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Conveying the Author's Voice: Translating Style

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(I presented this paper at a two-day conference on translation held at the Princeton Institute for Advanced Studies [Feb. 8, 9, 2003].)

Allow me to begin with my credo as a translator. As I conceive it, the translator's task is to create for the reader in the target language the opportunity to experience the original work in all its dimensions. Ideally, this means that whatever meaning or resonance is contained in the original text to be perceived or felt by the native reader, whether the author intends it or not, should also be rendered accessible in the translation. This is a withering and frequently disheartening task. But notwithstanding the arithmetic of loss and (rarely) gain that is inherent in the process, I believe it is achievable, or at least sufficiently within the realm of possibility to warrant the translator's tireless and undaunted efforts.

Great writers, after all, whatever language they are writing in, conjure a vision of life in a universe we all inhabit. To be sure, different societies perceive the world differently: the Chinese spectrum is calibrated more minutely than our own; Eskimo languages have dozens of words for different qualities of snow; and the Bedouin are said to distinguish forty varieties of camel eyes. There are also fundamental differences in values, in sensibility, and in the chemistry of human interaction. In Asian societies, certainly in Japan, allegiance to the family and loyalty to superiors are more powerful imperatives than in our own, and self-denial becomes a virtue. What is funny in one society may be offensive in another. Respect, and disrespect, are measured differently. Recently, when the incoming governor of Nagano Prefecture presented his business card to a local official, the bureaucrat folded the card in two before placing it in his wallet. The incident made national headlines: in Japan, folding a business card is an insult tantamount to a slap in the face.

Nevertheless, at bottom, grief is grief and love is love; envy, anger and chagrin, lust, and despair, to list a few of the emotional ingredients of life,

are familiar to us all: the commonality of human feelings is in itself a basis for positing the possibility of successful translation as I define it.

In my experience as a translator and as a reader of translations, the dimension of the original work that is most difficult to convey is its style. A precise definition of style is a challenge. Certainly it includes elements that are not strictly speaking linguistic: the author's sequencing of his narrative, for example, or his choices about which elements in his story to magnify and which to elipse. But for my purpose here I shall define style more narrowly as the largely conscious, artful, and distinctive use of language in the service of conveying the animating vision of the work. In other words, style is the voice, in gifted writers the unmistakable voice, in which the author tells his story. The components of style in this sense are principally diction and syntax: the author's choice of words, the sentences he constructs from them and the manner in which he employs his sentences in the construction of longer passages. In writing possessed of style, the aggregate of these choices creates an intra-textual effect as vividly identifiable as a voice print.

Translators rendering languages as different from English as Japanese have generally failed to convey style. For proof of this you need only open to the middle of novels by any two of the writers who define the canon of modern Japanese literature in translation and attempt by their stylistic voices to distinguish one from the other let alone to identify the author. If the passage in question happens to be a rhapsody on a female foot you will know you are in the presence of Tanizaki; if an erotic kiss evokes the beauty of death, Yukio Mishima will be a likely guess. But these are thematic signatures and have nothing to do with style. Wherever you look, the writing will convey a sameness: idiomatic enough, unobjectionable, featureless. I of course include much of my own work in this category. I am sometimes told, often by Japanese readers proficient in English, that my translations of Kenzaburo Oe are "easier to read," "clearer," "better" than Oe's original. Such remarks are intended as compliments, but to me they confirm that I have failed to reflect in English the dense complexity of Oe's idiosyncratic style.

There are works that retain their power in translation to affect readers even when bereft of style. Natsume Soseki's novel, *Kokoro*, is a good

example. Edwin McLellan's translation is literate but ordinary: the originality and resonance in Soseki's voice do not survive. Nonetheless, students in my classes rank *Kokoro* their favorite book on the reading list year after year: it invariably engages and moves them with the questions it raises about the meaning and purpose of life. Soseki's novel *Botchan*—"Sonny boy," or, as I would be tempted to call it, "Boitchek"—is the opposite example. The story is there to be read on the page in translation. But the pungency of the narrator's voice is gone and its absence drains away the novel's vitality and humor and, beneath the high jinks and tomfoolery, the sardonic edge that gives it resonance. I assigned it to my class one year, but when students read the book I had characterized as hilarious and ribald and crackling with spirit, they were confused and disappointed (*Botchan* is high on my list of Japanese masterpieces that have been destroyed in English and cry out for a new translation by someone who can handle style).

In serious works of literature, style is not merely embellishment but integral to the writer's vision. The labyrinthine sentences of Henry James are generated by, and the perfect construct for expressing, his focus on the psychological interior. Joyce's stream-of-consciousness is a similar example of style not only reflecting but also enabling the novelist's exploration of character. Hemingway's minimal, jackhammer constructions proceed from his certainty that truth is, and must be conveyed as, simple. For the great Japanese writers, style functions no less importantly. Mishima's blending of modern language and antique vocabulary, classical rhythms and sentence structure originates in his sense of himself as the privileged heir to a legacy from the past; obversely, Kenzaburo Oe's style, an assault on the traditional language, is an expression of his self-consciousness as a liminal figure on the periphery of Japanese society.

In my view, there are two formidable obstacles in the way of conveying style in translation. The first has to do with reading the source language. Those of us who have been at it long enough are in general able to construe what it is the author intends to say. Perceiving how he goes about saying it as a function of style is another matter. This requires a sensitivity to the original language that goes beyond conversance. When we read the work

of an English master, *Dubliners*, for example, we are thrilled by Joyce's choice of words and by the originality of the sentences he constructs from them. Our appreciation is based on our ability as native readers to encounter his choices in the context of other choices that were available to him. This variety of perspective, a product of both knowledge and, underlying knowledge, a deep-seated intuition, is not likely to be accessible when we engage with an acquired language as fundamentally unfamiliar as Japanese. How apposite is the choice of a particular word? How stunningly original? What is distinctive stylistically about a sentence? To what degree is it unconventional and how successful is its inventiveness? What constitutes overwriting and what is spare? Is fustian narrative an authorial lapse, or is it intended as an ironic commentary on itself? These and legion other similar questions confront us on every page; likely as not, we reach for answers and discover we lack the basis—the knowledge and intuition—for making critical judgments of this kind.

This might suggest that translation would be better left to native readers. But who can translate out of his own language into another that is not his native tongue? Nabokov, of course, and Samuel Beckett and Joseph Conrad had he the mind. In Japan, the only writer I know with any claim to membership in this elite club is Soseki himself. Soseki's translation into English of Kamo no Chomei's early thirteenth century *Hojouki* demonstrates a masterly command of the language he insisted he had never managed to learn. His English is musty and stilted, yet succeeds in conveying the life and depth of the original.

This brings me to the second obstacle: our limitations as writers in our own language. Let us assume that we are ideal readers of the original text (an unlikely assumption). Having perceived and appreciated the style of the work, we must now re-create or reflect it in our own writing. I have never felt adequate to this task. It requires an unflinching ear, perfect pitch in both languages, and a vast archive of intuitions that can be accessed and deployed at will. If I am diligent, and lucky, and intermittently clever, I can sometimes, with the inspiration I receive from the original, simulate or even achieve style in my translations. But my efforts tend to be hit and miss: creating an intra-textual effect that invokes the author's voice and

sustaining it from beginning to end of a novel by the consistent choices I make is a feat I have yet to achieve.

The cruel truth is that writers who do not write with style are unlikely to succeed at mirroring the style of other writers more gifted than themselves. There was a time when I consoled myself with the notion that great translators, artists in their own right (and this I firmly believe), are endowed with a gift that authors may not have, for transporting words across the abyss that separates one language from another. I no longer believe this: I am certain that if James Joyce had known Japanese as well as I do he would have been a far better translator of Kenzaburo Oe than I shall ever be.

There is yet another impediment to success as I have defined it that has to do with courage. When readers open a translation of foreign fiction they expect "smoothness" and "fluency," the qualities most commonly cited in praise of a translator's work. Professor Venuti has characterized the translator's acquiescence to this expectation, which has the force of a convention, as a process of "domestication": the translator is constrained to remove evidence of what would be perceived inside the target-language culture as strange or irregular.

The translator's response to this expectation applies equally to what I am calling style as to cultural differences. In his role as domesticator, the translator is expected to be invisible. Yet style is inherently intrusive, a door flung open to reveal the author and his collaborator lurking just behind the language. Where style includes, or is built upon, jaggedness, grotesque exaggeration, or ponderous complexity that makes it difficult to read, the translator is challenged to fly in the face of convention. To convey style, he must resort to what Phillip Lewis has called abusive fidelity, a "forceful translation that values experimentation, tampers with usage, seeks to match the polyvalencies or plurivocities or expressive stresses of the original by producing its own" (41). But daring to be redundant where the author is, or overwritten or ordinary, or rendering an awkward sentence awkwardly, takes courage: for it is almost certain to result in criticism of the translator as, that most damning of judgments, "clumsy."

I conclude with an example of style from each of the two novelists I have spent the most time attempting to translate, Yukio Mishima and Kenzaburo Oe. Mishima is more amenable to translation than Oe, but not because his language is less nuanced or his syntax simpler. As I have suggested, Mishima conceived of himself as the ultimate insider, heir to the long tradition of Japanese literature. His writing, a reflection of this image of himself, is in harmonious accord with the inherent, unalloyed genius of the Japanese language. Find the right words and assemble them in comely sentences in natural English cadences that mirror his own and Mishima's voice will sound.

Following are the opening lines from *Bitoku no yoromeki* [*Virtue Falters*], the most successful of the romance novels that Mishima serialized in women's magazines:

Abruptly indiscrete topic begin as for feels questionable, (but) Kurakoshi
いきなり慎みのない話題からはじめることはどうかと思われるが、倉超

Mrs. only 28 while being, truly senses-inherent gift was endowed. Very
婦人はまだ二十八でありながら、まことに官能の天賦にめぐまれていた。非常に

upbringing severe, distinguished family, Setsuko, inquiry, theory, refined talk
躰のきびしい、門地の高い家に育って、節子は探究心や理論や洒脱な会話や文学

literature, such senses-substitute things no connection because, eventually
や、そうゆう官能の代わりになるものと一切無縁であったので、ゆくゆくはただ

openly earnestly senses-sea to drift on was destined to say would be
素直にきまじめに、官能の海に漂うように宿命つけられていた、といったほうが

better. This sort of woman loved-by man indeed lucky.
よい。こうゆう婦人に愛された男こそ幸せである。(5)

My first pass at rendering this passage is as follows:

"It gives one pause to begin abruptly with an indiscrete subject; nevertheless, Madame Kurakoshi, though only twenty-eight years of age, was endowed with an enviable gift for sensuality. Because her strict upbringing in a distinguished family had kept her innocent of

inquisitiveness, [reflection?] theory, refined conversation, literature or anything else that might substitute for sensuality, it might be better to say that Setsuko had been destined to end up adrift, guileless [unselfconscious?] and earnest, on the sea of sensuality. Fortunate indeed was the man loved by such a woman." Yukio Mishima, *美德のよろめき*

While a few of my word choices seem slightly out of tune, I believe this conveys Mishima's brand of finesse and the prissy condescension which is one of his preferred keys in which to write. Asked to identify the passage, an informed English reader might well recognize it as Mishima's work.

Kenzaburo Oe is more challenging. If Mishima's style strives for accord, Oe, who comes at writing as a determined outsider, is all about dissonance. Recently, he surprised and confused me with an explanation of the origins of his style: "I was reading a lot of French poetry, Baudelaire, and Rimbaud and Verlaine, but to me French poetry was always just poetry, it had no relation to prose. Auden and Eliot were different, they were a bridge to my own prose style. I didn't translate the poetry word by word; I'd read it aloud over and over again until I had memorized it, and then I'd translate the narrative into Japanese. When I tried writing on my own, the opening of "Prufrock," or of Auden's "1929" would show up—English poetry led me to a prose style that didn't exist in Japan before" (Oe, 2003). I confess I have failed to uncover Eliot or Auden beneath the surface of Oe's early work; I suspect he was referring to an imponderable process inside his imagination in which the English verse was transformed into a narrative approach that was all his own.

As he matured, Oe began to deconstruct his own language consciously in an effort to move it farther away from the conventional. I quote again from recent conversation: "When I was writing *The Silent Cry* in 1967, I completed one hundred pages in very readable, clear prose. I serialized them in the magazine *Gunzo*. It was good work. But I wasn't satisfied with the style. I started re-working it at night and it was very cold. It was a small house and if I kept the heat on my wife and children couldn't sleep. So I would turn the heat off and the temperature would drop to zero and I'd wrap myself in a blanket and write. During the day for some reason I was writing regular Japanese, but at night, freezing, I began changing

every sentence, breaking it down and destroying it, and in that process I created a new style. I've done that ever since, breaking my language down and destroying it. So it's no surprise to me that critics say my language isn't Japanese or that I destroy the Japanese language. I've tried hard not to write in the language that others use. I reject and deny every sentence that comes out of me naturally" (Oe, 2003).

The result has confronted Japanese readers with an increasingly difficult challenge and offended critics and writers. Tanizaki declared that if Oe was writing Japanese, he would forever put aside his own pen. Others accused him of writing for foreigners in a language that "reeked of butter." Such objections are askew but understandable: Oe's language violates every rule of measure and cadence that occurs naturally in conventional Japanese. His sentences lunge at an idea from all directions, descending through images piled on top of each other and tenuously connected until it seems they must break apart beneath the weight of the heaping rhetoric. Magically, they do not break; instead they achieve a jarring, muscular, often brutal expressiveness that is unmistakably Oe's own. Conveying Oe's virulent originality requires the boldness to be excessive or outlandish in a manner that works in English. And sustaining his dense, resonant, overburdened sentences without breaking the syntactical back of an English sentence is maddeningly difficult (from reading translations of the Chinese writer Mo Yan, whom Oe admires inordinately, I suspect he leads the translator to similar despair). Consider the following sentence from Oe's *Warera no kyoki wo ikinobiru wo oshieyo* [*Teach Us to Outgrow Our Madness*]. It concludes a scene in which the narrator's retarded son has been subjected to an eye examination:

*Himself for what reason pain to receive, moreover continuing pain no one
自分がどのような理由で苦痛を被りしかもその持続する苦痛を誰ひとりやわら
soothes it seems, in addition new pain inflicts stranger with
げてはくれぬ模様でありその上にまた新たな苦痛をあたえる見知らぬ他人が権
authority appears, even father cooperates logic of that situation altogether
威をこめてあられ父親まで協力しているその状況の全体の筋道をいささかも*

incomprehensible idiot infant darkly muddled head pain only must accept
理解できぬ白痴の幼児の暗く濁った頭によってただ苦痛のみを引き受けていな

situation to that extent terrifying pain time can there be?

ければならない状況ほどにも恐ろしい苦しみの時があるだろうか? (Oe, *Warera no Kyoki* 314)

In the context of conventional Japanese, this is a deformed sentence: the first four lines, which themselves contain an internal series of nested dependant clauses, modify the word "situation" in the fifth line which is in turn qualified. At the same time, as is often the case in Oe's writing, the sentence is a linguistic construct that models the experience it describes. The reader is led down the rungs of a ladder of "pain" (苦痛), step by tortuous step in a manner that invokes the working of the child's murky brain, until he encounters, as it were at the bottom of a deep shaft, the question "can there be a situation as full of terrifying pain as this?"

Following, unfortunately, is my rendering of this sentence as it appears in print:

Could any conscious state be so full of fright and hurt as perceiving pain and not its cause, and perceiving pain only, because an idiot infant's murky brain could not begin to grasp the logic of a situation in which pain persisted and was apparently to go unsoothed and, as if that were not enough, a stranger stepped in officiously to inflict new pain while even Father cooperated? (Oe, *Teach Us...* 184)

This is accurate as far as it goes. But in my effort to assemble a shapely, unexceptionable sentence I have lost the timbre of Oe's voice. I know how this should sound and what its effect should be; one approach might be a melding of the idiot youth in *The Sound and the Fury* and a compassionate narrator:

Can such a state exist *why it hurts and why it keeps on hurting and no one makes it go away so full of fright as that in which an idiot infant's murky brain and why the scary stranger comes to hurt me badder cannot begin to*

grasp the logic of the situation *and why does Papa help him* and fathoms pain and only pain and nothing more?

I realize this is unacceptable even in isolation, not to mention how difficult it would be to fashion a consistent style for the entire work from a solution as heterodox as this. I offer it merely as a start in the direction of some variety of abusive fidelity that might allow me to restore the dimension of Oe's style. Knowing how important, how critical to success that recovery is, I am encouraged to pursue it. We can do better than, in Rilke's phrase, "moonbeams stuffed with straw."

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