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Japanese-English Translation: 「翻訳について」、岸田國士著、一九三五年一月作 The Question Concerning Translation, by Kishida Kunio (Penned January 1935), Translated by Christopher Southward, November 2024

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While the question concerning translation lends itself to any number of approaches, we can say in final analysis that *translation is for the translator*. To critique a source text based on its translation is to risk submitting this cultural craft to sheer commercial interests, so we urge those interested to set aside fiscal considerations and approach it solely as a labor of love.

The work of translation first demands that its practitioner read and re-read source material *ad-nauseum*, and it is through this that we discover the tenuous nature of our command over our mother tongues; indeed, to have such an encounter with one's own language is to swallow a bitter pill.

One often enjoys the initial reading of a text only to find it disappointing either during or upon completing its translation, this finding indicating failures of the original. But we should bear in mind that it is not the task of the translation to convey original meaning; in fact, semantic adequation is eternally elusive by nature. Rather, what we glean from a translation is *just how well it stands alone as a text*.

It seems reasonable to think that a translator's personal writing style might hinder the pursuit of broad proficiency in the craft, but on this point we beg to differ. And while it would also seem sensible to assume that the translator seeks to express the ineffable qualities of the original—something more than sheer meaning—this too is simply an error of conventional thinking. For an illustration of this point, one has only to consider French-to-Japanese translation, where practice evinces the absolute limit of expression of the target language relative to the source. And even more pointedly, we might take the example of Michel de Montaigne, whose distinctive style could only have been attained in French. Notwithstanding the fact that Hideo Sekine's deep admiration and understanding of Montaigne's work allowed him to capture its stylistic subtleties, we must note that this was due to nothing less than his mastery of his native Japanese.

While imagery and syntactic rhythm are beyond the scope of translation, the craft's literary essence seems to lie precisely in the art of converting one aesthetic form into another, making this one of its adaptive aspects. Bereft of this art, translation wouldn't even rank as a literary practice; in fact, without it, it would be reduced to purely mechanistic technique. Technical translation certainly has its place, but just imagine how mind-numbing are the work and its products! We can say by analogy that technical translation is something like a path taken by a weary hiker through treacherous mountainous terrain having left worrying parents far behind and praying for a safe return.

Translating the work of such writers as Alfred de Musset and Anatole France in such ways as to render them sensible in the Japanese is a task already daunting enough, but then there's Guy de Maupassant, whose work appears accessible enough at first glance but resists the translator at every turn, and the Japanese language simply does it no justice. No two works are the same, of course, and some are more recalcitrant than others, but clumsy translation tends to render a perfectly good text into lowbrow fodder unworthy of the reader. We leave it to the language and cultural prowess of the French to have produced such exquisitely obstinate literature.

Jules Renard's work is perhaps the most translatable of the French literary canon, and by this I mean that his rough, even rigid style radiates with rarefied qualities which, if successfully probed, are enough to suggest some of the most singularly interesting imagery. Unlike that of Maupassant, Renard's prose is utterly uncompromising; push it too far, and it cracks at the margins and between the lines, leaving us cursing both the author and ourselves. Then again, Maupassant's style is so malleable as to allow us to explore a wide range of interpretations, so that, if we're not careful, we end up losing our way before we even realize it. Indeed, anyone who tries grappling with Maupassant's work is bound to find themselves utterly vexed in the end.

And then there's French drama. I can't imagine the possibility of translating a French play without having first seen it in performance, as it is only here that one can gain a sense for its dialogic flow. Talkies are now a useful resource in this respect, but nothing can be more ineffective than to take spoken Japanese as source material, so let us save ourselves worlds of trouble by avoiding falling into the delusion that Japanese dramatic dialogue is a mode of linguistic expression amenable to translation.