and attainments? At any rate, the English partner ought to be watchful against writing nothing but fluent English. This kind of happiness can hardly be expected in the actual life. Hence the complaint that translation is impossible!

Translation is usually read in a more fault-finding manner. This is one of the merits of reading translation, for one's mind is more brisk and watchful in reading translation than in leisurely enjoying vernacular literature.

Some translators think that they are entitled to give improving touches to the original with impunity, adding something here and omitting something there. It may sometimes be because they think that if they stick too much to the verbal transposition of trivial details, they will destroy the mood or atmosphere of the original. Or they may fancy themselves as better writers of literature. They may be inflated with conceit that they are engaged in creative work. Don't those details constitute the whole atmosphere of the original?

How do Edgar Alan Poe fans like Ogai Mori's translation of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" when they find the introductory pages of the original dropped in the Japanese version?* The omitted paragraph may be redundant and uninteresting, but isn't it impudent for a translator to do so, however superior he may regard himself as a literary artist? Profound reverence for the original writer seems to be the starting point for translation.

One is surprised to find that not a few passages are omitted in Arthur Waley's generally admired translation of *The Tale of Genji*. He seems to have done so with some discrimination. He may have done so to avoid verbose repetitions which are characteristic of stories of the age. His correction may have made the tale more intelligible or readable to Westerners. We Japanese, however, think it a great pity that the masterpiece should be offered to the world public with some parts omitted. A classic should be read and appreciated in complete whole, if possible.

It goes without saying that too literal translation may make the whole attempt a nonsensical failure. A native speaker of English who has a competent knowledge of the Japanese language and culture might be allowed to touch up, making the translation intelligible and flowing enough as a work of art. Only he must not go too far.

Here are quoted two instances of how loose, free adaptation is of no avail in some cases. "This (viz. a Latin translation of Plato's works by Marsilio Ficino) and Erasmus' Latin edition of the New Testament, which he compared with the original Greek, were two great achievements of Renaissance scholarship and led to an entirely new attitude toward translation. Now for the first time, readers demanded exactness of rendering, for religious and philosophical beliefs depended on the exact words that Jesus or Plato or Aristotle had used."** Readers of entertainment literature may be satisfied with free adaptation, but Japanese scholars of the Heian classics pursue their studies with such elaborate seriousness that they will not stand any frivorous change that should be made in the translation. They regard the change almost as a piece of blasphemy. As luck would have it, very few of them are vulgar enough to vent their vexation upon foreigners. A modernized edition

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* It cannot be told whether Mori or the translator of the German edition from which Mori translated is to blame.

** *Encyclopedia Americana*, Vol. 27; p.13.

of an old classic seems to show the same lack of subtilty that is found in adaptation.

As the "Montaigne *essays* (1603) of the Italian refugee John Florio, which still has a high reputation, is in fact loosely discursive where Montaigne is both subtle and taut,"* translation may lose much of the mood or flavour of the original through a rough and loose handling.

To read Japanese old classics for the story seems to be a foolish sacrilege. Plotting is not their strong point, and so verbal accuracy ought to be all the more indispensable in translation, for the mood or atmosphere was what the authors chiefly aimed to convey.

Japanese scholars in our old classics seem to be specially thankful to Arthur Waley, as the first competent translator of *The Tale of Genji*, for the unprecedented services he rendered towards making Japanese literature accessible to the world public. They seem to connive at some errors he made and some bold changes he worked out in the way of improvement. His translation is indeed full of charming descriptions, but he cannot be quite beyond criticism.

It is strange and regrettable that those scholars should be so much reserved in criticising foreign versions of their classics. They seem to think that their original classics cannot suffer any injury however poorly they may be translated. They seem to think that translation is something that is beyond the sphere of their concern or scrutiny.

Let us consider Yukio Mishima, for example. No Japanese writer has had his work more abundantly translated into foreign languages than he. Is he really the greatest of the Japanese writers? Do those of us who have got mature judgment think so? Their doubt is serious. There have been many men and women whom history has branded as giants in our literary world. Mishima, on the contrary, is still an unknown quantity. It is all through his own machinations that he has acquired his popularity and consequently had his works translated into so many foreign languages. It is a well-known fact that from early childhood he was a self-centered boy of narcissism, though his persistent labour was inhumanly heroic.

It is a pity that Westerners should form a false idea of the national character of the Japanese or characteristics of the Japanese culture through reading Mishima's translated works. Japanese classical scholars should pay more attention to the translation of their literature, to what should be translated and how. A good translation ought to satisfy not only foreign critics but also native scholars.

2. The Beauty of Vagueness

Let us begin with considering Mr. Edmund Blunden's comment on the Japanese faith in the superiority of the incomprehensible to the lucid.

> We were standing before a small landscape picture, delicately drawn and tinted, of which the effect was dreamlike (so far as it went), a region where things passed like glistening shadows, and the distance hovered uncertain as a morning mist. K., a student who has been long endeavouring to take me seriously, but without perfect success, cast a desultory glance on the piece; turned aside, and after a moment said with a sigh, "Sir, I do not think you can comprehend the excellence of such a Japanese picture". I had been facying that the essence of it was akin to Corot's 'Silver-grey Dream of Central France', whether it included some oriental religious reference or not; but K.'s verdict on my hopes caused me to look again without such a comparison. My renewed view was as before; the appeal of the tender mistiness, the dim radiances, the lonely hill track and the old peasant with his horse was the appeal of 'Do I wake or sleep?' But I replied to K. in simpler terms: 'You, as an Oriental, think you understand all Western art and literature; surely then the West may perceive what is valuable in your art and literature.' This answer was followed by the cheerful assent of N. and the other students present, and when I had given my notions on the picture, I added the reminder that Western eyes had long feasted on Oriental art, and that

* *Ibid.*

many great collections from India, China and Japan would testify to the liberal taste of our travellers. N. very happily observed that between art and art there is no difference, and K., grinning, relinquished the matter. No doubt some hidden associations in the picture above us had urged him to speak; but the manner of his speaking was significant.*

Mr. Blunden goes on to say: "For, if I read aright, there is firmly rooted in the Japanese character a belief in the beauty of vagueness, and, arising out of that, a cherished formula that Japan has a spiritual secret so fine and rare as to be quite incommunicable to people of any other blood." Mr. Blunden's complaint is quoted here not to show that Japanese pictures done vaguely in black and white can please Westerners as much as the colour-prints, but to remind you that the Japanese belief in the beauty of vagueness is so inveterate and so widely spread. It is not uncommon for ordinary Japanese to take it for granted that foreigners are naturally prevented from appreciating Japanese culture and art, or the people's mentality.

It is said, with reason, that European languages are more intellectual than the Japanese language. Western mentality is embodied in the logical structure of the European languages, while our language is loosely or vaguely constructed. Japanese sentences can be used without any subject, usually personal pronouns in the nominative case, definitely mentioned in so far as the reference is clear from the context. '*Yuku*' (go) is enough to mean 'I go'. If '*boku*' (I) is added, the sentence means 'Nobody but I go,' emphasis being placed on the subject. In former times equivocal expressions were more popular among the people. To say things clearly and logically was thought to be a sign of shallow-mindedness or want of manners.

The Japanese language is exceedingly rich in honorifics and also in terms of humility. This is a device to explain human relations indirectly and vaguely. This may have been invented to refer ambiguously to one's superiors or inferiors or oneself or one's relatives. As it used to be criticized as a sign of impoliteness to look your superior full in the face, so you were rebuked for referring directly to him, mentioning his proper name clearly or speaking plainly of behaviour without employing any honorific. Honorifics or terms of humility enable us to do without the subject in a sentence. '*Yukimasu*' means 'Some person of a high social position goes,' while '*Yuku*' means 'I, you, he, she, we, they, some ordinary person or persons go.'

'Ambiguity' has been fully discussed as a feature of rhetoric or semantics.** It is very interesting to know that Shakespeare is often quoted in the study of this art of subtle significance. Ambiguity was one of the stylistic devices that lady writers of the Heian period tried hard to excel in, and generally speaking, the Japanese regarded the frequent use of expressions of indirect and vague denotation as a mark of good breeding.

Here are some examples of Japanese indirect and vague way of reference. '*Mikado*', literally meaning 'august gate' or '*ue*', meaning 'above', denotes 'emperor'. This was a clever device invented to avoid the direct reference to the emperor. The word 'emperor' itself, apart from the person, may have been thought to have some magical power. People tried hard to evade the use or utterance of the word. They may have thought it awesome even to hear the word spoken by somebody else. The same is true with other courtly titles. They were usually used instead of personal names. It seems outrageously strange for us to find 'Genji' or 'Murasaki' clearly mentioned so frequently all over the translation of *The Tale of Genji*, for in the original the hero's proper name as well as the heroine's leaves carefully unmentioned all through the book. Titles like 'Minister', 'Prince', or 'Princess' are used instead, or no subject is mentioned. Mention of their proper names drives away much of the fascinating ambiguity of the original novel.

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* Edmund Blunden, *The Mind's Eye* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1934), pp. 134–135.

** William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (Penguin Books, 1965); William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words* (Chatto & Windus, London, 1964); Stephen Ullmann, *The Principles of Semantics* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1964); Stephen Ullmann, *Semantics* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1964).

Like any other language, most words have more than one meaning in the Japanese language. According to the most reliable Japanese dictionary*, '*kanashi*' has six meanings: 'beloved', 'pathetically interesting', 'heart-breaking', 'miserable,' 'admirable,' and 'provoking'. Obviously there is contradiction among them. Judging from the context, it is not very difficult to decide which is the most fitting in translation. The original writer, however, might be shocked if some particular '*kanashi*' in his story is translated 'beloved.' He may have felt that the six meanings were all so inextricably intertwined that he found it impossible to choose any one of them. There seems to be no single English word that has the six meanings mentioned above. A conscientious translator will hesitate to employ any one of them. Ambiguity of this kind is a charming trick favourite with female writers of the Heian period.

The Japanese love of ambiguity is closely connected with some other qualities of theirs. Modesty, on which they set a high value, and contempt they feel for the colourful are allied to it. Inevitably some bad qualities are its relations. The cultural pattern of "avoidance of face-to-face relations of embarrassment"**is closely related with the Japanese love of ambiguity, though they are sometimes well-meant but not always. A pattern of shirking responsibility so often found among Japanese leading people can be attributed to this instinctive tendency as well as to their concept of face.

European philosophers have tried to explain everything vague through analysis. Aristotle claimed, "Words of ambiguous meaning are chiefly useful to enable the sophist to mislead his hearers." Men of letters, however, have not hesitated to make use of ambiguous words and syntax. Religious thinkers have acquired their success by their practice and theory of ambiguous mysticism. One of the reasons why at the beginning of this century Western philosophy of cool analysis attracted Japanese thinkers must be that they had been bored with the esoteric tendency of their traditional thoughts. They were fascinated with the method of critical analysis. Of course their inherited mental habit has proved hard to alter.

One of the reasons why Yukio Mishima cannot please those elderly Japanese well-read in their classics is that he was not an heir of the traditional belief in the beauty of vagueness. He was too much obsessed with publicity mania. His endeavour towards self-advertisement ought to have been properly checked by the Japanese sense of modesty. It may be all right from the Western point of view that his novels should be most intellectually constructed, but according to our standard of literary greatness, his life and consequently his works lack some vagueness and unpretentiousness that might make them literary works of the first rank.

Even before his too dramatic suicide, he had been looked coldly or indifferently upon by his fellow countrymen of the more sober mind and even in the literary circles except a few literary men, chiefly because his life was too suggestive of propaganda and his works were full of artificiality. His life was a typical example of a man constantly striving with a brilliant success after fame and profit. His unremitting pains, however, resulted finally in a death of ignominious notoriety, and his genius proved wasted. Naturally his life was a puzzle to people of common sense. "Should a man who wrote with such profound admiration about the practitioners of the pure Japanese Way have lived in a Spanish-style house furnished entirely with European objects, down to the large marble statue of Apollo in the garden? Should Mishima, despite his rejection of the mindless adulation of the West, have shown himself so responsive to every vagary in men's fashions, whether sports shorts that opened almost to his navel or trousers so tight they became uncomfortable after he ate?"*** It may be partly because young men are naturally devotees of snobbery or

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* *Kôjien*, pub. Iwanami Shoten (Tokyo, 1969).

** *The Encyclopedia Americana*, Vol.15 (New York, 1965), p. 627.

*** Donald Keene, "Mishima and the Modern Scene," *The Times Literary Supplement*, No. 3, 625(Aug., 1971).

because young Japanese of the present day have lost the traditional belief in the beauty of vagueness that Mishima's books are so popular among them.

Comparison of the Japanese original having no subjects or objects mentioned clearly with the English version looks very strange because of the latter's clarity depending on its syntactical orderliness. Japanese sentences of grammatical ambiguity have fascination of their own in the Japanese eye and mind. One of the charms William Faulkner has for some Japanese readers is that he sometimes wrote in a very ambiguous style. His is a style of least orthodox clarity. He must have found English of plain style to be insufficient for the expression of what had accumulated in his mind. It is sometimes very difficult for us to decide which person his 'he' or 'she' refers to. The tottering study of his novels can compare favourably with that of Japanese classics of the Heian period.

Henry James is another example of the writers who are captivated by the beauty of vagueness. He often employed words of general meaning, such as 'good', 'nice', or 'fine' instead of words of more definite or accurate description. It is obvious that he knew quite well that attentive and discriminating readers would be perplexed with delight and satisfaction as to the meaning he intended to convey. He also used 'he' or she' or 'it' which puzzles, and at the same time charms, us Japanese in wondering which person or which situation is referred to.

It is a great pity that stylistic techniques of ambiguity are very difficult to make use of in translation. That is why the Japanese partner should do his best at literalism, while the English partner should be warned against resorting absent-mindedly to English of mere fluency. The extremely difficult and important task of making a reconciliation between the two contrary directions—the Japanese love of ambiguity and the Western attitude of grammatically correct reference—is chiefly placed on the shoulders of the English-speaking partner. There ought to be a happy compromise between the two points of view—between the Japanese pride in their emotional perception and the Western confidence in their intellectual analysis. Japanese mind is characterized by its sensitive emotionality, they say, and may we believe that the Japanese language is an efficient but delicate instrument for delineating what a man or woman personally feels?

3. Disagreement in Social and Literary Backgrounds

Even in those instances where the original and the translation may mean the same, they look different, they sound different, and they awake a different sensation. Japanese characters are arranged vertically like Chinese characters. Both Japanese and Chinese characters are quite different from the English alphabet. The two languages have quite different sound systems. I am saying self-evident truths, and yet it is surprising what serious hindrances they should be when one starts comparing the original and the translation. The Japanese and the English cannot help giving quite different impressions. It seems impossible for one to overcome the strange sensation one feels when one starts reading *The Tale of Genji*, for example, after reading the original *Genji Monogatari*, though Waley's translation is reputed to be a masterpiece. It is some time, longer than is expected, before the strangeness goes out of one's mind as one gets absorbed in the story. For some readers the happy absorption may never come.

The most salient of the syntactical characteristics of the Japanese language is almost regular omission of the subject. This may be blamed as a defect, but it is made up for by frequent use of expressions conveying respect or humility. We Japanese regard it as an indispensable art of making the Japanese sound soft and self-effacing. Compared with the Japanese original, the English translation sounds too logical and methodical.

There seems to be hardly any correspondence between the courtly titles of the Heian period and those of England of the eleventh century or thereabouts. Strictly speaking, it is impossible to find an English equivalent for *To no Chujo*, for example. It is 'Lieutenant-

General of the Imperial Bodyguard, holding concurrently the post of Chief of the Department of the Imperial Archives and General Affairs.' This is of course too long and cumbersome for the readers as well as the translator. Consequently Waley and other translators were wise enough to use the Romaji transcription as if the title were a personal name. As explained above, the use of personal names used to be avoided as often as possible in those days so that evil influences might be averted, for it was a sign of lack of due reverence for one's superiors. Waley uses 'To no Chujo' even after the lord is promoted from *Chujô* (Lieutenant-General) to *Taishô* (General).

Until the sixteenth century, Japan had been free from any influence of Christianity, while the English people know hardly anything of Buddhist priests' life in Japan or of various hierarchies of the Japanese Buddhist sects. Hence the difficulty of translating terms related with Buddhism.

According to Japanese-English dictionaries, the English equivalent for '*hô-ô*' (an emperor who has had his head shaven for the renunciation of the world) is 'monk-emperor'. The term 'monk', however, reminds one of Christian monasteries of the Middle Ages. '*Hô-ô*', on the contrary, continued to live a sumptuous life surrounded by as many ladies-in-waiting as he pleased. '*Kwannon*' or '*Kwanzeon* (Avalokitesvara), who has long been worshipped everywhere in Japan as a merciful divinity, is usually translated in English by 'Goddess of Mercy,' but Waley did not like to call a Bodhi-sattva god or goddess, and so calls her 'Lady Kwannon' in his *Tale of Genji*. It seems very strange to most Japanese to find 'Lady' appended to Kwannon, for they do not think that Kwannon was ever a living woman. 'Saint Nichiren' sounds as if Nichiren had been a Christian saint, and so 'High Priest Nichiren' seems to be more appropriate.

We may use, in our ordinary conversation with an Englishman or American, 'Good God' or 'Good gracious' or 'Lord bless me' or 'Hallelujah' in order to show our surprise or relief. All these exclamations are associated with Christianity, and so they must not be used in the translation of our old classics. 'Good-bye' or 'adieu' cannot be a fitting equivalent for '*saraba*' (farewell), for 'God bless you' or 'to God' is irrelevant in describing Japan of old days.

'Knight' cannot be used as the equivalent for '*bushi*' (warrior), for the term reminds one of Western chivalry of the Middle Ages, though Japanese bushido has much in common with knighthood. In the Heian period, the warrior classes were not socially prominent and independent, and 'retainer' seems to be a more appropriate term in a court noble's household.

In translation, 'the First Month' should be used instead of 'January', because a calendar different from the solar calendar was used formerly in Japan, in which the first month began at the beginning of February, and which was different in several points from other calendars. Expressions connected with the practice of divination and incantation which used to dominate the wide field of people's life and mind baffle the comprehension of us modern Japanese, much more Westerners of the present day. The calendar itself was believed to have a magical power.

Gaps between the costume of the Japanese court of the Heian period and that of the European courts are so wide that all that can be done is to employ such terms as 'robe', 'cape', 'mantle', 'skirt', 'under robe', or 'court robe' as a make shift for '*kinu* or *uchiki*', '*uwagi*', '*karaginu*', '*hakama*', '*hitoe*', or '*nôshi*.' As for the colour scheme called '*kasane*', which enthralled the mind of the people of the court of those days, one must acquiesce that one can do hardly anything effective for promoting Westerners' appreciation. A court lady was expected to wear *yanagi gasane* (willow scheme) or some other *kasane* as the case may be in the spring season. *Yanagi gasane* consists of robes white with blue lining. More than thirty combinations of colours were used for spring wear. It was regarded as a sign of the female discretion to choose a fitting *kasane* from among those thirty on every public occasion.

The English for '*hagi*' is 'bush clover'. Waley uses 'lilac' instead. It may be because

'lilac' was thought by him to sound as good as '*hagi*,' or because their flowers are both purplish pink; but they belong to different families, and the lilac comes out in May, while the *hagi* in August. Most plants and flowers that appear in Japanese classics are not strange to Westerners, though not exactly the same as those growing in Europe and America. The names may not sound as attractive as the Japanese names. This is sometimes a trouble, for some names are chosen for their euphony.

Japanese poems are appreciated with criteria quite different from those that are used in the evaluation of English poems. Japanese poems translated into English according to English prosody seem to sound ridiculously un-Japanese. Japanese poems have rhythms of their own—more subtile, more difficult to explain, more ambiguous, less methodical, and almost impossible to analyze. The translation with mechanical rhyme and rhythm sometimes sound almost like a parody.

'*Makura-kotoba*' (pillow-word) are a device much employed in older times. '*Ashibiki no*', a pillow-word attached to '*yama*' (mountain), has hardly any meaning, but it is very effective in making the poem rhythmical. In translation, 'pillow-word' had better be left unused except when the translator is William Faulkner's calibre and creativeness.

'*Kake-kotoba*' ('pivot-word') are another device now nearly out of fashion. '*Nade-shiko*' means 'wild pink' in ordinary speech, but it was employed formerly to mean two ways, 'wild pink' and 'stroking tenderly', because '*nade*' means 'loving caress'. This trick of making a word mean twofold is very difficult to translate effectively. One wish all the more earnestly that one were gifted with William Faulkner's genius.