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Four Poems in Diverse Styles by Natsume Sōseki

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Natsume Sōseki

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[untitled]

leafy autumn mountain while walking in the rain;

lo! a cataract

2 November 1895

on a mountain lane looking at maples

山路觀楓

even a woodcutter

looks to be wearing brocade

when this morning's rain

thoroughly washes his sleeves

to the hue of autumn leaves

6 November 1889

on a mountain lane looking at maples

山路觀楓

moss-covered stones washed with rain, slippery and difficult to climb—

across the river, threading through the forest, back and forth

everywhere the cries of deer; in vain do I seek them—

white clouds and crimson leaves fill the countless mountains

November 1889

winter night

冬夜

the shadow of the
clumped all together
diagonally

peony's blossoms
four or five of them
on a golden screen

a milky quartz-glass chimney
its crimson color
illuminating

encompassing the lamp flame
strikes across the wall
a broadly bright sphere

ears cold in the dark
to the crystal sound
a single person

listening clearly
of silent snowfall
in the dead of night

when I replenish
paulownia wood
with spent coal—embers

the charcoal in the
brazier, it collides
scattering resound

pouring water from
for some short time, now,
cast iron kettle

the cold water pot
the susurrating
has ceased its crying

I think, yet I can't
first five syllables
at length, I delight

write the stanza—those
so hard to produce
in creating it

with thoughts of slumber
above my head; Hail!
my mind untroubled

I pull my sleepwear
Amida Buddha
and free of all dream

10 December 1904

Commentary

Natsume Sōseki (1867–1916) is the preëminent Japanese author of the early modern age (1868–1912), and perhaps of the entire twentieth century as well. He straddled the feudal and modern eras, and the breadth of his education, with its particular emphasis on the Chinese classics, found a literary outlet in myriad genres. The poems here represent Sōseki’s work in four poetic forms: *waka* (of which he wrote a handful), *kanshi* (poetry in classical Chinese, of which he wrote hundreds), *haiku* (several thousand), and *haikai-tai* (humorous poetry in the style of *renga*, or linked poems, of which he also penned only a handful). With the exception of the second and third poems, which explicitly share a time, space, theme, and title, the connection among these four is a simple temporal continuity of the end of the year; however, by their juxtaposition they present a glimpse of the impressive range of Sōseki’s poetic output, as well as sense of both the breadth of his literary ambition and the depth of his skill.

Each poem offered a different challenge for the translator. The *haiku* (untitled) gains its rhetorical and emotional effect through what Ezra Pound called the “super-position” of an “invisible” image revealed through the juxtaposition of the two parts of the poem. The trick for the translator is to capture in English enough of what is in the original to occasion that same flash of insight without revealing what the flash should be. This may involve rearranging the words or, as I have done here, adding a term (“while”) to clarify a relationship.

The *waka* (“on a mountain lane looking at maples,” 6 November 1889), too, leverages its economical use of language to evoke an emotional response. The struggle here was again one of word order. Both the *haiku* and *waka* also implicitly raise the question of lineation. In the original, they are each a single line. The (older) western convention distinguished poetry from prose through multiple means, but lineation was, perhaps, the most obvious. Many translators follow the descriptive syllabic breaks (5–7–5 for *haiku*; 5–7–5–7–7 for *waka*) to present these poems as either three or five lines, respectively, in English. I have followed the latter for the *waka* in acknowledgement of its relatively smooth narrative continuity. The essential role played by

the *kireji*, the caesura (the semi-colon in my translation), that demarcates the two parts so essential to Pound's super-pository image seen in haiku, however, argues convincingly for rendering the haiku into two lines, which more accurately represents what is occurring as a consequence of the poem's formal construction.

Kanshi offer a plethora of conundra for the translator and "on a mountain lane looking at maples" (November 1889) is no exception. To be sure, the grammar and vocabulary are frequently unfamiliar to Japanese readers, but it is more often the compactness of the form that causes the greatest difficulties for the translator. The struggle between fidelity to that economy and comprehension is impossible to resolve to everyone's satisfaction. I have opted for the former, hoping that what is on the page is still sufficient to suggest, as it does in the original, the necessary information to flesh out the interpretation. Reading this poem against Sōseki's waka written, we might presume, on the same occasion (6 November 1889), illustrates differences in both tone and structure as well as highlights how their respective formal elements might lead to different emphases.

Finally, "winter night" is one of only a few poems in the haikai-tai that Sōseki composed. This was, in many respects, the most challenging poem to translate. The original appears prose-like in its structure, each stanza reading more like a sentence cut into six segments than a "poem," narrowly construed. It was easy enough to replicate the split sentences, themselves a nod to Chinese poetic convention with which Sōseki was intimately familiar. To have followed, slavishly, the word order in Japanese, on the other hand, would have been to create an awkward, disjuncted string of text that would ill serve Sōseki. There is a second concern, however, for haikai are a comic outgrowth of renga, a form whose mode of construction—a strict syllable count of either a 7-7-syllable stanza or a 5-7-5-syllable stanza—eventually inspired what we now call haiku. Sōseki's poem is actually only in the *style* of haikai, a variant on the form, as it were: only two of the 42 segments have seven syllables and all the rest have five. To ignore, therefore, the very deliberate syllabification would have meant dismissing a fundamental structural component of the poem as irrelevant. In the end, I opted to construct the lines to read comfortably as prose-like in English

and replicate the deliberate five- (or seven-) syllable pattern for each segment. This latter choice had the unavoidable consequence of requiring an occasional additional term not present in the original, but I chose to think of this as something akin to an intercalary day designed to harmonize the whole.

Source text:

Natsume Sōseki 夏目漱石. [untitled], “on a mountain lane looking at maples” (6 November 1889), “on a mountain lane looking at maples” (November 1889), and “winter night.” *Sōseki zenshū* 漱石全集 [*The complete works of Sōseki*], vol. 12, Iwanami shoten, 1975, 2nd printing, pp. 538, 463, 395, 496–97.