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Comparative Literature

Spring 2020

Japanese-English Translation: Kitaōji Rosanjin—Character (1953)

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Recommended Citation

Southward, Christopher, "Japanese-English Translation: Kitaōji Rosanjin—Character (1953)" (2020).

Comparative Literature Faculty Scholarship. 28.

https://orb.binghamton.edu/comparative_literature_fac/28

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It was late afternoon, and..., But wait!

How pretentious it must seem to the reader that I should open with such a literary phrase. But not to worry, as I have no designs on the Akutagawa Prize¹ for my efforts. Besides, the world of letters is already heavy laden with the combined weight of This, That, and The Other Prize, and we've already had enough of the legions of presidents, executives, and directors of Companies X, Y, and Z, whose incessant talk of offices and titles never lets us rest.

Picture it: You're out for a walk one day when you bump into an old friend, and before you manage to grasp the motives behind his smile, he reaches into a breast pocket and produces a business card bearing his credentials, reverently presenting it to you as you calmly peek through his straightlaced naïveté and glimpse the countenance of the corporate lackey and emissary of capital. For every company executive seated behind an office desk and telephone, there's another out on the beat whose sole function is to leverage connections with banks in exchange for lines of credit, and each of those literary prizes we bestow upon our writers circulates in a similar manner, which is to say, as a sham, and I think that we should have done away with these long ago. Don't get me wrong; I'm all for commending people for doing good work (Who doesn't appreciate receiving a bit of praise now and then?), but we should be careful not to praise too lavishly, as this can only distort a person's creative vision in the end. History is replete with stories of writers who, upon receiving this or that coveted prize, found themselves standing with one leg already in the grave and who....

But I digress. Where was? Ah, yes— *It was late afternoon....* Let's pick up there.

It was late afternoon, and I was out for a walk with my dog. Or, rather, I was out on a stroll with an old professor who was visiting me all the way from Fukui Prefecture and who often sent me care-packages loaded with freshwater fish, usually *unagi*. No matter how you slice it, Fukui's *unagi* is the best in Japan. One finds it in other provinces, of course, but Fukui's is exceptionally tasty, and those native to the waters of the town of Shikaura are particularly unrivaled in quality. Maybe it's the hairpin bones that make eating this fish such a special experience, I can't quite say, but no other eel has the texture that is so specific to Fukui's, each bite offering an unforgettably soft crunch of pure delight. Its skin sheathes a core of unusually firm flesh, and should you dare let one slip from your hands while handling it live, it hits the ground with a hollow thud. Oh, the numbers of these feisty critters I've wrestled and cleaned at the cutting board over the years!

So, I found myself ambling toward the train station with this man from Fukui, the land of *unagi*, and since I too had business there, we went together. As we made our way, we happened upon a schoolboy who, with a glance at my companion, curtsied deeply before him. At this, the professor turned to me and, with a grin, nearly blushing, said—

No matter where I travel, children tend to bow in greeting when they see me. It must be that I remind them of their teachers.

His words at once impressed and concerned me, for while I'd always considered the educator's station a noble one in life, I also knew it to be a terribly lonesome lot, as theirs is a constant struggle for legitimacy and recognition. Anyone can deploy a set of standardized pedagogical practices and call himself a teacher, but this alone ultimately stifles creativity and leaves students with nothing but empty form. The same is the case with cooking. A chef who strives to honor the forms of a culinary tradition will always be bound by its strictures; he will never surpass them. This is not to suggest that one should avoid formal precision in cooking, as an immaculately executed dish is more desirable than a carelessly presented slop. Similarly, a college-educated ignoramus is to be preferred to an uneducated one, except that the educated ignoramus studies only what interests him. In fact, a person who's committed to study will do so through sheer effort and with no need of formal schooling, which is not for everyone but is reserved for those who would otherwise suffer and perish without it. On the other hand, in the case of those for whom hard work

¹ 芥川賞: あくたがわしょう (*Akutagawa-shō*): A prestigious Japanese literary prize named in honor of the Taishō-era writer, Akutagawa Ryūnosuke [芥川龍之介] (1892-1927)

and study come naturally, formal learning is purely an academic matter, but by no means is this to suggest that there is a formal distinction between thinking and doing.

Take lexicology as an example. Whether it be written by one who has learned it in school or by one who has first sought out and experienced the thing it represents, the character which expresses the idea of what we call a "mountain" takes one and the same form². No matter who writes it, *as a character*, "mountain" is "mountain;" it simply doesn't change. The difference between the two instances is this: whereas the abstractly learned character, "mountain," might be written with formal precision and yet have no *character*, that which is written in the context of *an experience of mountains as such* does. The latter is robust, informed, and aesthetically appealing while the former, albeit formally precise, is nonetheless uninspired and uninviting. In short, that which has character is joyful, honest, and engaging and, in terms of sheer form, one who is self-taught and learns by trial and error arrives at the same point as one who studies conventionally. But what *is* this point at which the two arrive? It is *truth*. The truth of that which has character not only possesses inner form, style, and order, but it also exudes taste, strength, beauty, and aura; we can even say that there is something pleasantly aromatic about it. Conventional education is fine, but I seriously doubt that it can teach strength, beauty, and taste, and the appreciation of these virtues, which we gain through hard-won lessons, is not ready-made but cultivated. While it is important to begin with form, we must take care not to surrender to it fully and thereby lull ourselves into complacency. Rather, we all must eventually shed form and transcend it, so that, leaving form behind, we stand on our own feet and begin to walk.

Japan's welfare is in no way improved by the wealth of its given and repeated forms. Granted, we have mountains, rivers, and valleys, and these things enhance our nation's beauty, but let us keep in mind that, even while they are universally the same in a formal sense, no two mountains, valleys, trees, or flowers are alike in measure. And yet, every flower in its kind sprouts from seeds of the same respective form, and when seeds have been produced and sowed, each must then find its own way to germinate and flourish. When I say something like, *Forget education!*, what I mean is that we should never rely solely on form and that we should never become idle in our devotion to a cause.

I have not written this book³ in order to stoke your egos, Dear Readers, and neither will it do for you to satisfy yourselves with simple glances at the cover. I offer this in the hope of inspiring you to act and so that you might grow both within and through your various researches and practices. In short, this text is not to be arrogantly treated as though the truths it contains are self-evident; rather these truths are to be taken to heart and lived.

And so, again, we ask, *What is character?* As it said, *You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear!*, and what a shame it would be for us to go about envying others' abilities while ignorant of our own! Everyone is singularly gifted, and each of our abilities is absolutely invaluable.

Let us reject the hubris for example, that prefers beef to radishes! No more should we ever assume that it is the desire of a radish to become a steak than we should mistakenly assume that name-brand foodstuffs are better than generic ones. Everyone craves a nice dish of pickled vegetables⁴ and a bowl of rice bathed in hot green tea⁵ following a meal of *sukiyaki*, so if it is true, as they say, that a person's culinary tastes says something about their character, then perhaps we should treat the ingredients we use with respect and grace as we work with them and give them new life.

² 山：やま (*yama*)

³ 『独法』、昭和 28 年初出: [First published in *Eminence*, 1953, NP].

⁴ 漬け物：つけもの (*tsukemono*)

⁵ 茶漬け：ちゃづけ (*chazuke*)