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Untitled (2 October 1910), Untitled (6 October 1910), and Untitled (7 October 1910) by Natsume Sōseki

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Erik Lofgren
Untitled (2 October 1910)

Natsume Sōseki
[SZ 12:407]

In dream, I wander the cosmos; a profoundly silent dew-fall glistens.
At midnight, my body and its shadow in the flame's pathetic gloom.
Ill in this inn with Shuzenji temple nearby—
Through the curtained window, its faintly sounding bell; long, now, into autumn.

Erik Lofgren
Untitled (6 October 1910)

Natsume Sōseki
[SZ 12:408]

The world is ever uncertain,
And ever are we at the mercy of its winds.
Under a clear autumn sky, we lament our greying sidelocks;
Our disease-ravaged bodies dream the flush face of youth.
I see the birds off across the limitless sky
And watch the clouds on their endless paths.
I am but bones, yet precious they are,
And careful I'll be not to grind them down.

Erik Lofgren
Untitled (7 October 1910)

Natsume Sōseki
[SZ 12:408]

How melancholy the arrival of autumn!
Vomiting blood, yet still this body lives.
How long ere I might arise from my sickbed?
The village, aglow in the setting sun.

Commentary

All three poems here are taken from *Sōseki zenshū* (1967) and represent Natsume Sōseki's (1867–1916) return, after a ten-year hiatus, to *kanshi* (poems in the classical Chinese style). They date from a time when Sōseki, perhaps Japan's most famous early-modern author, was recovering from a near-fatal illness brought on by a journey undertaken to recuperate from an earlier serious illness. Consequently, the twin themes of life's ephemerality and man's relation to his world define these poems. The degree of lachrymose pathos is, perhaps, overwrought; however, the poems do offer a refraction of the mind of a convalescent and, as such, join a long history of writing that crosses many national and periodization boundaries. Through recourse to this neglected part of Sōseki's *oeuvre* we gain another view of a complex and highly influential novelist.

One of the primary difficulties facing the translator of *kanshi*—or, indeed, classical Chinese poetry on which *kanshi* are putatively modeled—is the frustration of plenitude that lies at the confluence of concision, evocative power, and a vibrant intertextuality. This plenitude may be addressed in numerous ways: explanatory footnotes, descriptive text inserted in the poem proper, through a discursive essay, or the translator may choose to let the poem stand on its own. It is this last that I have chosen, for the possibility of deeper awareness inheres, however tentatively, in the shared context of the three poems.

Nobody familiar with classical Chinese poetry will be surprised to learn that extensive commentary has grown up around the fertile ground of Sōseki's *kanshi*. What is, perhaps, troubling for the translator is how much of this commentary seeks to rewrite the poems in the image of the putatively real. For example, in the first poem (2 October 1910), Iida Rigyō (*Shin'yaku Sōseki shishū* [Tokyo: Kashiwa shobō, 1994]: 153–54) has drawn upon Sōseki's use of the temple Shuzenji, plus Sōseki's contemporaneous writings, to expand upon the poem. He observes that the bell should actually be thought of as “drum” for two reasons. The first is because Shuzenji did not construct a bell until the Taishō era (1912–26) so there was no bell tower on the premises at the time Sōseki was writing. Second, Sōseki described the evening in question in *Omoidasu koto nado* (*Recollections*, 1910) saying, “At that moment, the drum of Shuzenji sounded.” Yet, to accept this attribution of intention, however accurate the facts upon which it is based might be, is to deny the poem and its poet the freedom of

creative fancy, and the power of image. The fact is that Sōseki chose to use “bell” instead of “drum” and in the poem, there is no indication that a reader was to understand the choice in any other way. Note that I am not suggesting the poem must remain true to the author’s intention; rather, that in the absence of any evidence in the poem to the contrary, changing the text to match an assumed knowledge of the reality surrounding the poem’s construction, as many of the commentators feel obliged to do, beggars the immanent power of the poem.

Once the determination was made to present the poems as free from this biographical armature as possible, the other decisions facing the translator fell into place. While neither foot nor meter, as they are understood in Western poetry, play a significant role, *kanshi* is governed by a strict syllable count (each character representing one syllable) and rhyme scheme. In most published English translations of *kanshi*, these have both been ignored, generally to the benefit of the translation. I have followed the lead of others translating *kanshi* and have set aside the strict rhyme scheme present in the originals as too disruptive of a natural flow to warrant strict adherence.