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April 5, 2010

“Paper Lanterns and Humanity”

When Norma asked me to say some words about translation at this gathering in honor of Bill Sibley, I immediately thought of Bill’s unpublished translation of “Uta Andon.” It stands out in my mind as some of the most exquisite translation prose I have ever read. I have always remembered a few phrases from the opening passage; and for someone who forgets nearly everything, this feat of memory testifies to the strength of the impression. Izumi Kyôka’s 1910 “Uta Andon,” has since been translated by Charles Inouye as “A Song by Lantern Light” in the second of two volumes of collected “gothic tales” by Kyôka, titled *In Light of Shadows*. (Hawaii, 2005)

By my calculation, Bill’s translation must go back at least three decades, because he handed me a typescript copy sometime before my prelims in the early 80s. No doubt, he thought the novella would make an instructive contribution to my “modern literature” field. I had organized my reading list to address an inclination toward reflexivity in modern Japanese fiction—and Uta Andon was about nothing if not art itself. Judging from my renewed appreciation for the difficulty of the original, Bill’s translation must have cast much needed illumination on the dim fog of my own limited understanding of Kyôka’s prose. But it also cast a radiance of its own—as you’ll see in just a minute or two.

I can make a few guesses about why this particular work was of interest to Bill: First, its atmospheric qualities. No doubt with the benefit of the find function, Charles Inouye counted the number of appearances of “moon” in the 100 odd page novella; 46 in all. *Kyôka* weaves a scenic web from moonlight and darkness, from shadows and pale lantern light. These visual images are layered with aural and tactile images to create a spellbinding, dreamlike aura. A second attraction of the story may have been its juxtapositional excess--high and low, vulgar and refined, comic and tragic. Judging from his translation of “Hohiron” (aka “On Farting”), I imagine that Bill appreciated this contrapuntal style.

The challenges of translating Uta Andon are daunting: cadenced prose (some in *shichi-go-chô*); descriptions (scenic and otherwise) condensed in thickly evocative, kanji-laden phrases; lots of those sentences that are simply a noun preceded by an interminably long modifying string. The rhythms, juxtapositions, synaesthesia; the multitude of allusions and double entendres—all this requires linguistic pirouettes; and Bill performed them with poise and panache.

The story? Actually two stories, told as if on a quickly revolving Kabuki stage; two casts of characters. In the end, the plural stories and their respective casts of characters all prove to be intertwined in a single plot. The place is Kuwana, the 42nd station on the Tokaido on Inner Ise Bay (northern Mie Prefecture). The time is purposefully vague—though various clues (“sartorial eclecticism,” popular tunes, and a send-off party for military recruits)—date it round-about mid-Meiji. The first story follows two elderly travelers, one of whom insists on fashioning himself and his reluctant companion as Yajirobei and Kitahachi, the two hapless travelers from Jippensha Ikku’s

picaresque comic tale, *Tôkaidôchû Hizakurige* (1802-1822), translated as *Shank's Mare* by Thomas Satchell (1960).

Following the original, Bill opens with a scene-setting quote from travelogue-ish

Hizakurige:

*Watched over by the hot and pungent god of Atsuta, **the pillars of whose shrine stood thick and firm as the renowned radishes of this region**, they have safely crossed six leagues of bounding waves and arrived in Kuwana, where with much rejoicing ...*

*--Half-humming to himself these opening phrases of Shank's Mare, Chapter Five, Part the First, the figure of a traveler looms up on a station overpass one night in the month of first frost: **above him the pellucid expanse of chill sky, where stars seem washed in the pure moonlight; below, visible here and there in the twinkling of lamps, the bare bones of trees standing in small groves. He too has arrived in Kuwana.***

“[P]ellucid expanse of chill sky”; “stars washed in pure moonlight”—those were the phrases that remained so deeply etched in my memory. The passage from *Hizakurige* uses conventional associations with place to produce both humor and recognition: (Read from original #1). The translation turns apposition into its intended metaphor: *the pillars of whose shrine stood thick and firm as the renowned radishes of this region*. For Kyôka's cadenced prose that follows, Bill substitutes parallel phrasing (*above / below*) to call attention to the poetic qualities of the language. With that last “*He too has arrived in Kuwana,*” he impresses upon the uninitiated English-language reader that the character in question is retracing the footsteps of the earlier literary journey.

Toward the end of this first chapter describing the arrival in Kuwana, Kyôka's self-styled Yajirobei has made some snide remarks about how the advanced age of his traveling companion, whom he now refers to as “Cranky,” makes him a poor stand-in for Kitahachi; rather, says Yaji, he resembles some character he might have “picked up along

the way ... ‘lurking among the pines at the side of the road’.” His companion, irked by the forced induction into *Hizakurige* says the following:

“Would you quit calling me ‘Cranky’? What will people think? You may if you like refer to me as your traveling companion, but that ‘lurking among the pines’ makes me sound like some kind of swindler.” Here he taps the ground firmly with his stick and, like a wild goose breaking formation, flies past the leader and out through the station wicket.

Yaji deliberately falls behind a few paces and, gazing after his companion as he bustles ahead like an old paterfamilias off to scold an unruly son, exclaims with a guffaw, “That’s why I call you Cranky. What have pines at the side of the road got to do with swindlers? Of course, it’s possible that in your younger days . . .” His solitary mirth is cut short as he feels the ticket snatched from his hand and sees the face of the ticket-taker, whose solemn look he himself quickly assumes.

And indeed he is the last of the brigade to straggle through the wicket, having dawdled so long that the train now appears shimmering over pale, distant fields, spewing out white clam-smoke, in honor of the local specialty, into the moonlight.

(Read from the original, # 2, 3; note the creative translation of the terse Japanese phrasing and the well chosen phrasing for the quick switch in mood in the original)

Unchastened, Yaji returns to the text of *Hizakurige*, coercing rickshaw drivers and maids into playing the roles he selects for each in the narrative, as the traveling companions make their way and settle in to the Minatoya of literary fame. On their way to the inn, however, the two rickshaws carrying the travelers are brought to an abrupt halt by “a voice that “ricocheted from the roof tiles, . . . a voice raised in song shimmered amid the stars, as if moonlight shining on the far-off Straights of Chikuzen had been reeled in on a thousand-mile-long silver thread over unbroken ranks of waves that finally washed up into this river.”

The song is actually a Hakata Ballad, and its refrain introduces the protagonist in the second of the two stories told in *Uta Andon*.

The moon peaks out and there,

*Waiting in the shadows beneath the pines . . .
Ara dok-koi-sho!*

The concluding refrain cut through the frosty air like a plectrum tossed into the open sea, where the moon shone forth from among the waves. The ballad-singer turned toward the door of the noodle shop, the paper panels of which, criss-crossed by wooden slats, glowed a faint red, holding his shamisen loosely by its tuning peg in one hand, with the other he used the plectrum to flick open the door.

Here Bill has effectively translated the uncanny imagery and condensed lyricism of the original: (Read from original, #4). The “slender countenance” and “fine figure” of the ballad-singer belies his apparent profession as an itinerant musician, thus setting the stage for later revelations. As we discover from his strange conversation and behavior in the shabby noodle shop, the ballad-singer has a consuming fear of blind masseurs and seems to be in the grips of the most terrifying delusions that he is being pursued by their ranks. Here we are treated to some of the more chilling images in Kyôka’s repertoire: Startled by the sound of a masseur’s flute, the ballad-singer “trained his sharp gaze upwards on the broad roof beam as if at any moment the pupilless eyes of a blind masseur bathed in pale moonlight, might be seen peering down at him.” Under the influence of alcohol, and resigned to his imagined fate, he tells his story and thus reveals what lies behind the disguises that propel the narrative.

At the risk of being a spoiler, the story goes something like this: Three years earlier, the ballad singer, designated successor to one of the most famous Noh performers of Edo (Tokyo), had made this same trip with his Uncle/benefactor who is the head of the school. The two, riding the train toward Kuwana, overhear a conversation in which praise is heaped on a certain blind masseur who lives nearby. This blind masseur had taken the “pretentious” name of Sôzan and fashioned himself an accomplished Noh

master. The younger man, angered by the arrogance of this provincial amateur, sets out to bring him down a notch. Here is the scene where Sôzan's performance is sabotaged by the young master who maliciously throws in a few contrapuntal beats:

Poor Sôzan. Soon enough I could see sweat trickling down from his forehead, then, as he struggled to croak out the phrases, the pores from his chin down to his chest fairly oozed with what looked like oil. Those thick lips began to parch like beached sea-slugs, his tongue went stiff, he was breathing very hard. He hadn't got through so much as one page of that little libretto of his when, still trying to chant, his quivering hand started to clutch at the tatami in search of the sake flask. Right then I stuck in the last strong beat, almost whacking it out on my knee. It must have hit him deep in the belly, for at that moment the bottom dropped out of his voice.

The breath he heaved as he toppled over felt like fire. When his face hit the floor, his tongue lolled out, long as a dog's, and licked the mat.

"Sensei," I addressed him with a grin, "are you ill"?

The humiliation is so complete that Sôzan commits suicide, and the young man is disowned by his uncle for his own arrogance. He has been wandering since.

It is, of course, a woman who provides the link between the two stories, comic and tragic—an artless young Geisha (O-Mie), who turns out to be Sôzan's daughter, sold into service after his death. She has been called to the room of the latter-day Yaji and Kita over at the Minatoya, but it seems she has been unable to learn even the rudiments of a geisha's arts, central among them, singing and playing the shamisen—and is at risk of being sent away in disgrace. In desperation, she offers to entertain the two elderly men with "a sort of imitation No-dance." The two reluctantly allow her to begin the dance:

Then, appearing almost to bite against her purple collar, she lowered her chin, once so full, now so sadly meager, to search out something tucked well under her lapel—hidden, indeed, close to bare skin, so it seemed from a fleeting glimpse of her breasts through the pale thin stuff of her collar. Presently a long, narrow object wrapped in deep purple crape emerged; the wrapper fluttered away and there appeared, first glinting in the candlelight then dazzling forth with its own

radiance, a predominately silver dance fan that struck one as a great burden for those herring-fry fingers.

Having raised the glittering fan to her brow in a gesture of profound respect, letting it press for a moment on her forelocks like a jeweled hairpin, she opened it, with a crackling of the deep creases as they spread out, and hid her face behind the scene of moonlight tranquilly shining on receding waves, revealing herself only in the slender white fingers stretched against the fan's outer ribs.

[. . .]

At this moment, from behind the fan on whose gleaming silver surface floated gold-speckled clouds and a single deep-blue circle of a moon, her voice rang out, crystal clear:

(Refer to original to show how the translation conveys the building drama of the beginning of the performance.)

She begins the “Jewel Sequence” from the Noh play *Ama* [The Diver], only to have her performance interrupted by the two men who sit “with knees rooted to the tatami.”:

“Wait. Stop right there,” Cranky calls out. The reason? These two are in fact famous Noh masters, and Yaji, no other than the Uncle of the estranged balladeer. No sooner has O-Mie’s performance begun, than they recognize the art of their particular school and correctly surmise the identity of her teacher – the ballad singer, no other than the nephew of the Noh master, aka Yaji.

The ending is a reunion enacted as pure performance. Inside the walls of the Minatoya, O-Mie will finally complete the dance, accompanied by these two old masters, (one on drum, one singing chorus). The balladeer, drawn to the gate of the inn by the sound of the Master’s drum, will complete the singing of the chorus from his distanced location.

The night grew old, the streets of the town froze over. As a flute sounded somewhere high up in the firmament, the solitary, pale figure of Onchi Kidahachi stood in the dim light beneath the eaves of the Minatoya. When, casting his dark

shadow beside him, he moved slightly forward to raise his voice in song, moonbeams sliced down over the ridge of the roof and struck him full in the face in a luminous fanlike pattern. For a moment Kidahachi's face merged with the flashing fan of O-Mie's dance, the one becoming but the reverse of the other.

[. . .]

Here and there along the palely glowing strand of the town's single street stood a few figures, among them a blind masseur or two leaning on their sticks, intermittently illuminated by the lanterns that by now burned very low.

I know from experience that talent or brilliance isn't always matched by goodness of character; but in Bill's case, I'd like to think that his exceptional skill at translation—his ability to put himself in the words of another and the other in his—has a lot to do with the generosity and friendship he showed me (and so many other of his graduate students) during my time at Chicago and beyond. I credit Bill for my survival of the prelims, for my (belated) love of the Chicago skyline, and for my job at the University of Michigan among other things.

Finally, I want to end with a quick story from another memorial: this one in 1997 for Bob Danly who died his own untimely death from illness. The memorial was held in a large hall in the Michigan League with just under 100 people in attendance. I don't remember any of the other tributes (though I'm sure they were heartfelt); but I do remember Bill's. He stood up in front of a somber audience and proceeded to sing, quite fetchingly, Cole Porter's 1934 tune "You're the Top." Not with the original lyrics, but lyrics he had made up, capturing Bob to a T, with humor, wit, and style to spare. I won't even try to sing the original for you . . . I wish I could give a tribute as touching and funny to Bill, but it's beyond my meager talents. Instead, I'll just repeat the refrain, "Bill, you're the top."