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To begin with, a short introduction to the Japanese language will illustrate the kind of difficulties one encounters in translating Japanese into the European languages, and vice versa.

Linguistically, Japanese is an isolated language. It has no relation to Chinese. It must have had some relation to Korean, another isolated language, but the two went into different directions thousands of years ago. Some linguists claim that the Japanese language, along with the Korean, belongs to the Ural-Altaic family, yet the claim remains hypothetical.

The Japanese language features some characteristics that would seem most strange to those who are only familiar with the European languages. For example, a grammatical subject is unnecessary in Japanese to construct a grammatically complete sentence. 淋しい (*Sabishii*) means (someone is) lonely. It is a complete sentence, but there is no subject. The sentence may mean, *I'm lonely*, *you are lonely*, *he/she is lonely*, *the rock is lonely*, *all human beings are lonely*, etc., depending on the context. It may also mean that there exists a vague sense of loneliness which need not be specified. A sentence may be very long and still be without a subject. In *The Tale of Genji*, there would often be three long sentences without subjects, yet each with a different subject implied. It is for the reader to figure out to whom the sentence refers by the degree in the narrator's use of the honorifics (which happens to be yet another feature of the Japanese language). The narrator of *the Tale of Genji*, who is a lady in waiting, would reserve, for example, the highest honorifics for the Emperor. It is true that in some European languages, such as Italian, a grammatically complete sentence is possible without a named subject. But the subject can always be determined by the inflection of the verb (and often also by the changes in the articles, adjectives and nouns): *Sono sola*, *Sei solo*.

In fact, the Japanese language does not even have personal pronouns the way that the European languages do. There is no word in Japanese which is the equivalent of the English *I*, the most essential personal pronoun in European languages. Instead, Japanese has many variations of the word that means *I*: 私 (*watashi*), あたし (*atashi*), わたくし (*watakushi*), 俺 (*ore*), 僕 (*boku*), 我輩 (*wagahai*), あたい (*atai*), おいら (*oira*), わらわ (*warawa*), うち (*uchi*), おいどん (*oidon*), 手前 (*temae*), to name just a few. Each denotes a varying degree of culture (or the lack of culture), urbanity and rusticity, femininity and masculinity, or even pompousness and humbleness. As a consequence, a Japanese speaker must use different forms of *I* depending on the person to whom he is speaking. These floating *I* make it impossible for the notion of universal subjectivity, implied in the *I* of the European languages, to exist in Japanese.

However, it is unlikely that Japanese is unique in these linguistic features. It is more likely that, if more languages are studied from a less Eurocentric perspective, the very existence of personal pronouns such as *I*, for example, may be construed as what sets the Indo-European languages apart from the rest. (The notion of the Subject may even be a linguistic by-product.) What is truly unique about the Japanese language is its writing system. It is the only language I know that mixes ideograms (the Chinese characters) with phonetic signs[1]—two kinds of phonetic signs. Hence, three different signs coexist within any Japanese text. Ideograms are usually used for nouns and verbs, and may always be replaced with either of the phonetic signs. Of the two phonetic signs, the more frequently used sign, *hiragana*, best represents the vernacular language, whereas the other, *katakana*, gives the impression of being more blatantly phonetic, and is thus often reserved for imported foreign words. The word *bara*, meaning *rose*, therefore, may be written three ways: 薔薇, ばら, or バラ. Thus, the famous American poem, *A rose is a rose is a rose*, may be translated:

1. In recent history, Koreans basically stopped their own practice of mixing Chinese characters with phonetic signs but the practice is said to be now coming back.

A. 薔薇は薔薇は薔薇である (*bara wa bara wa bara dearu*)

B. ばらはばらはばらである (*bara wa bara wa bara dearu*)

C. バラはバラはバラである (*bara wa bara wa bara dearu*)

or,

D. バラハバラハバラデアル (*bara wa bara wa bara dearu*)

or even,

E. 薔薇はばらはバラである (*bara wa bara wa bara dearu*)

The five translations are all pronounced the same but each gives a very different impression in Japanese; the meaning and the nuances are inextricably connected to the combination of signs one chooses. I would choose translation B, the one in all *hiragana*, for Gertrude Stein, because it is the simplest and yet, the most confounding. As can be seen, Japanese, when it is written, is a strangely visual language.

This system of writing is a product of history. The Japanese did not have a writing system until the Chinese characters were introduced in the fifth or sixth century by Korean scholars who had fled political upheavals in Korea. Had the Chinese used a phonetic alphabet, the Japanese language would have developed in a very different way. However, that was not the case and, the Japanese, who had to make do with the ideograms from an entirely different language, ingeniously invented ways to cope with

the problem. First, as demonstrated, the Japanese conceived their own system of writing in the vernacular that mixes Chinese characters with the newly created phonetic signs. Second, the Japanese conceived a highly developed decoding method with which one would decipher the Chinese texts by systematically changing the word order to fit into the Japanese language. Chinese word order in a sentence, 我愛你 (I love you), will thus be systematically converted into Japanese word order, 我は你を愛する (I you love). This method not only allowed two types of written text to coexist in Japan, one in the vernacular and the other in Chinese, but also allowed the Japanese to basically bypass the problem of translation until the country opened its doors to the West — which finally brings us to the discussion of translation.

What is amazing about human beings is our almost innate capacity to distinguish *what is not only a story* from *what is only a story*, not in a real sense, but in a genuinely literary sense. Philosophy, religion, science (and often poetry) — all come under the rubric of Truth, because, there, the true meaning of the words are, in principle, unalterable. There, one is not allowed to play with the original text — no free adaptations, no free participation of the imagination of others. The only way to transcribe those unalterable words into another language is an act of translation, an act which presupposes a respect for the original text. And we humans have always known, more or less, which writings required us to remain faithful to the true meaning of the text. Conversely, we humans have also always known which writings are only stories that we can infinitely alter.

The coexistence of the two kinds of written text in Japan, Chinese and the vernacular, meant that the present-day notion of translation did not need to exist in Japan. All the Chinese texts that came under the rubric of Truth (Buddhist sutras, Confucius's teachings, the Classics), needed no translation because those who read them, the upper-class men, were educated to decipher their meanings in the original. The Chinese prose fiction, however, was freely adapted into the vernacular language. There was no line drawn between getting an inspiration, borrowing a few plot lines, putting the story into a Japanese context, or translating the story, whether loosely or faithfully.

The present-day notion of translating novels, that is, translating a story with respect for the original text, only took root in Japan after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, when writers began translating European literature. In the preceding centuries, because the Japanese government had banned European literature from Japan fearing the spread of Christianity, the rare attempts at translation from the European language to Japanese had almost entirely been limited to scientific works in such fields as medicine, geography, and astronomy. It is therefore not surprising that, after the Meiji government lifted the ban, one of the very first books to be

translated was the Bible (usually one of the first books to be translated into any language). It is not surprising, furthermore, that, in the beginning, European literature was turned into fantastic adaptations. Many of the novels and plays were made into Japanese stories, with Japanese characters living in Japan. Even when they were actually translated rather than adapted, the translators freely abridged the original, inserted digressions, and sometimes came up with their own endings.

Once again, what is amazing about human beings, is how quickly we can understand a new way of looking at things, and once that happens, how thoroughly our understanding goes. Futabatei Shimei, a writer who is considered the first modern novelist in Japan, is not only the inventor of the modern vernacular, but also one of the very few who first fully understood the present-day notion of translation. Born several years before the Meiji Restoration, Futabatei had in fact done all there that had to be done to transform Japanese literature into modern literature, and he had done so all in his twenties. Growing up before Japan developed its own system of education with its own professors, he had the good fortune to study Russian in a foreign language school where every subject, including literature, was taught by Russians in the Russian language, and Futabatei ended up becoming bilingual. Like so many of his generation, he was a patriot and his initial aim in studying Russian was to know the language of the enemy. Instead, he fell in love with Russian literature, became a novelist, and translated a story by Turgenev. What made his translation radically different from the previous ones was his determination to remain faithful to the original. In fact, he was so obsessed with recreating the original in Japanese that he is said to even have counted the number of alphabets in the original and tried to use the same number of signs in Japanese — an attempt which inevitably failed. Yet, around the same time, translations that tried to remain faithful to the original were making their way into the Japanese literary scene and the significance of such achievements was soon recognized. Suddenly, stories ceased to be only stories. Their words attained the status of the Words. Stories became novels, with all the typical modern notions attached to the genre: the notion of text, of authorship, and even of intellectual property rights.

Now, all this is history and, as is usually the case with history, is nearly forgotten, even by the Japanese. Yet, I always find it refreshing and even humbling to go back to a time when the notion of translating a novel, completely taken for granted today, still remained a nebulous one. Thinking about the trajectory the notion had to travel forces a novelist to face the fundamental paradox of her vocation. For it is in the aporia between a storyteller and the author of a text that her vocation will always reside.

Having spent 20 years of my life in an English-speaking world, I am more conscious than most other Japanese writers of one thing: I am not merely writing, but I am writing in the Japanese language. This induces me to engage in seemingly contradictory endeavors.

On the one hand, I want to bring the readers' attention to the materiality of the Japanese language (or, theoretically, of any language) as that which resists translation. After the initial struggle to translate the European languages into Japanese was over, the possibility of translation has become so much taken for granted in Japan that the Japanese are often no longer aware of the problem inherent in an act of translation, let alone in an act of translation between two languages as far apart as English and Japanese. One of my novels, *An I Novel from left to right*, has a bilingual format to make the point. By mixing some English sentences into a Japanese novel, that is, by juxtaposing the two languages, the novel underscores the radical abyss that separates the two languages and hence the impossibility of reproducing the materiality of one language into another, and ultimately, the impossibility of translation itself. Moreover, by assuming that Japanese readers are capable of understanding the English that appears in the novel, the novel also underscores the asymmetry between English, the de facto universal language of the day, and Japanese, a mere local language, thereby bringing home to the reader's mind the fact that they are not just reading a novel, but reading a novel in the Japanese language.

On the other hand, I want to bring the readers' attention to the possibility of translation as the very condition of modern Japanese literature (or, theoretically, of any modern literature). Another of my novels, *A True Novel*, is a conscious rewriting of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* in postwar Japan. The narrator of *A True Novel* claims within the novel itself how it was the translation of *Wuthering Heights* that she read as a girl which eventually led her to want to rewrite the novel in Japanese, but she claims this with a grain of salt. For, although modern Japanese literature had freely borrowed from European novels in its early years, it had gradually grown less inclined to admit to such borrowings as it became increasingly modern and thus increasingly caught up in the notion of originality. The Japanese novelists continued to have no qualms borrowing from their classical literature; classical Japanese literature, instead of giving a privileged status to the claim of originality, long cherished a tradition of reworking from the pre-existing material.[2] Yet, when it came to the question of borrowing from European novels, the Japanese novelists eventually gave up the practice, at least on the conscious level, and the whole literary institution began suppressing the early history of modern Japanese literature and how the emergence of that very literature owed so much to the earlier borrowings from the West. In fact, a recent finding that the most popular novel during the Meiji period, *Konjiki Yasha*

2. There existed a major poetic tradition called *honkadori* where a poet would compose a new poem by making a variation out of an earlier well-known poem.

(*The Gold Demon*), which was based on an American dime novel, had so surprised the Japanese people that it made the front pages of several major newspapers. *A True Novel* is at once an attempt to rectify such suppression of history and a tribute to the possibility of translation as that which has always enriched and shall continue to enrich world literature.

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