

Translations Not Written

(Gerald Figal)

Everyone here has read Bill's translations and, I'm guessing, marveled at the verve and vitality of them. Among those written, you probably have your favorite pieces, those that have stayed with you and those you return to. Whenever I think of Bill, however, scenes of translations not written are what immediately come to mind, those sessions as a student reading a piece of literature one-on-one with him, struggling to grasp sinewy sentences to render from Japanese into English. Even in my rare better efforts when the opacity of a passage seemed to give way to meaning with a bit of literary style to boot, Bill would, in a way only he could do, acknowledge the effort and gently offer another take on the passage and casually, seemingly off-the-cuff, spin a gem of a rendition that instantly made clear the chasm between neophyte and master.

In the time I have here, I'd like to draw attention to these ephemeral masterpieces of translation while relating translation itself to memory and dream, sense and sensation. I didn't know I would be talking about these things until they all came to be meaningfully related to me in the process of thinking about what particular memories I had of Bill. Several scenes emerged, but one series of well-defined moments—fragmentary but clear, clear in the sense that I could conjure a room, a table, chairs, texts, a face and voice—struck me as especially relevant. While memories of reading Izumi Kyoka's *Kōya hijiri* together remain vivid (especially the paragraph about the leeches) and were instrumental for one chapter of my dissertation and book, a work that didn't make it into

the dissertation but remains firmly lodged among memories of Bill is Sōseki's odd collection of short dream pieces, *Yume jūya* (Ten Nights' Dreams), originally serialized in *Asahi Shimbun* from July 25 to August 5, 1908 (and republished and retranslated and adapted to film for the 100 years anniversary of publication).

The actual language of *Yume jūya* is rather straightforward, simple even; sentences are mercifully short; subjects markers relatively clear; grammar resembles that which one learns in class. "Konna yume o mita" it begins with an inviting—and misleading—simplicity. What made it difficult to translate this piece on-the-spot and side-by-side with Bill was the first order of translation that it represented, that of putting dream into words (or words into simulated dream). Whether or not Sōseki actual had these dreams is beside the point; he is clearly attempting a translation between dream experience and written language, in one direction or the other. He is also playing with the sense of heterogeneous times juxtaposed in a single space, as in the sixth night's dream, for example, which finds the Kamakura-period sculptor Unkei chiseling away in Sōseki's contemporary Meiji period as if it were not out of place to do so. This suggests to me that every time we remember the past we are juxtaposing fragments of times, put together in our minds, rather than "recalling" per se the past of our present. We are instead inhabiting multiple times now. "Living in memory" is more accurately rendered as "living in times."

In remembering and then trying to fill in my remembrances of rendering Sōseki's narratively disjointed and at times absurdist text into English, I was suddenly made

aware of three acts of translation converging: dream to narrative; distant memory to present words; distant language to nearby language. An analogy emerged among trying to narrate a dream, trying to narrate a memory and trying to translate one language to another, especially languages as disparate as Japanese and English. All presented similar linguistic challenges to grapple with. Even the most accomplished translator could feel this.

For the less accomplished translator, this analogous relationship among dream-memory-translation is even more strongly felt. As one would struggle to put dream fragments and memory fragments into intelligible narrative, so too does one struggle to put what sometimes is received as fragments of meaning from an unfamiliar foreign language into a familiar home language. Remembering the past and relating a dream are acts of translations; and, translating a text engages mechanisms used for remembrance and for decoding dreams. If these translations are not written down, if they are done in the moment and gone without material trail, then they adhere even more strongly to memory and dream. They exist only in memory and dream. And the “meaning” or “significance” that memory and dreams generate side more with sensation than with sense.

This is where I often got it wrong and Bill always got it right, particularly with dream-like narratives like *Kōya hijiri* and *Yume jūya*. As I struggled to make sense of a passage, to connect sentences into a meaningful whole, Bill would guide me—through his magical re-translation of what I had attempted—to a fitting translation, one motivated by

sensation over sense. That is not to say that sense was abandoned; it followed in the sensation, you could feel it was there. To get the sense of a passage in translation means sensing it, and that implies operating through a field of sensation. It took this present exercise of reflecting over Bill's readings and translations with me—and certainly recalling them in a fragmented and distorted way—to come finally to this minor epiphany, twenty years later. At least for the texts we treated—admittedly strange texts to begin with—translation was all about capturing and creating sensation, not sense per se. In this light, Bill's spontaneous unwritten translations were truly sensational. Upon hearing them, all of the clichés applied: I was left speechless, without words, dumbstruck at how sensible his rendering was even though it might not have hewed to the dictates of making direct sense out of the passage.

And I have no words from his translations now, but for that these translations not written are all the more precious and powerful. Here is where the sensation of Bill's ephemeral spoken translations proves itself and becomes enveloped in the same field of fragmentary associations as memories and dreams. "Konna yume o mita": I can see the scene and his figure, but they are not foreground. The foreground is the voice of the translator, its timbre and resonance as the sensational translation forms upon waves of air into words that are gone as quickly as they came. Maybe you can call this *mono no aware* if you'd like. The scene I see is near static save Bill raising his chin and leaning in to scrutinize the Japanese text a bit more carefully before speaking. I hear his voice, but I cannot make out the words. I know he is giving me an encouraging assessment of my effort despite its quality, and then, in an understated and matter-of-fact manner, offer a

revision. I say something on the order of “oh yeah, okay” while wondering in awe “how does he do that?” The sensation of hearing but not hearing him in these recollections, of knowing (or feeling?) exactly what is going on and being said, but not being able to pin down the verbal exchange could be out of a dream rather than a memory. A sensation of the scene is deeply impressed upon my mind, with a sense of the sense of it glowing on the edges. And the source of that sensation was the easy virtuosity displayed in Bill’s act of translation. To me, then, it was alchemical. I would need the same alchemy now to translate that memory into the verbal sense it had then. Lacking that, all I can hope for is to impart the sensation originally felt; some sense may or may not follow....

This effect of being at the brink of verbal sense while immersed in the center of sensation felt from piecing together the past is not—at least not entirely—a function of faulty memory because I do recall words from other scenes, such as when Bill bailed me out during my truly disastrous oral exams; he intervened with “Let’s move along to the literature now and discuss how fantastic literature figures into your thesis...”. (And I moved as if fleeing a burning building, that I know.) Considering remembrance as a translation of past time to present time—as one might consider recounting dreams as a translation of dream time to waking time—one has the option of how literal that translation should or can possibly be while still making some sense and “ringing true”—my own dream-like recollections of Bill’s unwritten translations here included. Likewise, if we consider translation in general as akin to committing memories or dreams to written words, the sense of the original can be safely imparted in the sensation of meaning that inheres in words that have moved, that have been transformed, across

linguistic codes to meet a reader on a page. Bill transmuted many leaden originals into golden translations that were written down and when read do, in their finest moments, impart an alchemical aura wherein sense and sensation resonant and move the reader. But it is in his translations not written—those only I or a small group of students ever heard—where I have always felt the greatest impression and have always held most valuable. Dream-like memories of them in their fleeting moments of utterance continue to flash up and move me every time I set out to translate a passage, in a kind of uncanny return back to that scene of translations not written and not forgotten.