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Translators' Voices: Two Roundtables on Japanese Literature in Translation

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In March 2024, two roundtable panels were held on the topic of literary translation and Japanese literature at the Association for Asian Studies Annual Conference in Seattle, Washington. The theme of Japanese literature in translation is a timely one, as titles published over the past decade have achieved remarkable recognition worldwide—from Murata Sayaka's *Convenience Store Women* (Konbini ningen, 2016; tr. 2018 Ginny Tapley Takemori) and Kawakami Mieko's *Breasts and Eggs* (Natsu monogatari, 2019; tr. 2020 Sam Bett and David Boyd) to Yuzuki Asako's *Butter* (Batā, 2017; tr. 2024 Polly Barton) and Kawakami Hiromi's *Under the Eye of the Big Bird* (Ōkina tori ni sarawarenai yō, 2016; tr. 2025 Asa Yoneda). If you visit almost any bookshop in London or New York or a university town, you will find shelves lined with Japanese literature in translation, reflecting its growing presence and influence on the global literary stage. Within this phenomenon, translators have played an indispensable role in the selection, creation, promotion, circulation, and reception of Japanese literature overseas, and the following roundtables engage directly with these questions from the translators' point of view. Here, we showcase these conversations, featuring participants actively involved in literary translation in order to bring attention to translation as a visible and multiple embodied practice.

“Beyond the Novel: New Forms, New Infrastructures, and New Possibilities in Translating Japanese Literature” features six translators (David Boyd, Michael Emmerich, Kendall Heitzman, Anne McKnight, Asa Yoneda, Hitomi Yoshio) based in the U.S., the U.K., and Japan at the time of the conference, and explores current issues in the translating landscape, discussing both the act of translation itself and the



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infrastructures that support translators working between Japanese and trans-Atlantic English fields. Through concrete examples of their recent work, translators discuss specific translation decisions in the context of their overall method and intended audience. Translators also shed light on literary forms often overlooked in the English language, in particular the novella, an important genre in Japan where most literary writers first gain recognition. From the perspective of advocacy and collaboration, translators foreground the kinds of working relationships and infrastructures that make translation possible and provide support for emerging translators.

The second roundtable, “Why Retranslate?” (Rebecca Copeland, Torquil Duthie, Meredith McKinney, Keith Vincent, Anna Zielinska-Elliot), turns our attention to the question of retranslation. Together, these translators consider the economic, academic, and cultural dynamics that shape the landscape of retranslation. What power dynamics are behind the retranslation of certain literary works, while others remain untranslated? Who decides which texts warrant retranslation, and on what basis? Is it true that translations age while originals do not? Does each generation need a new translation that responds to new sensibilities and sensitivities? The translators address the above questions by reviewing different aspects of retranslation and some recent trends. Thinking about retranslation along these lines reveals the stakes—personal and collective—of reading and writing translations, allowing us to reimagine translations as part of ongoing conversations we have with ourselves and with others in the past.

We believe that the two conversations read together add nuance and complexity to our understanding of Japanese literature and its circulation in the global market—its background, challenges, joys, and possibilities. By foregrounding translators’ voices and experiences, these roundtables emphasize the often invisible, yet crucial role translators play in shaping the global reach of Japanese literature today.

Beyond the Novel: New Forms, New Infrastructures, and New Possibilities in Translating Japanese Literature

David Boyd, Michael Emmerich, Kendall Heitzman,
Anne McKnight, Asa Yoneda, Hitomi Yoshio

Michael Emmerich: The landscape of Japanese literature in translation has changed significantly over the past decade, and it continues to change. I think the hope is that we can draw on the expertise and experience of the translators here, and the experience that many of you in the audience have as well, engaging in translation, to gain a new awareness of where we stand right now and where we are headed as people who care about the existence of Japanese literature in translation. We will start out with brief opening comments from each of the presenters, then move into an open discussion.

David Boyd: Pushkin Press recently published two sets of novellas from Japanese. The first, which included work by writers like Kawakami Hiromi and Kawakami Mieko, came out in 2017, at a time when Japanese novellas weren't receiving much attention in English translation. The second, which included novellas by Imamura Natsuko (translated by Hitomi Yoshio) and Fujino Kaori (translated by Kendall Heitzman), came out in 2023. In the years between these two series, the translation landscape changed completely. It used to be almost impossible to publish a novella in translation. I can't tell you how many times I heard an editor say, "Novellas don't sell." Well, it's been a few years since I've heard that.

Honestly, I was a little surprised that Pushkin was able to publish *This is Amiko, Do You Copy?* and *Nails and Eyes*. Pushkin is an independent press, and over the past couple of years major presses have stepped in to purchase novella after novella: Takase Junko and Ichikawa Saou's books come to mind as two recent examples. It's been getting harder and harder for independent publishers to compete with deep-pocketed mega-publishers. Multiple publishers are bidding on these books, which is not how things have worked historically. Not even close.

So, what changed? The overwhelming success of Murata Sayaka's *Convenience Store Woman* (translated by Ginny Tapley Takemori and published in 2018) opened publishers' eyes. In other words, this wasn't a gradual process, but rather a sudden shift that can largely be credited to a single translation. After *Convenience Store Woman*, a lot of presses—majors and independents alike—started hunting for novellas that could potentially duplicate the novella's success.

Admittedly, not everything getting published in Japan is getting translated into English, but the field has never been so alive. Big titles—anything that wins the Akutagawa Prize, for example—are getting translated a year or two after publication in Japan, which is great, right? A lot of translators are saying that we're in the middle of a golden age, but to me, it seems more like a gold rush.

Kendall Heitzman: I came aboard because of the new Pushkin series and my translation of *Nails and Eyes*. Fujino-san and I are going to tour in April through the Midwest and to the East Coast for a couple of weeks. But I can talk briefly about a different project that's going on right now which we're hopeful will be viewable (listenable) this fall.

Tokyo Heterotopia is a long-standing urban mapping project by Takayama Akira and his theater unit Port B. Anne McKnight is heading the English translation project. Anne and Christophe Thouny were working on some translations for it, Michael Bourdaghs had already translated a few things for use in his classes, and during a sabbatical last year, at Anne's suggestion I became the translation coordinator for it. The project started life over a decade ago as a multi-location installation where you went to different places around the city and tuned in to stories set in those places, using a shortwave radio. Now, it's an app on your phone that serves as a guide to various sites in Tokyo that are important to people who are not mainstream Japanese citizens. So a school for Nepalese residents in Japan, a mosque, a Cambodian restaurant, and so on, all places that are important to different communities in Japan. For each site there is an explanation of what this place is and how it came to be here, and when you visit each site with the app open it unlocks a recording of a story about the place, written by a working Japanese novelist or poet; there may be about eight or ten writers in the mix now. So we created English translations and recordings for those sites and there was a great exhibition at the Mori Art Museum last spring in which Port B's work occupied the entire last gallery, and it was just a beautiful, beautiful, exhibition. Alas, the app was not a beautiful, beautiful app. It has had several incarnations, each one more troublesome than the previous one, so we currently have a well-functioning Japanese original and an English version still in process with translations and recordings ready to go. The hope is that soon there will be two functional apps. There are currently about twenty stories relating to heterotopias across Tokyo, with more on the way.

Anne McKnight: It's great to hear about the work of all these new translators, including many of you, who are opening up channels for translation in new modes and genres, pushing beyond the figure of 3% that's often quoted as the percentage of all books published in the United States that are translations. I've sort of slid into translation, like many of you. For academics, when you're putting together an academic essay, and using works that are relatively underknown, you need to quote passages—translating them is a good chance to get some prose circulating so that a broader audience can read at least a sample and get a sense of the tone, the “voice.”

My latest project is translating a series of *taidan* and *zadankai*—two-person discussions and roundtables—that include Kurosawa Akira, with some other cultural figures who knew him. He is notoriously tight-lipped when it comes to interpreting his work or even offering something like a critical take on film. One concept I thought about a lot when I tried to get at his “voice” in print was “Bygonese.”

“Bygonese” is a term that novelist David Mitchell made up when he was writing historical fiction, specifically the novel that became *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*, set on Dejima in Nagasaki, in 1799 during Edo. He uses it to mean “a sort of dialect—I call it ‘Bygonese’—which is inaccurate but plausible.” *Inaccurate but plausible*. In my take, he is referring to all the granular elements, the sorts of details, dialogue, and description that make the story seem real but may, in fact, be artifice. It seems like a consistent language, but there may be made-up bits told for the sake of the characterizations, the narrative, the historicity.

This angle of “Bygonese” factors a lot into my translation work because I translate fiction from the 1920s and 1930s, stories that I want to appeal to readers today. I started publishing translations of the pre-histories of subculture—namely, *shōjo* fiction and stories about robots that came out of genres like detective fiction and sci-fi in the 1920s. One figure I translated is Unno Jūza—an under-translated figure, writer of robot murder stories, an employee of Japan's telecom ministry during the war, and what some people call “the father of Japanese SF.” He was quite a warmonger, and technologies of war feature prominently in his stories. He published in the magazine *Shin seinen*, where interesting genre crossovers took place. Given the SF context, there are both a lot of neologisms and a lot of things that need to come through in “Bygonese,” conveying the aura of the moment, or of the future he imagines (that we are now reading in the past, thus the need for “Bygonese” in translation), but in a manner that

seems real. Future “Bygonese” is pretty trippy.

A good many of Unno’s detective stories are *jiken*-oriented—stories that unfold out of a sudden crime or incident, like a strike or a shooting. The one I translated was called “*Jinzō ningen satsugai jiken*,” or “The Case of the Robot Murder,” as I called it. I didn’t use “incident” because I felt that term would be aligned more with detective stories, through incident reports—it doesn’t have the same link with mysterious genres as “*jiken*.” Unno went on to write a number of books that feature gadgets and technology that try to give examples of how Japanese technology could actually outstrip the technology of its enemies in wartime.

“The Case of the Robot Murder” came out in 1931 in *Shin seinen*. There’s now a hundred-year history of writing about robots in Japan, in theater and in literature—and more than one word to refer to them. If we choose one plausible word in English—“robot” (based on ロボット *robotto*)—we feel relatively close to present-day SF and stuff we might already know. But as a researcher, I know that’s very much a direct translation from our current moment, and that the initial term for “robot” was *jinzō ningen* (artificial human). Which to choose, to what effect? How to preserve the retro-ness that “artificial human” can also provide? “Robot” seemed a little disappointingly direct, without the mediation of time I was looking for. But “artificial human” is clunky and doesn’t connect as easily to the story because of the contemporary sense of artificial life and AI that is so overwhelming and elbows out the older, more fabulistic sense of artifice. In the end, I picked “robot” despite the directness, but I balanced that choice by making a lot of the description and dialogue closer to “Bygonese,” which I researched by looking at genre fiction from around the same time in our library at UCR, which has a special collection of detective fiction, sci-fi, and other pulp fiction. The voice was less purple than, say, Chandler, who is a bit later, and more atmospheric than Hammett, who was earlier. It also has bits of Sherlock Holmes—like “*mame* soup” (bean soup) for “*pea* soup” fog.

Readers of these stories are, for the most part, students and fans. I feel bad taking money from students, especially my own students. So once I’ve paid the translator, Amazon (mea culpa, for now), and the rights holder, I give the money to local queer youth organizations near campus. It’s a small sum, maybe 500 bucks a year, but it’s something. It also might provoke students to think about themselves as people who can pay artists and artists as people who get paid.

I’d like to say one more thing about how people get paid and

recognized within the culture industry. I'm an academic, and translation is often overlooked. It can be hard to get credit for translation on the tenure and promotion cycle, as people who don't do it might not be familiar with the process or how translation contributes to the field of scholarship, how it really expands the knowledge base of what's possible and is so very generative. So, with a super supportive department chair, our faculty rewrote our department's tenure and promotion guidelines to include translation and introduce the idea of research-creation. When the frame for "translation" gets kicked up the ladder of decision-making, it reaches the people making these very significant decisions, including the scientists and other scholars very far afield from literature and languages. It gives them a category to work with; they know that translation is real intellectual work, and they know it is part of our department's mission statement.

Asa Yoneda: Hello, my name is Asa Yoneda. I am a translator without affiliation. We do exist, but we're a bit more exposed to the vagaries of the market than translators based in academia. I want to talk a little about how I'm embedded in a whole network of people doing different types of work within the publishing industry, with the result of that labor being a book that readers can hold in their hands.

Here's a book I translated recently: *Idol, Burning* by Usami Rin. The original is called *Oshi, moyu*. The novella was a phenomenon in Japan when it came out in 2020, and it was quickly picked up by HarperVia, which is HarperCollins' translation-specific imprint. They contacted me and asked me to translate it for them. This is something that publishers can choose to do: to reach out to a particular translator because of whatever ideas they might have about how to present a translation. In HarperVia's case, they are fortunate to have a Japanese-reading editor who was able to commission this book with a firm concept of how they wanted it to come out in English. Usami is a young writer who writes with an interesting blend of high literary style and youth culture, incorporating elements that would clearly come across differently depending on how it was translated.

Outside of the text itself, there is, of course, the cover, which also influences how readers will engage with the work. Playing off the title, which is about a member of a male pop idol group—the character in the novella makes a kind of shrine to the celebrity she adores—the book designer commissioned by the publisher commissioned the photographer Delaney Allen, who built an installation and set it on fire. The cover image is one of the stills captured during the process. So this was another artist

contributing their work to the book. The English edition also included illustrations by the artist Leslie Hung that were not in the Japanese edition. The original was a standard book. From the style of the illustration, you might see that the publisher wanted to situate the translation in a space between YA and general literary fiction. Because the protagonist is a teenager, HarperVia wanted to make it accessible to YA audiences while also appealing to a broader general readership, and that informed the direction they took with the art and the marketing. I hope this gives you a sense of how many different people are coming together to create this one slim book.

Even with a Japanese-speaking editor, the teams involved are working with partial information, especially when they want to get a book out quickly. The timeline is compressed, so marketing starts before the translation is complete, before they even have a full idea of what the book is. Once the book came out, a lot of readers said, “This wasn’t what I was expecting,” based on the blurb and so on. For some of them, that turned out to be a good thing. In other cases, they were disappointed. I’m sure that this meant that the book didn’t reach some readers who would have enjoyed it, but that was a trade-off resulting from the specifics of the process. As a translator, unless you run your own press, like Anne, the more work goes into a book, the smaller and smaller your contribution to the finished product becomes—especially with a novella. You’re translating less, literally, and I think publishers realize that if their translation costs are lower, that enables them to spend the difference on, say, marketing, charge a similar amount as for a longer book, and have almost the same impact. Maybe more, in fact, if people are able to read that book in one sitting, formulate and express their opinion of it in a way that connects with other potential readers through a social media post, for example, and then move on to the next book.

Hitomi Yoshio: The landscape of translation is definitely changing. When I first started translating almost ten years ago, I was a graduate student in a PhD program in the U.S. I had previously studied with Shibata Motoyuki as an MA student in Japan, and he asked me to translate a short piece for *Monkey Business* literary magazine (now *MONKEY*). But because of the dynamics in North American academia, I always felt I had to hide the fact that I was translating and was hesitant to take on translation projects. I did just one short piece a year for *Monkey Business*, and it felt like a guilty pleasure. It still felt that way when I got my first assistant professor job.

But with people like Anne changing the tenure guidelines and David getting tenure through his amazing work as a literary translator, I feel that translation is gaining more visibility and acknowledgement in academia as well. And every year, more and more students are interested in literary translation.

Today I want to talk about Imamura Natsuko's *This is Amiko, Do You Copy?*, which came out in October 2023 through Pushkin Press as part of their Japanese novella series. The novella was Imamura's debut work that appeared in 2010 under the title, *Atarashii Musume*. When the novella was published in book form, it was given its current title, *Kochira Amiko*. Imamura later won the Akutagawa prize for *The Woman in the Purple Skirt*, which has been beautifully translated by Lucy North.

This is Amiko, Do You Copy? is my first book-length translation. Before I translated Imamura's work, I had been translating Kawakami Mieko's work for almost ten years. Although both Imamura and Kawakami are from the Kansai region, they are very different writers, and my translation process with the two authors differs too. Kawakami has a very public (almost celebrity) persona and is outspoken about feminist issues. I correspond with Kawakami closely; she always reads my translations and has questions and feedback to give, and sometimes I point things out about her work that gets incorporated into her revisions. Imamura Natsuko, on the other hand, is a very private person, and I've never corresponded with her. But *This is Amiko, Do You Copy?* invites the reader to have a very intimate, strong emotional connection to the characters. My own response to the book was so strong that I was almost glad to have complete freedom to interpret the book in my own way.

The book focuses on a young girl, Amiko, following her from first grade up to middle school. Though the novella is told in the third person, the narrative is completely filtered through Amiko's eyes. The language is very simple; there is no omniscient perspective. Everything that happens—the scenes, the family dynamics, the interaction with classmates—is told from Amiko's perspective. When I was translating, that was what I paid the most attention to—creating a world as seen through Amiko's eyes.

I wouldn't say it's a Young Adult novel, though. Despite the simple language, or perhaps because of it, the novella invites the reader to fill in the gaps—to add nuance and complexity to what is not written on the page. It challenges the reader to go beyond the world seen through a child's eyes to figure out what's going on beyond her scope. And what lurks between

the lines, beyond Amiko's comprehension, is very dark. Amiko is a social outcast, she's neglected at home, there is bullying at school. But all those things are told in a simple and almost humorous way because Amiko is a child without words for sorrow.

It was also interesting to work with a translation editor, who read the English without consulting the original Japanese source. What I realized was that when you're reading in English, you tend to expect more of a logical flow. But Amiko's mind doesn't work that way. The narrative is nonlinear and jumps from scene to scene, from memory to memory. The editor suggested that I move around certain passages and cut scenes, all of which I was very hesitant to do. I ended up pushing back a lot, but at the same time, the act of pushing back helped me come up with better solutions. I'm really thankful to the editor.

Another thing I was struck by when the novella came out in translation was how it was read and received—or even marketed. Just before the novella was published, when the review copies were going out, the editor of Pushkin Press emailed me with a question from Publishers Weekly about whether the author Imamura Natsuko was neurodivergent. The question surprised me, but it made me realize that this book was going to be read in that context in English, which is very different from how it was received in Japan. Clearly, Amiko doesn't fit in. She has a different way of perceiving and being in the world than everyone else. But it's never clearly articulated in terms of mental health. But in the Western context, at least in the English-language one, there's so much cultural context for mental health and the language to speak about it in those terms. This was also the case for *Convenience Store Woman*, how readers viewed the protagonist Keiko. In a way, both books gained a level of nuance and complexity through translation.

Emmerich: So many issues have come up already, so I'm going to pose a really broad question to everybody that I hope can be a starting point for a freewheeling conversation. My main takeaway from everything you've said is that we're in a moment right now of incredible potential, that all kinds of things that could not have happened ten years ago are now possible. So, here's a question, or two questions.

First, from your perspective—as translators who work with publishers, authors, academic structures, and new forms of presentation, including, for example, the possibility of including images in a translation when the original book does not contain any—what's responsible for these new

possibilities? Following from that question, how do you mobilize or continue to mobilize and expand these possibilities going forward?

Maybe you can start, David, since you began by talking about the novella, which I think is an easy place to begin thinking about this—because the novella is, as you suggested, not something that you could have published ten years ago. Now it's become possible. That's a clear, identifiable change. Can you share your sense of why that happened, and then we can go to other topics from there...

Boyd: Sure. Generally speaking, publishers don't like taking risks. Things that are truly different don't usually get picked up. You'd like to think that good books get translated because they're good, but it doesn't really work that way. Instead, each breakthrough success leads to numerous imitations and variations. Publishers are looking for novellas now because *Convenience Store Woman* worked out as well as it did. That's why they're looking for short books, or short books by women, or short books by women that can be labeled as “quirky.” I'm not saying that I think Murata's work is quirky, by the way, but that was how *Convenience Store Woman* was described by everyone from Ruth Ozeki to *The Times*.

The novellas that have come out since *Convenience Store Woman* are, for the most part, really, really good, and I'm glad that things have moved in the direction they have. At the same time, publishing seems to be moving on already. I'm concerned that the latest trend in translation from Japanese is going to eat into the great work we've been seeing. Right now, a lot of publishers seem less interested in contemporary fiction by women and more interested in cozy cat books...

Yoneda: Coffee-cat books?

Boyd: Coffee-cats, copy-cats. Exactly. *Until the Traveling Cat Librarian Saves Books from Bad Coffee* [laughs]. Tons of these heartwarming books are getting translated and outperforming the novellas I was talking about. I just hope this trend doesn't disrupt the amazing work that translators have been doing over the past six or seven years.

Yoneda: I'll just throw out the idea of content tourism and the way that people are coming into Japan through some radically different angles. There is a concerted drive on the part of tourist agencies to bring people over, so you've got lots of new audiences who are, potentially, lots of new

fans. The idea of remapping Japan and bringing people into new spaces and new geographies is really important and tied to these bigger economic engines. How to work with that is another intriguing question.

Heitzman: Everything in publishing is predicated on what's already been published in that language and how a new work connects to it, as David said. The difference is that now you don't have to say this new book is a strange amalgamation of Murakami Haruki and Yoshimoto Banana, which is how about forty-eight books got labeled for a stretch there. Now there are so many more touchstones for new works. And *Granta*, *Words Without Borders*, all of these online venues give authors a foothold in English online, which makes them visible to English-language publishers. So obviously, that's a huge shift, that we're not going from nothing to a book. We're starting with stories published in quite visible places, maybe, before a book appears.

The other thing I'll just point out as a microtrend is the fact that Akutagawa prize winners seem to be getting a little longer. *Nails and Eyes* as a book in Japanese is a short novella with two stories, as it is in English; I thought surely Pushkin is going to want those two stories because the title novella itself is even shorter than *Convenience Store Woman*. So there's a trajectory from *Nails and Eyes* to *Convenience Store Woman* to *Idol, Burning*. Li Kotomi's *Higanbana ga saku shima* is essentially a full-length novel, and a number of other recent winners have been, too. Not in every instance, but I wonder if that's a response to the fact that these works are actually being translated into other languages now or if that's just happenstance. But it seems like the novella's shifting into the short novel range, and it does maybe make it easier to get them published in English.

Yoneda: My impression is that with some authors, their Japanese publishers are working with an eye to translation and publication outside of Japan, and that might influence how they commission, edit, or present these authors' work. And on the other side, we're benefiting from the increasing diversity of works being originally published in English. We're translating into a context that's less homogeneous, both linguistically and otherwise, than it used to be.

Yoshio: I also want to highlight translation communities and support networks, which are especially important for emerging translators. As I mentioned before, the *MONKEY* literary magazine has been an amazing

community for me because the three editors—Shibata Motoyuki, Ted Goossen, and Meg Taylor—work as a team and are committed to discovering and nurturing new talent and building relationships. I’ve now had the opportunity to work with many of the major literary journals, some that are much better known than *MONKEY*, but I’ve never received so much editorial feedback and advice from anywhere else. They’ve been an amazing translation community for me, a truly educational experience.

Institutional sponsorships are also crucial. The Japan Foundation has historically been a great benefactor, and more recently, the Yanai Initiative has done amazing things for literary translation and global Japanese studies in general. With institutional support, literary magazines or publishers can invest in what may not otherwise be bestsellers—minor genres like the novella, poetry, or non-contemporary writing. So the changes in the past decade are thanks to the efforts of individual translators but also these larger translation networks and institutional support that are shifting the landscape to make translation more visible and viable in the publishing industry.

Emmerich: David, you started out saying that publishers tend to be highly risk-averse, which is absolutely true, while Kendall, you pointed out the flipside, which is that once you have a model of success, it can actually open up new pathways. I was just thinking about the novella again. I remember being in Seattle for the MLA convention some years ago and having a conversation with an editor at a certain large press. I was trying to persuade him that *Dōkeshi no chō* by EnJoe Toh, which is in the new Pushkin press series (translated by David Boyd as *Harlequin Butterfly*), was a phenomenal novel that ought to be published. As I was describing it to him, telling him that Nabokov appears as a character, he started to get interested, then excited—I could see it in his face. Then, as we were walking out of lunch, he asked, “How long is it?” and so I told him, and he went, “Oh, oh well.” That was the end of it—just because it was a novella. That was how things worked; publishing a novella was just not something they would consider.

Getting to the point David and Kendall were making, Pushkin Press is a very unusual press in that it saw the fact that other publishers were not willing to publish novellas as an opportunity, as a niche market they could exploit. Then also, the reluctance to publish novellas was something specific to English. French publishers were already publishing Japanese novellas, so for a French reader, it was possible to read them and then

decide whether to publish them in English. So Pushkin was actually looking at that, and this Pushkin Press series came out because they asked me to translate a series of novellas by Inoue Yasushi, and after I did that, I went to them and said, “Hey, would you be interested in doing more?”

It seems to me there’s been a change in the relationship between publishers and translators. Before, publishers were saying, “We want the next Murakami,” or, “We want the next Banana Yoshimoto.” But as a result of a few publishers, New Directions being one, Pushkin being another, taking risks, it became possible for us to approach them and say, “Hey, how about this? How about this?” Because of their success, now a much broader range of publishers are interested in doing this kind of work, and not just as a one-off because they get funding for it, but as a sustainable business. I’m curious to hear what the process is like for you now that we have this kind of range of possibilities. What sorts of conversations are you having? What sorts of projects do you have in mind to try and continue to expand, first of all, the publication of novellas? But also, is there something that we can do to take this in a different direction? I think the highest hurdle would actually be really long books. Furukawa Hideo, for example, with his 1,600-page books. Is there some way to get there from the success of the novella?

Heitzman: Not without six years of my life.

Boyd: Sounds about right. Six years? That would be a lot of time for an academic to invest in a single translation...

Yoneda: And those of you in the academic world often have *more* leeway to spend longer on a project...

Boyd: Yeah, you’re right about that. Still, a book like that would be a big challenge, even for a translating academic. I imagine you’re not really in a position to take on a six-year commitment like that, right, Kendall?

Heitzman: Not with my current teaching and service load.

Yoneda: We’ve seen a shift away from viewing the work or even the book itself as the product, and toward treating the author as a kind of brand. Now that we’re able to translate more contemporary writers who can travel and do events or be encountered directly through social media, the

priorities are different. When you take on a 1,600-page book, that's an opportunity cost for you as a translator, but also for the authors who want to be translated, and for publishers: if publishers want to market more writers, and writers want to publish more books, then how much more value does, or can, a longer book have over a shorter one?

Heitzman: Do you think translators have more of a say than ever before or about the same or less than ever? On a micro level, I had a very similar experience to Hitomi. The editor wants things done a certain way and I'm like, "Wow, I'm glad I'm translating this at this point in my life where I'm willing to resist." And I agree with you that some great things happened from that process. But if I had been twenty-two and just let the editor steamroller me, or if the translator had been cut out of the process upon delivery of the manuscript, it would have been a disaster. So there needs to be that pushback on that level—and three cheers for editors who enjoy that give and take, and who make our work so much better. But also on the macro level, there are cat and coffee books out there, but it just seems like the field is getting bigger and even people who are translating in those genres are getting to choose their own projects, too. Am I naive in thinking that it is a golden age for the translator? Maybe not in terms of payment, but aren't things better?

Boyd: Are they? Do you think things are better, Michael?

Emmerich: This is a really interesting question. To think about it properly, we have to go back to the immediate post-war period and think about what was happening at Knopf. So there, you've got editors who are saying, "Okay, our target is the Nobel Prize," looking for one author to succeed in order to demonstrate that Japanese literature is worth taking seriously—that kind of thinking creates a sort of box. The translator is the expert and has a lot of freedom to try and persuade an editor to do something, but it's within a very narrow range, right? A certain number of writers are being considered, and within that limited group, you choose which work to push. What we're seeing now is quite different. This is a kind of golden age in the sense that we have the ability to say, "Look, there's this wide range of things that we can choose from," and a wide range of translators from different backgrounds can try and move the market in different directions.

But at the same time, Asa, you said something very interesting that I think demands more discussion. You said, "contemporary literature" and

“branding.” In order to have a sustainable brand as an author, you have to be alive. I’m interested in hearing whether the changes that we’re seeing also open up new opportunities for publishing earlier works or not. Is the shift that we are seeing primarily about interest in contemporary fiction, and specifically, contemporary fiction by women? As one of the co-editors of this Pushkin Press series, every time we put together this selection of six books, we want to have a good gender balance. It’s very hard because women writers don’t need any help right now. Publishers are so interested. I mean, that’s a slight exaggeration. But when we ask, “Can we include this in the series?”—take *This is Amiko, Do You Copy?*, for example—the first answer was no, because another press would probably be doing it. Only because the other press turned it down were we able to get this book. So there seem to be certain predilections, certain kinds of movements taking place within the market, that are wonderful in opening things up, but at the same time, perhaps other possibilities are being foreclosed. I’m especially interested in hearing about your experience with non-contemporary fiction, and also fiction by writers who are in some ways objectionable but still worth publishing.

McKnight: There are definitely many interesting texts out there, and I think it’s a lot of fun to excavate them... I guess my mindset is pretty academic, as I do want to see a place for “older” texts to be translated, and don’t see a reason to be presentist entirely—while still wanting to support living authors. I also want to get people to think differently about language, but I think you have to read contemporary writing to do that effectively—both contemporary Japanese and English, because earlier writing doesn’t necessarily slide gracefully into the lingo of today. It’s out of touch with trends on Goodreads and BookTok. That’s why the idea of “Bygonese” is so interesting to me, because of the differently sedimented layers of narration and other background you have to consider—the moving pieces of a narrative through which historicity can be made to seem, if not real, at least immersive, or taking the question of meaning and thinking about it. Japanese fiction wasn’t allowed to be funny until very recently. It had to be tragic, partly because of the canonization after the war; it had to be avant-garde, black and white, and tragic. A lot of the work being published now is really changing that.

Yoshio: The current success of contemporary women’s writing has opened so many doors, not only for the newest novel by up-and-coming authors

but also for works by an older generation of women writers. Because I teach modern Japanese literature from the Meiji period onward, I'm always struggling to find new translations of these earlier works. There have thankfully been wonderful short story collections and anthologies of women's writing in the past few decades, but they were mostly published by academic presses with high price tags and small circulation. And now, David and Asa are working on an Osaki Midori collection from a major press, and there are other projects by different translators in the works. That's so exciting. These books won't just be used in the classroom; when the book comes out, anyone can pick up an Osaki Midori book at a bookstore and encounter the work of the great modernist writer. The success of contemporary women writers is certainly creating opportunities for an earlier generation of authors to be newly discovered by a large global audience.

These past couple of years, I've been translating some works by the nineteenth century author, Higuchi Ichiyō. I love Robert Danly's collection of Ichiyō's stories; they are beautiful translations that are extensively annotated by footnotes and that give a glimpse into the poetic allusions and richness that would otherwise be inaccessible to ordinary, non-Japanese readers. But because they are academic translations, published by a university press, the stories haven't found an audience outside of the classroom. So I wanted to do something different. In my translations of Ichiyō's stories, which have been published in *MONKEY*, there are no footnotes. I try to embed as much into the text as possible and make the stories accessible and relevant to a contemporary audience. This is a big challenge, especially for such a complex and nuanced writer like Ichiyō, whose works are full of rich poetic allusions. But it's an exciting challenge.

Questions from the Audience

Q1: How much of this interest in Japanese women writers was initially engendered by publishers outside of Japan who were interested in bringing their works specifically to broader audiences in English language context? And have these external factors had some effect on the local production and their visibility within Japan? At the same time, how much does this trend and discourse on women writing further entrench the idea of *joryū bungaku*, which can be a little bit pernicious, to say the least? How can we contrast or balance that as literary translators?

Yoshio: The other day, there was a Japanese TV special reporting on the recent “boom” of translated fiction by Japanese women writers overseas, and they brought up this exact notion of *joryū bungaku*—women’s literature as a unique tradition in Japan, going back to Murasaki Shikibu and Sei Shōnagon in the Heian period. While it’s wonderful to celebrate the works of Heian aristocratic women, these types of lingering essentialist rhetoric certainly simplify and erase the complex historicity of women’s writing and obscure the incredible diversity of works coming out of Japan now.

One reason for the diversity of translated works by contemporary writers today, I believe, has partly to do with the increasing number of Women translators, some of whom are deliberately choosing to translate works by women writers. I would include myself in that category. Or queer translators choosing to translate works by queer authors. Decisions like these are a reminder that translation can become a political act.

Yoneda: Adding to what Hitomi said about more women translators, it’s a trend observed in many industries that as more women start doing the work, it becomes less valued. My impression is that the literary industry in Japan also comprises more women recently. They do more of the work, but the men who write still do more of the prestigious work. I’m generalizing here, but many women writers have literally dozens of columns and regular gigs through which they piece together a career. Meanwhile, some of the men are better positioned to hole up for a couple of years and write a magnum opus. Taken alongside the devaluing of fiction, literature, and writing in general as a result of other forms of media coming to the fore, some of the effects are interesting. One is that English-language publishers are happy to take a risk on a novella that poses a problem but doesn’t answer it. Novellas tend to do this more than novels, and publishers are increasingly happy for literature or fiction to be disruptive, as opposed to authoritative—as long as it has a hook. So the fact that more women are translating is complicated. To be clear, I’m *not* saying we shouldn’t have more women in the field. I’m just saying their presence is not necessarily a sign that problems have been solved.

Heitzman: I think there is a case to be made that a lot of what we are seeing started inside Japan publishing, not outside. The global interest in literature written by Japanese women tracks with a move toward gender parity with the Akutagawa Prize winners, which is a very recent

phenomenon and maybe a tenuous one. And that tracks with the number of women who are on the prize committee, which was incredibly skewed toward men for an embarrassingly long time. And that in turn tracks with the number of women in editorial positions and other positions of power in Japanese publishing. So there are also ways in which the work of women in Japanese publishing has surely had a positive effect on what gets translated. But that doesn't answer the second concern that you're pointing to, which is, is this something that's being devalued even as we have these things that are worth celebrating? On that front, I see what Asa is seeing and agree with her take. So there is a shift in Japan, and on the surface it is a good one, but I also think the concerns you are raising are very valid.

Q2: First, I have a comment about the misconception among lay circles of people who read a lot of Japanese literature that more fiction by women is being translated now than by men. It's true that probably more contemporary literary fiction by women is being translated, but the overall fiction numbers are still skewed in favor of men. 2022 is the year that came closest to parity. This year, of the books I'm tracking, there are six more translations of writing by men than by women. In terms of living writers, a lot of that is detective fiction, so the situations are not exactly comparable across genders, but nonetheless, my point is that women are not receiving a disproportionately large amount of translations, as is commonly misconceived.

Several of you mentioned the YA genre, or how a book that isn't YA in Japan is sometimes marketed as YA in the United States. It seems to me that English readers tend to expect a book about a kid or a young person to be a kid's book or a YA book, and I'm curious how that has shaped the way that you've been asked to translate or the way you translate. For example, *Heaven* by Kawakami Mieko is about a middle schooler, and Asa, you talked about how *Idol Burning* didn't necessarily align with the publisher's expectations, so I wonder if you could talk about that.

Boyd: When Sam Bett and I translated *Heaven*, which features a pair of fourteen-year-old characters, the YA question came up a lot. It was really hard to convince various parties in the publishing world that *Heaven* could be a "serious" book. It was frustrating, but all we could do was translate the book as we understood it. That is, we didn't do anything to make it readable as YA, and I'm glad we didn't.

Yoneda: With *Idol, Burning*, I think it also had something to do with the fact that the author herself is fairly young for a published author. In this case, HarperVia's response resulted in the creation of more art. I don't think they would have commissioned illustrations or this kind of cover for something that they weren't marketing towards a YA audience as well as a general one. So I would celebrate that. An element I didn't mention earlier was that in addition to a translator's note, which they include in all of their books, they also requested a new afterword by the author herself for the English-language translation. I saw a good deal of reader feedback that indicated that the added material helped to crystallize the reading experience: they essentially said, "I had a lot of feelings as I was reading this book, but once I got to the author's afterword," which touched on some of the real-life experiences that Usami drew on when writing the book, "then, I was in tears." By the metric of emotional impact on individual readers, I think the publisher's choices were effective while also not constituting a barrier to wider access. If older readers wonder, "What are these illustrations doing in my book?" Well, I think they can handle it.

Emmerich: Thank you for a very helpful correction about gender parity in translated works. I should clarify that earlier, I was talking specifically about my experience with the Pushkin Press series, which is literary fiction. The point about genre fiction is actually very important. Our discussion has been largely focused on literary fiction, and you've given us a bit of a doorway out. This is something that I think will become key moving forward as we think about how we can expand the possibilities. The networks are already there. People working with both genre fiction and literary fiction, people who were involved in the summer workshops at the British Centre for Literary Translation ten years ago—people are moving on to work on all of these different genres, trying to continue building those relationships and thinking about how to translate some of the success that has been had, for instance, with the novella form, into other areas, not just of literary production, but also thinking about how we can engage as translators now. We may now have, in a sense, more power, or at least, it's become easier to work with publishers and lead them in new directions, so the question is how we can channel this.

McKnight: The question of seriality operates because these genre fictions are so powerful, right? Because once you read one detective story, you

might say, the detective, whose cover is he going to blow in the next one? And it usually is men, as you pointed out. But seriality can also be found in the branding, too. What do we expect of others, and to what extent are authors allowed to change their profiles? With Murata Sayaka—will she stop being what she is at a certain point, or will the plug be pulled on her if she’s no longer interpreted as quirky in these particular ways? Because I think the neurodivergent vocabulary started with her, if I’m not mistaken. I really like your explanation of it, that it’s just an umbrella word for a discussion of a much larger phenomenon.

Heitzman: The desire to diagnose is real. When Murata Sayaka toured the US, she stopped by Iowa City after reading in a few other places, and she said, “I’ve never received this kind of question, but here I’m getting it at every stop.” I mean, in the US everybody wants a box to put this character into. And just as everyone was thinking they had Murata pegged as a certain type of writer, her translator Ginny Tapley Takemori was saying, “Well, everybody better hold on to their seats, because *Earthlings* is going to be a little different.” People like to put characters *and* authors in boxes. With *Nails and Eyes*, Barnes & Noble has usually been putting it in the horror section. I’ve been telling everybody that in the middle of this shelf of black and blood red dripping down all the spines, the canary yellow and teal really pops nicely. Whenever I am traveling, I like to stop by Barnes & Noble and re-shelve it. Maybe I should leave it where it is.

McKnight: Where would you put it?

Heitzman: Well, I’ve been putting it back in just general fiction. But maybe at the branches where I find it in general fiction, I’ll start putting it in horror. Mainly, I am so curious about why this happens. I don’t know why they--I mean, they must have read something about it. It’s not coded that way. But Hitomi, I wonder if maybe you have something to say about *This Is Amiko, Do You Copy?*, just because I can see somebody saying, “Oh, this is a great YA novel, and we’re going to get this really redemptive storyline at the end.” It feels like another book that people might want to categorize in a certain simplistic way, but it’s actually really complex.

Yoshio: Exactly. And the way a book is packaged has so much influence on readers’ expectations, and we could probably spend another hour discussing cover designs. The original Japanese cover of Imamura’s

novella is calm and serene and abstract; it presents itself as literary fiction. But the cover design of *This is Amiko, Do You Copy?* by Pushkin Press is very pop and colorful, and definitely gives off YA vibes. So I'm curious to see how readers react to this novella in English—how they would respond to Amiko's off-kilter character, the narrative complexity and lack of resolution, and the sheer devastatingly emotional quality of the book.

Q3: I was wondering if you could speak about how you perceive your roles as English translators in the broader context of global literary translation. Often, English is the first translation, though sometimes it's French. Are you conscious of how Japanese literature is received beyond the Anglosphere, or how your translations might affect its global perception?

Heitzman: This probably belongs to a different discussion, but . . . I have a foot in contemporary poetry as well; we've had a number of Japanese poets come to the University of Iowa's International Writing Program in the last few years. I've come to realize that what a poet really needs is ten poems translated into English. Well, they definitely need ten poems translated if they want to come to Iowa City for the International Writing Program, but it's not just that. If they want to be invited to international poetry festivals, which happen in surprising places all over the world, that level of visibility really helps. Visibility in English can help them get visibility in other languages. So if you have a poet you like, ten poems in English can open up a world to them.

Boyd: There isn't one pattern when it comes to these global movements. Each book seems to follow its own trajectory. At any rate, I think English translations have a lot of power. While translations often have this power, the same can't always be said of the translators themselves. Publishers don't necessarily keep us in the loop. Sometimes we have no idea how our work is being used in other markets...

Emmerich: If we had translators who are based in Korea and China here, I think they might have a different perspective—they might say, "Actually, you know what? There are a whole lot of books being published in Japan that go directly into Korea and then from Japan into Chinese, Taiwanese as well." So maybe this notion that English is the gateway is no longer true—in some cases, it is, but perhaps not so much in the case of Japan.

The East Asian market is developing, and there's an issue, of course, because, as I mentioned earlier, at Pushkin Press, they were reading French translations. So it can come into English through French, but it's not going to come into English through Korean, which I think is actually really interesting—it deserves more thought and perhaps more building up of connections.

I also think personally that it's wonderful to have a panel that focuses on translation from Japanese to English. But with a panel that involves people translating from Korean into English, from Chinese into English, and from Southeast Asian languages into English, we could perhaps begin to form networks that are not based on language that would also allow us collectively to start opening up even more possibilities. Perhaps that's another panel for the future.

Q4: I would like to understand more how you see the appetite for literature that plays with the language more than telling a story. This panel showcases that you are doing a fantastic job in pushing new genres and new types of literature and I'd like to understand a little bit more in that direction.

McKnight: I feel like Inoue Hisashi is one of these underknown people, as a playwright as well, who works with a lot of wordplay. He's a writer who picks up on the oral character of *rakugo* and related kinds of storytelling, a bawdy, shaggy-dog kind of storytelling in which wordplay and jokes, very highly topical jokes, are important. I encountered him because of his crossing over multiple media. He was a friend of Kurosawa Akira, and they have *taidan* discussions together. And they share a certain understanding of what a making of a movie is like. I suspect that because we are fairly siloed, in the world of literary fiction, we haven't talked about adaptation or media mix or the IP laws and copyright laws, which I think may be different in Korea, for example. I read a really interesting book about multiple translators working on the same work, which gives you a different sense of the market. If three of you are out there with competing translations on a novel, that's a different understanding of how you have to hustle or navigate the literary scene politics. It puts our system in relief in interesting ways. Getting back to the “Bygonese” point, Inoue Hisashi is very embedded in dialect.

Emmerich: We're out of time, so I would like to close by saying a few

things. First, this Pushkin Press series started a while back. The first series was funded by the Nippon Foundation. The second series was funded by the Yanai Initiative. Just recently, I had a conversation with Pushkin Press. They said, “You know, we’d really like to continue this series. Would you be open to that?” And they said a couple of interesting things. The first was, “Would you be interested in including some non-contemporary fiction?” David Karashima and I, the co-editors, have been thinking that we would like to do that in a third series. We’ve been trying to use this as a platform to little by little open up new possibilities, so I was really happy to hear them say that. The second thing that they said made me even more happy, which was, “If you don’t have the funding, that’s okay. We would still like to continue this series.” This gives you a sense of the moment that we are in, where publishers are actually getting the sense that this is sustainable.

The second thing I want to say is that while we’ve been focused on the power that translators have, because that’s what this panel is about, readers—especially professional readers who get other people to read in the context of classrooms—also have a lot of power. In terms of numbers, when it comes to any of these books we’ve been talking about, if you can sell 3000 copies, that’s terrific. If you’re teaching a course with 200 people in it and you teach it a few years in a row, you have just made it possible for them to reprint that book. This is not a joke or some little thing. Everybody in this room, you collectively could sell out all of the books that any of these presses are publishing. So if you say, for instance, “We’re going to choose, with apologies to Penguin, to not assign a book by Penguin,” and instead go, “I’m going to do a whole course focused exclusively on independent presses,” you would transform the market, literally. You would create the possibility for the next series or for the next book. This is really important to bear in mind, that the market is not something out there, that we are the market, and all of us have the ability to affect it.

The third thing I want to say is just thank you to Hitomi for organizing this. Thank you to all of the participants in this panel. It was a wonderful discussion.

Why Retranslate?

**Rebecca Copeland, Torquil Duthie, Meredith McKinney,
Keith Vincent, Anna Zielinska-Elliott**

Keith Vincent: My name is Keith Vincent and I'm the chair of this roundtable on retranslation. This is quite an extraordinary group of scholars and translators. I'll introduce people very briefly, and then we'll each give a short statement before opening it up for discussion. To my left is my colleague from Boston University, Anna Elliott, followed by Rebecca Copeland from Washington University in St. Louis, Meredith McKinney, who's come all the way from Australia (Australian National University), and Torquil Duthie from UCLA. Very happy to welcome you all.

Meredith McKinney: It's wonderful to be here. I feel as though I'm a bit of a fish out of water, or maybe just amphibious, because I don't self-identify as an academic. I'm a translator rather than an academic by profession, so I'll give my thoughts on the question of retranslation from that practical perspective. The question I'll consider here is not, "Why retranslate?" but, "Why do *I* personally retranslate?" I have two answers to this. The first is boringly pragmatic: it comes down to what a publisher chooses to publish. Almost without exception, publishers make their choices largely according to what will sell and what won't. If a previous translation has done well, they may be interested in publishing a new translation of it, whereas they are much more wary of a previously unpublished author or work unless they sense that it might hit the market with a splash.

Many of my own translations are of classics, and it goes without saying that they are therefore retranslations. Why does a publisher like Penguin Classics decide to publish a new translation of something on its list? Well, there seems to be an unspoken policy that an important classic deserves retranslation every fifty years or so. This makes a certain sense. By this time, the earlier translation is generally somewhat dated in language, and stylistic tastes have often changed. In the case of the earlier classics, scholarship may also have moved on, and interpretations of textual obscurities evolved, all of which a new translation can reflect. Indeed, for classics, periodic retranslation is more or less a given.

So much for the pragmatics of retranslation. I want to introduce my other, more personal, reason with a couple of quick stories to illustrate

common responses to the idea of retranslation. In my little Australian country town, we have a film club, and a few months back, it played Hayao Miyazaki's *Howl's Moving Castle*. Because many in the audience are elderly and a bit hard of hearing, the subtitles were run together with the dubbed English. The trouble is, they were apparently done by two different translators. Naturally, the audience was hugely puzzled, and during the intermission, some people gathered around and asked me which version was correct. Of course, I had no access to the Japanese so it would have been impossible to answer, but I pointed out that both translations were actually "saying" the same thing, only in different ways. This proved a bit difficult to grasp for some, though others immediately caught on, and in the second half of the screening, they became quite critical in comparing the different versions.

My other story about common concepts of retranslation involves a talk I gave to a reading group about my recent retranslation of Mori Ōgai's novella *Gan (The Wild Goose)*. They were to read the book beforehand, but because they couldn't find it in the library, they circulated the previous translation to read instead. I don't know what they were expecting me to talk about, but they were mystified that it should matter whether they had read my translation or the previous one. It was the same work, after all. Surely the translations would express the same thing, and that's all that matters.

In the face of this widespread attitude, it's tempting to ask indeed, why retranslate? Why bother when so few will care? In my case, the short answer is because of love. If I choose to do a new translation, as I did with *The Wild Goose*, it's because I love the work and would love to spend time with it and somehow make it my own. I think readers actually respond to books in much the same way. When you read a work that you love, you read it in your own way, you make it yours. And translating is perhaps the deepest way of reading. This is my ultimate answer—you do it because you love it.

One of the interesting things about retranslation is that it can provide a window into the variety of translation approaches and translation choices possible in interpreting the same text, both through time and across a spectrum of translation styles. Personally, I don't translate with an academic audience in mind or publish with a university press; my translations are almost all published for a general readership, and this can affect translation choices enormously. I can never afford to stop thinking of the general reader when I work. There is a theory that early translations

are more target-oriented, and that over time, retranslations move closer to the source text and are able to highlight its otherness. This certainly reflects the shifting approaches to translation and the current interest in applying translation theory to the actual task of translation. My own instinct, based on the audience I translate for, is to navigate between the two extremes but to place primary value on creating something that works for the general reader. My ideal is often to be closer to the original than earlier translations, to try as much as possible to be “true” to the text in its particulars—not just linguistic structures and so on but more importantly tone and nuance—yet not in a way that compromises the English in any way that will affect the reader’s appreciation of the text as literature. More scholarly translators, writing for a largely academic audience, make different choices accordingly, and comparisons across translations are often fascinating. Surely all approaches are valid.

When you do a new translation of a previously translated work, you’re always aware to some extent of what others have done. There are translators who keep a fairly close eye on previous translations as they work and often translate in conversation or competition with them. Whatever I feel about a previous translation, my own policy is to not look at it until I’m pretty certain of what I want to do myself. When I translated *The Pillow Book*, for example, I had to put Ivan Morris’s famous previous translation in the cupboard because I respected it deeply, and he was therefore going to be so noisy that I really couldn’t have it anywhere near me without being paralyzed by his translation decisions. As a result, I never looked in detail at his translation or compared it to my own while I was translating. I did look at a few key places later, and they were always remarkably different, which was both reassuring and a bit worrying. That was a fairly early translation of mine, when I was still not really confident that I knew what I was doing. Later, I became less nervous about previous translations, but I still always leave it till the very final draft before I open them up to check how things were done there. I need to be really sure not just of my own interpretations but of the language, the expression, the rhythm of what I’ve written, and I don’t want anyone else whispering in my ear with other suggestions.

It could be said that rather than retranslating an already translated work, translators would do better to concentrate on introducing untranslated works into the world. And it’s true—ideally, readers are no doubt better served by being introduced to unknown works rather than being tempted to reread known ones in a different version. But, as I said

above, the boring fact is that if you want to get published, you do what publishers want. I imagine most translators have a drawer full of rejected translations they've done in the vain hope of convincing a publisher to take them. New works and unknown writers are very difficult to get into print. The result is that what is available to readers is skewed towards the safe and predictable, when really, there's so much more out there.

Retranslation certainly plays a part in canonizing a work. Because of the difficulties of negotiating copyright, except in the case of very popular contemporary authors, a new translation of a work generally appears after the copyright on a work has lapsed, which means there's usually a time lag. I suspect that as retranslations of a work or author begin to appear, they automatically slide toward canonical status. Very worthwhile works that haven't yet been retranslated for copyright or other reasons are generally still floating free of canonization. However, the existence of multiple translations of a work doesn't necessarily reflect its importance in the country where it was written. I think a good example of this is Basho's *Oku no hosomichi* (often translated as *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*), which was certainly always admired in Japan but hadn't really been placed among the great classics. It is now, though, and I think this is due to its reception in the West. It attained a kind of cult status in the West back around the time of the later Beat poets, and since then, it has prompted a long line of translations, surely more than of any other Japanese classic. The result has been to raise its status in Japan, and now you can find half a shelf or more of reverential books devoted to it in Japanese bookshops. The existence of multiple translations really does have the power to canonize works and authors, it seems, and of course, this comes with a certain responsibility.

Canonization has been much maligned, but it has its positive side too. Part of the power of retranslation is that it alerts the reading public to the work's continued importance and, more widely, to the value of that country's literature. In an age when fewer people are reading literature and more and more books are jostling for their attention, this is surely no bad thing. Anything that encourages people to read and value literature from other languages deserves all the support it can get.

To me, the real question is, "Why not retranslate?" What can really be said against retranslation other than that publishers don't want it? I'll leave my remarks there. Thank you.

Rebecca Copeland: Thank you for including me on this panel. It's a treat

to be here with so many translators and so many retranslators as well. I'd like to start with a story. One of the greatest joys that I had as a graduate student was the opportunity to study with Edward Seidensticker, the esteemed translator and, in fact, retranslator of *Genji* and other classics. Occasionally, we would meet and talk about his experiences in translation, about new translations that were coming out and other things. One evening, over dinner, I casually asked him, "What did you think of the new translation of *Kagerō nikki*?" Of course, I was referring to Sonja Arntzen's translation, published in 1997, and I just assumed that he had seen it. It had come out just a few months earlier and was getting a lot of attention. "What?" he said, dismayed. "Why? Why did she retranslate it? What was wrong with mine?" I hadn't meant to upset Professor Seidensticker, but clearly, I had. I responded as quickly as I could, "Nothing, Sensei, is wrong with yours." She just read the text differently. That's all.

I realized then that I probably shouldn't go into the fact that she was able to find a different texture in the voice of the *Kagerō* diarist or that she had captured a different style, experimenting with sentence structure and tense and so forth. We didn't talk about that. I don't know what I had expected when I brought it up. I guess I thought that we would talk about the way their translations differed and why it mattered. I thought he would understand that the fact that the *Kagerō nikki* had been retranslated only added to the canonicity of the text and contributed to its deeper afterlives. After that exchange with Ed, I didn't really think about retranslation much more. But when Anna brought the topic up for this panel, I looked into what has been said about retranslation and discovered that it's an emerging subset or, really, has already become a subset of translation studies proper. There's a lot out there.

Here are a few of the insights I gleaned from looking over some of the studies on retranslation. Antoine Berman claims that first translations are usually target-oriented, whereas retranslations are generally closer to the source text. He suggests that an early translation is an incomplete act that can only evolve and become more complete through later translations. By complete, he means a translation that moves closer to the source text and is able to highlight the otherness of the original.

Bringing this theory back to Japanese literature, I realized that the two translations of *Kagerō nikki*, Seidensticker's *The Gossamer Years* and Arntzen's *The Kagero Diary*, bear this idea out, as do the many translations of *Genji*. Less a question of faultiness, these retranslations highlight the greater breadth and diversity of a readership that is now somewhat familiar

with Japan and Japanese literature and therefore more adaptable to strangeness in the target language.

Moreover, as Meredith brought out clearly, retranslators want to produce a translation that more perfectly conforms to their own reading, a reading that's often informed by new scholarship, greater linguistic dexterity, more artistic innovativeness, and, sometimes, a greater sense of ideological concerns generated by shifting cultural norms. As the canon of Japanese literature in English grows, so will the number of retranslations. So here are some additional questions that we might want to consider. Does the retranslation enhance, or in some cases return, critical focus on the original? After all, the retranslation is usually critiqued comparatively with both the earlier translation and the original in an effort to determine which one did it better, or how the two translations differ.

While we explore the importance of retranslation, we might also discuss the presence of non-retranslation, a term I discovered while looking into retranslation. Non-retranslation refers to the reprinting of the same translation again and again without having it retranslated. Of non-retranslation, Charlotte Bollaert notes, "Retranslating is bringing something new. Reprinting is keeping something old," but they both participate in the effort to keep the work in motion.

I wonder if Professor Seidensticker might not have been quite as upset had I told him this, whether he might have even been happy to think of retranslation as ensuring the continued mobility of *Kagerō*. As translations of Japanese literature continue to prosper, I anticipate that we will welcome more and more retranslations, and in the process, we'll enjoy the positive mobility of texts.

Torquil Duthie: I would like to begin by thanking Anna for organizing this wonderful panel, my other co-panelists, and all of you for coming today. Most of what I have to say is about the retranslation of premodern literary classics, and in particular about the translation of waka poetry, having recently published a retranslation of the *Kokinshū* (Columbia University Press, 2023). The *Kokinshū* has been translated previously in its totality into English by Helen McCullough and by Laurel Rodd, but I chose to translate just one-third of the collection—long enough to convey an idea of the whole but not too long to read from beginning to end. My *Kokinshū* book is also a retranslation in a different sense, in that I published a book of one hundred translated poems from the *Kokinshū* into Spanish in 2005, almost twenty years ago.

To me, the question “Why retranslate?” seems to be asking a question about value. What is the value in redoing something that has already been done? Is it possible to say something that hasn’t already been said if you’re redoing something that has already been done? (Of course, the real question here is what we mean by “already been done.”) In a more practical sense, there is a question of financial value—will a retranslation sell? And a separate question of intellectual or scholarly value—does the retranslation convey something that earlier translations did not?

I think most of us would agree that the purpose of translation is to make a book accessible in another language. But probably few of us would agree with the idea that the purpose of translation is simply to deliver content from another language. If the translation were merely about making content available, then once a book is translated, then the work would be done. Any retranslation would be no more than a commercial venture, no more than a repackaging or a rebranding of what is basically the same product. On the other hand, if we agree that a literary work is subject to interpretation, in other words, that a work’s meaning is open to question, this implies that all translation is basically a kind of retranslation, a form of reinterpreting and rethinking what one has read.

Recently I have been reading Emily Wilson’s excellent retranslation of the *Iliad*, and I came across a very interesting review by Stephanie McCarter (herself the author of a superb translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*), which included the line, “A good translation will make us rethink what we thought we knew.” This line struck a chord with me because it shows that what we are really saying is that retranslation is, as Meredith has already said, a form of rereading. We translate because we reread and rethink, not only as individuals but also collectively as a society, and I think this is quite important. Individual human beings change, and as they change, they read differently. We all have experiences of reading something we read a long time ago and being surprised at how much our relationship with the text has changed. We also individually play a part in collective rereadings that are shaped by the socio-historical moment in which we live.

Rebecca’s anecdote about Ed Seidensticker reminded me of something I read very recently in a book by a Spanish writer, Carmen Martín Gaité, who tells a story about wanting to write a book about storytelling and initially being unsure how to approach the topic. She asks a friend who is a university professor for advice, and he tells her she needs to be careful, as “this is a topic that many people have written about.” He

advises her to read a long list of academic books on narratology so that she doesn't end up "retreading the same ground," and she finds this somewhat amusing but not in the least discouraging, "for the same reason that I have never been discouraged from loving or befriending someone because others had loved or befriended them in the past."

There can certainly be jealousy and possessiveness about retranslation, an intensity of emotional involvement not just on the part of translators but also readers who become deeply invested in particular translations and sometimes even resentful of "new" versions that threaten to spoil their relationship to the text. However, retranslation is fundamentally an act that is shared with one's contemporary readers and across generations. All retranslators are engaging in conversation with previous translations whether they are conscious of them, trying not to be influenced by them, or reacting against them. It's important to be aware of this shared transgenerational commitment to rereading, beyond whatever value it might accrue to an individual translation or translator.

Vincent: Thank you all. I'll start by saying that I'm a big fan of retranslation, and there are many reasons we can benefit from a new translation of a literary work. For me, one of the most important reasons is the fact that insofar as a translation is a co-creation between the author and the translator, each new translation is really something new. The theorist Isabel Gomez has a great new book on Latin American theories of translation where she talks about how good translators leave their "teeth marks" on their translations, conveying something to the reader about the translator's own sensibilities and the historical moment in which they are writing.¹ I think it's really important that each new translation gives us something not just of that work but also something of the translator with it. Rebecca mentioned Seidensticker's translation of the *Kagerō nikki*. That's a book that I teach often and adore. He has a wonderful line in the introduction where he describes his take on the book in a single pithy phrase. He says that this book is "the exposition of the author's thesis that men are beasts." I love that line. To me, the archness and the campiness of that line say a lot about Seidensticker as a certain kind of gay man living in a very homophobic environment and experiencing a kind of solidarity with straight women, specifically the mother of Michitsuna. In that sense, his translation is both a record of the experiences of the mother of Michitsuna in the tenth century and, at the same time, a record of Seidensticker's sensibility as a gay man living in 1950s America.

Sonja Arntzen's retranslation is, of course, a very different but equally valuable version from a feminist perspective. Of course, retranslations are also essential because, as Rebecca noted, they keep a work of literature young, updating its language while also bringing it closer to the original as the text's initial foreignness fades. Arthur Waley's domesticating use of words like "knickerbockers," "casement [window]" and "bluestocking" are updated in newer translations so that the novel actually reads like it is set in Japan!

But I want to call particular attention to a certain type of vocabulary and discourse that is highly subject to historical and cultural change and therefore requires frequent re-translation, and that's language about gender and sexuality. In Arthur Waley's *Tale of Genji*, for example, the word "sex" appears only three times, and in all three instances, it is referring to what we would now call "gender." In Dennis Washburn's *Genji*, the word "sex" appears nineteen times, and in every case, it is about "sex" as in sexual intercourse. What a difference eighty years can make! But which one is right? This is one of those times when a retranslation makes you go back to the original and learn new things about it.

Here's another example. I used to have a slide that I showed whenever I taught *The Pillow Book*. It was Sei Shōnagon's list of "hateful things," in which she complains about a certain kind of man. In Ivan Morris' translation, it goes like this: "A man who has nothing in particular to recommend him discusses all sorts of subjects at random as if he knows everything." For years, I had a great time discussing this with students as a Heian-period indictment of mansplaining. But when I started to teach Meredith's translation, I saw that the line was totally different: "...a very ordinary person who beams inanely as she prattles on and on." Meredith had made my mansplainer into a woman—this really took the wind out of the sails of my argument! But it also raised fascinating questions about just how feminist Sei Shōnagon was, and it made me return to the original with a more critical eye.

There's something undeniably exciting about a new retranslation of a classic work. It's a shiny new thing that publishers can market and helps to draw in new readers. But we must also be careful not to be so seduced by the new that we write off earlier translations or assume that the new one is better by virtue of being new. This may be obvious, but I think it's worth saying that with translation, it is rarely as simple a matter as newer is better. An example: in my early twenties, I tried to read Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* in Scott Moncrieff's 1920s translation, but I

never made it past the first volume. Then, in my early thirties, the new Penguin translations of Proust came out, and I tried again. This time I made it through the whole thing and became totally hooked on Proust. At the time, I bought the argument made by the translator Lydia Davis and others that the Moncrieff was just too old and fusty. I figured that it must have been Moncrieff's fault that I couldn't finish Proust on my first try. I assumed that the new, more contemporary translation had made the difference. So I told everyone I knew, "Proust is not that hard! Just read it in the new Penguin translation!" But then, in my fifties, on my second time through Proust, I went back to Moncrieff and found his version to be not only completely readable but also exponentially more beautiful than the Penguin translation. I realize now that I just wasn't ready for Proust in my twenties, probably not in any translation. It wasn't Moncrieff's fault. I've also realized that another major reason I was able to finish Proust in my early thirties was because my mother had just died. Because Proust's book is essentially an extended act of grieving on Proust's part for his mother, it helped me through my own grief. In other words, as Torquil said, individual human beings change, and as they change, they read differently. I guess sometimes as you get older, what you need is not a new translation but an old one.

I've had similar experiences with the *Tale of Genji*. When Dennis Washburn's retranslation came out in 2015, I was inspired to teach the whole thing for the first time. I loved it. In fact, I taught it for five years in a row. Both my students and I found it wonderfully accessible. I'm really grateful to Washburn for helping me find my way into the world of *Genji* as a modernist. But now, I've gone back to Waley and am finding it as beautiful as Moncrieff's Proust. I would never say we don't need more *Genji* translations, but no matter how many English *Genji* we have, I'm confident that we will always need Waley's.

There are some translations, like those by Waley and Moncrieff, that have a special status as literary works in their own right. Joseph Conrad famously told Moncrieff that he thought his English Proust was better than Proust's French.² It never ceases to amaze me that Waley's *Genji*, for example, has been translated back into Japanese not once but twice. Perhaps one measure of the quality of a translation might be the degree to which it contains sentences that show the translator's teeth marks very strongly and have taken on a life of their own. Waley's *Genji* is full of sentences like this, sentences that are really his invention but are so beautiful they have spawned critical commentary under their own power.

I'm thinking here, for example, of the line in the "Yūgao" chapter where the narrator describes the flowers growing on the trellis outside Yūgao's house as "smiling at their own thoughts." It's a remarkable image. Virginia Woolf quotes it in her review of Waley's *Genji*. She clearly saw it as exemplary of Murasaki's style and aesthetic, but in fact, it turned out to be Waley's invention.

Another example: when Genji goes into exile at Suma after his affair with Oborozukiyo, he writes her a letter before his departure. In Washburn's translation, Genji writes, "Thinking back on all that took place between us, my love for you is the one crime for which I must accept responsibility." My students often groan when reading this line. Could Genji really have convinced himself that loving Oborozukiyo was his *only crime*? In Tyler's translation, Genji sounds more reasonable. "I know when I look back," Tyler has him say, "that I must take the consequences." But it's Seidensticker's version that is truly sublime. Seidensticker's Genji says, "Remembering is the crime to which I cannot plead innocent." It is hard to believe that these are all translations of the same sentence. Each one gives us a very different Genji. If Washburn makes Genji seem like someone with no conscience of his own crimes, Tyler has him acknowledge them, while Seidensticker takes the sentence to a whole new level. Genji's genius for remembering is what saves him from being a mere philanderer, and it is that ability that Seidensticker highlights in his translation. As Janine Beichman, who alerted me to this passage, has written, remembering is a "wonderfully human crime."³ It is also what Genji has in common with his creator, for it is the novelist who "cannot resist without telling of the inexhaustibly absorbing and moving things of this world." So while I'm all for new retranslations, it's also important that we remember the old ones.

Anna Zielinska-Elliott: I want to start by thanking you all for agreeing to take part in this panel. The idea for it came to me as I was preparing to moderate a conversation with Allison Markin-Powell and Lisa Kuroda-Hofmann, the translators of a new English version of Akutagawa's *Kappa*, at a bookstore event in Boston. This is the fourth translation of *Kappa*, and I wondered, "How do publishers or translators decide that it's time for a new version? Do they think that the new version will be more definitive or closer to the original, as Rebecca has told us retranslations tend to be?"

Meredith explained that it is overwhelmingly the publishers who decide which new translations to publish based on potential sales figures.

Which authors are out of copyright may also come into consideration. When I was looking at what has been retranslated in Japanese literature, however, it seemed to me that it also has something to do with the vintage of a work, with writers up to Akutagawa and Sōseki getting retranslated more often, and those from Tanizaki on not so much, even though Tanizaki is also out of copyright. There are some exceptions, of course. We have multiple versions of the classics, *Genji*, *Makura no sōshi*, *Heike*, *Kagerō nikki*, and collections of poetry. Late nineteenth and early twentieth century works have also been translated multiple times. There are, for example, five or six versions of *Botchan*, one quite recent, and, as I just mentioned, four translations of Akutagawa's *Kappa*. There are multiple versions of Miyazawa Kenji's 1927 *Ginga tetsudō no yoru* too, though none of them is particularly recent.

However, there are fewer examples of multiple translations of newer works. An interesting exception is Dazai Osamu. A new version of his 1947 *Ningen shikkaku* came out in 2018 in Mark Gibeau's retranslation. In this case, it seems that publishers recognized the need for a new translation because of a reborn interest in Dazai among young readers stemming partly from the enormous popularity of *Bungo Stray Dogs*, a manga that was later turned into an animated film and a game. Another translation of *Ningen shikkaku* by Juliet Winters Carpenter was just published in March 2024 by Tuttle, and from what I understand, David Boyd is also currently working on a new translation too.

Some other exceptions include short stories like Tanizaki's "Shisei," which has been translated into English at least five times. Torquil suggested a little earlier that we should talk about translations from Japanese into languages other than English, so let me give one example that attests to the popularity of "Shisei" among translators. According to a 2000 article by Donald Richie, at the time of writing, there were, in addition to the five English translations, five translations into German, three translations into French, and two translations each into Italian and Hungarian.⁴ Ōe Kenzaburō's 1958 story "Shiiku" is another example of a story that has been retranslated. The first translation, titled "The Catch," was done by John Bester in 1959. It was followed nearly twenty years later, in 1977, by John Nathan's translation titled "Prize Stock."

Of the still newer works, notable exceptions to the no-retranslation rule are three early novels by Haruki Murakami, all written between 1979 and 1987. First published solely for the Japanese market in the 1980s in Alfred Birnbaum's translations, they have all since been retranslated—

Norwegian Wood by Jay Rubin in 2000, and both *Hear the Wind Sing* and *Pinball, 1973* by Ted Goosen in 2015. The retranslation of a fourth Murakami novel, *End of the World and Hard-Boiled Wonderland*, appeared in December 2024, more than thirty years after the first translation by Birnbaum was published in 1991. There are also a couple of other Murakami short stories done by two different translators.

Apart from these exceptions, for the most part, there exist relatively few retranslations of works written in the last hundred years. This probably mostly has to do with the cost and trouble of obtaining copyright. Older works are more attractive because they are free, but perhaps there are also other reasons. Perhaps we think, for example, that literary works need to pass the test of time. Or do we think that each generation deserves a new translation? Or rather, is it that some works simply deserve multiple translations? It is sometimes said that originals don't age but translations do. How do these questions apply in the context of Japanese literature specifically?

I have also been thinking about retranslation when advising students in the Literary Translation MFA at Boston University. Of the five students working from Japanese we have had in the last four years, two chose texts that have previously been translated. Interestingly, both were by Miyazawa Kenji. One student translated *Ginga tetsudō no yoru*, and the other a few short stories. One might think that the reason students choose to retranslate has to do with young translators perhaps feeling more confident if there is another version to consult when in doubt. But these two students seemed to have had different reasons. The first one did it because she felt that the existing translations didn't sound to her ear the way she wanted them to in English, so she wanted to try it herself. The other student had apparently been given two books by her host grandfather, who said they were his favorite, so she decided to honor him by retranslating one of them.

Speaking for myself, I hope we see more and more retranslations. I recently heard a comparison of multiple translations to a fan, its parts fanning out from the original, each fold offering a different version. When the fan is spread out, we get different angles on the original text, but when folded up, they come together to bring us closer to it.

I would like to suggest that we begin talking to each other about this impulse that people get to retranslate, which Meredith mentioned. It seems that sometimes the urge to retranslate comes from a sense of dissatisfaction with existing versions, or with the feeling that one can do it differently. At the same time, I'm wondering about the sense of ownership mentioned by

Rebecca in the context of Edward Seidensticker.

I want to bring up another anecdote from a roundtable of translators that took place in 2000. The participants were Edward Seidensticker, Howard Hibbett, Edwin McClellan, and John Nathan. Somebody from the audience said, “When I read ‘The Catch’ by Ōe Kenzaburō in Japanese and the English translation, I was very surprised to discover that the Japanese story is a completely different story. It’s not a story about international relationships between the black man and the two Japanese boys. It’s a story about the sexuality of the protagonist, and it’s only about sexuality. Whole sentences and paragraphs are utterly eliminated.” To which John Nathan replies, “Not from my translation.” The questioner says, “I hope not.” Then John asks, “Have you read mine? It’s titled ‘Prize Stock.’ Please do read it. Because one of the reasons I was moved to retranslate was precisely what you’re talking about. One of many reasons.”⁵

So I am wondering if you could all talk a little more about this impulse to retranslate. Do you feel this possessiveness a little bit? Do you feel that your versions are the right ones? Or maybe “right” is not the appropriate term here. Because when it comes to translation and teaching translation, there are no right answers, but there are definitely wrong answers. Do you feel ownership of your translation? Would you be angry if somebody else started doing it differently?

McKinney: Like Seidensticker. Hmm. It hasn’t actually happened to me very much yet, although Keith has retranslated, or translated, parts of *The Pillow Book*, I’m not sure how much.

Vincent: Maybe a third.

McKinney: Oh, okay. That is actually going to be really fascinating. I very quickly passed my eye over it and thought, “Oh, oh!” What it reminds me of is somebody else telling you about somebody that you know very well. You have your own version of them as who they are, but when somebody else starts talking about them from their own point of view, it can actually be an entirely different kind of person. In the beginning, your mind is sort of spinning to and fro between the two and saying, “But no, no, no, no, no.” And then, after a while, you think, “Oh, oh well, that makes sense why she...” So the perspectives begin to merge, though in the beginning, they feel very separate. As you read or hear more and more, you actually

come back to the essence of the text in a clearer fashion.

The initial shock is certainly there because, I mean, Sei Shōnagon? Well, she feels like mine... Though obviously she isn't—in fact, she's actually Ivan Morris's. Then again, Waley translated parts of Sei Shōnagon long ago, so perhaps she's really his. Of course, she is really everyone's; she belongs to whoever reads her. Waley's translation is a hundred years old, though, and contemporary readers often can't appreciate it, beautiful though it is. That is one more reason to retranslate: because readers demand something closer to what they understand and respond to.

Duthie: This is a difficult question to answer. If I could draw from what Meredith said, my experience with Ivan Morris was that the beginning of the translation—the rendering of “haru wa, akebono” as “In spring it is the dawn that is the most beautiful”—that bothered me so much that I simply didn't want to teach it. So I just waited for Meredith's translation. This is all rather irrational, of course, and unfair—there are other wonderful things about Morris's translation. But just as you have sentimental attachments to particular translations, you can also have visceral reactions about them. What Keith said about Seidensticker is interesting, because I read Seidensticker's and Waley's translations at the same time while I was trying to read *Genji* in the original, and of course, Seidensticker's translation was more literal and therefore more helpful as a crib, but I remember developing an intense dislike of Seidensticker's style and thinking Waley conveyed the feeling of *Genji* much better. But now Keith's comments make me think I should perhaps give Seidensticker a second chance and try rereading his translation to see if I feel differently now after two decades.

I do think there is a big difference between liking or disliking certain parts of a translation and disagreeing fundamentally with its entire approach or philosophy. Most of my own experience with translations concern poetry—the *Kokinshū* and *Man'yōshū*—and I think that translating short poems is very different from translating novels or short stories, which are discrete works that are, for the most part, self-contained. Once a translation of a novel is finished, the process is more or less over—there is rarely much opportunity to change or tinker with it any further. My experience translating waka, on the other hand, is that you never feel the process of translation is complete. For example, I translated some selections from the *Man'yōshū* for Haruo Shirane's *Traditional Japanese Literature* some twenty years ago. In the meantime, I have taught the

Man'yōshū several times, and over the years, I have been working on a volume of Hitomaro's poetry. I have lost count of how many times I have retranslated each of Hitomaro's poems. And every time I open a page of my *Kokinshū* translation and look at it, I see something in a poem that I would do differently now. Literally every time. And the thing is, the *Kokinshū* was designed to do this to its readers. The poems are designed to keep you guessing at what they are really saying. So it is difficult for me to feel attachment or possessiveness over the translations because I never really feel a sense of ownership over them, and to me, reading the *Kokinshū* means accepting that process of constant rereading.

What I do feel attachment to is the poetic form and style of my translations. One thing that made a difference with the *Kokinshū* was that I had translated it into Spanish first (albeit just one hundred poems). Because Spanish has a tradition of short poetry, I was able to translate the *Kokinshū* into a form that I knew would feel somewhat familiar to Spanish readers, even if the setting was distant. This was not the case with English. In fact, for a long time, I couldn't think of how to translate the *Kokinshū* into English in a way that would convey intimacy to its readers. In the end, what happened is I looked at successful examples of translations of Spanish poetry into English, and that allowed me to develop a *Kokinshū* style in English that I felt satisfied with. What is interesting is that with the *Man'yōshū*, it is the other way around. I like my English translations of *Man'yōshū* poetry, but to date, I have not found a way to reproduce the typical forward-pushing rhythm of *chōka* in the *Man'yōshū* into Spanish in a satisfying way.

But I don't think of attachment to rhythm and sound as being about possessiveness but rather as creating a pattern that can serve as a background for different readings to take place. I see the translations themselves as only a snapshot of how I read the poems at a particular moment. I suspect this would be different if I were to translate a single monumental work, something like *Genji* that you spend many years on. I don't know if this is a true story or not, but I heard that when Ed Seidensticker first heard about Royall Tyler's translation, he said something like, "My *Genji* deserved more than 25 years!"

McKinney: Yes.

Duthie: I heard that.

Copeland: I heard that too.

Duthie: Of course, there is also the question of whether one translation is going to make the other one somewhat obsolete. This is not so much about possessiveness as a fear that you might end up getting pushed out of the conversation entirely.

Copeland: When I teach translation, I have my students do a translation project at the end of the semester, and I always tell them, “A translation is never finished, it’s just published.” So, you know, turn in your papers already. I feel like that’s actually true of almost anything we write. It’s never finished, and we’re always capable of redoing it, or we often want to redo it. I feel that way with my own original writing as well—original writing is rewriting, and original writing is also being translated from something else as we write. Writing is a long process that is never complete, whatever Berman says. It’s never really complete. The next translation is, I feel, a welcomed addition to this continued dialogue with the text. Many translators retranslate their own translations. I think that highlights the fact that a translation is not finite in many respects, and neither is the original work.

Vincent: I just have one more Seidensticker story. It’s actually not my story, but Alan Tansman told me that when he was an undergraduate, Seidensticker came to Columbia to talk about his translation. And Alan raised his hand and said, “Professor Seidensticker, which one should I read? Which one is better?” You can imagine how that went.

But I did translate a part of the *Pillow Book* for an audio book. It needed to be short and understandable without footnotes for somebody who’s just listening to it. I had a lot of fun doing it. I did not put Meredith’s translation in the cupboard. I actually looked at her translation quite a lot, and the Waley and Morris translations too. One thing that I realized through this is that when you’re retranslating, you actually have, in some ways, a lot of freedom. I was doing an abridged translation. I knew that Meredith McKinney’s translation was there for readers who want the whole thing with all the footnotes, so I took a lot of liberties. I changed the order of the sections and made a very different kind of text. I felt permission to do that because Meredith’s translation and Ivan Morris’s translation were already there. In that sense, I think not only does a retranslation bring you closer to the original, as Rebecca said, but in some

ways, it can also take you further away by allowing you to take more liberties in adapting or retranslating.

I also wanted to say one more thing about this question of which books get translated. That's a really interesting question. I wonder if it might also have something to do with what Torquil is saying about how hard it is to resist wanting to change the translation of a poem, whereas a novel is a bigger operation and not so easily changed. You mentioned the dividing line between Sōseki and Tanizaki. Tanizaki is arguably a more popular writer than Sōseki ever was, and yet we have many more Sōsekis than we have Tanizakis. If we have five *Botchan*, four *Kusamakura*, and only one of the *Makioka Sisters*, I wonder whether that might not have to do with the dense poetic quality of Sōseki's prose versus Tanizaki's more narrative prose. This is just a hair-brained theory I have. Tanizaki and Sōseki are both equally canonical, you could say, and yet the fact that we have more retranslations of Soseki's than we have of Tanizaki raises the question of whether there is something intrinsic to certain texts more than others that seems to invite a translator to retranslate them.

McKinney: Can I just say it's copyright?

Vincent: Ah, copyright. There you go.

McKinney: I'm sorry, but it's copyright. It's an easy answer.

Vincent: Now that Tanizaki is out of copyright...

McKinney: Everybody's working on it.

Vincent: Maybe we can open it up for discussion with the audience now.

Questions from the Audience

Q1: I'm wondering, tactically, when you're translating, how you decide whether to set aside previous translations to ensure that you have your own take. When do you choose to navigate between existing editions, as Keith was describing, or to put them aside but return to them for specific passages when you're unsure what something means? I'm curious, for your most well-known translations, how did you approach this balance?

McKinney: My general policy is that regardless of what I feel about the

previous translation, I don't want to look at it until I'm pretty sure what I want to do. As I said earlier, I actually never really looked at the Ivan Morris translation of *The Pillow Book* in detail. When I finally did, it was so remarkably different that I didn't even want to start thinking about it. But that was right at the end. I don't think I would ever look at another translation until I was on draft four of my own translation and until I was really sure not just of my own interpretation but of the words, the language, the expression, the rhythm—for me, the rhythm is so important. At that point, I'm often quite interested to see what others have done. The reason I don't check until then is that I don't want to be influenced by somebody who's already formulated their own opinions before I've decided on my own. Personally, I wouldn't do that myself, but I know that other translators are very different.

Zielinska-Elliott: How many drafts do you have?

McKinney: How many drafts? Well, I mean, it's like Torquil says—it's endless. If it's sitting around, I just go back and start playing with it again. So, three?

Zielinska-Elliott: So, draft four is pretty much...

McKinney: Draft four is when you're hoping that you don't have to go back and do this again. But, you know, if you've got the time, you generally do. But not completely, just bits and pieces.

Duthie: For me, one of the issues with translating poetry, or waka in particular, is the question of form. I made a decision fairly early on that I was going to translate all waka into a common form that would transpose a sense of the original prosody. Once I had developed the form, I had to do everything within that mold. As a general rule, I didn't look at other translations first, but occasionally, when I'd hit a wall with a particular phrase in a poem, I went to the other translations to see how they had handled it. Because I was working within a strict prosodic pattern, I usually couldn't use the solutions that other translators had come up with, but they often gave me an idea or a suggestion to do something else. There's a strange kind of debt that one acquires with previous translations—reading them can give you great ideas even when your solutions are quite different.

Q2: Meredith, you started by making a distinction. While the panel is about why *we* retranslate, you chose to answer, “Why *I* retranslate.” I’d be interested in hearing your thoughts on the difference between these two questions—why *we* retranslate as a collective and why *I* retranslate as an individual. “We” seems to point to the collective, to collective activity, which is not necessarily decided upon through any sort of conversation but still has an effect over time that transcends any individual efforts.

Vincent: I feel a little unqualified to answer this because I’ve only done one retranslation like this, but I would say that I actually retranslate every time I read something, you know. Every time I go back to something, in my mind, I retranslate it. If I write about it, I’m retranslating it. And my answer is really what Meredith said, for me too. It’s about love. It’s because I love a text that I find myself wanting to retranslate it. It’s a way of owning it also, making it yours. It’s also a way of making sure that you understand it and tracking the evolution of your understanding of it over time. I mean, the way that I read Proust now is very different from how I read it before. I’m not translating it, but I think it’s a cognate phenomenon. When I really love a text, I find I can love it even more by comparing translations. I have a project with my students where we put all of the 795 poems in *The Tale of Genji* into a database in all of the extant translations, and I’m constantly going back to that with them and talking about the differences among the different translations. I loved Anna’s metaphor of the fan for retranslation. I sometimes think of retranslation as a kind of exfoliation of all of the potential that’s in the original. Each time you do a new one, it reveals a different aspect that was always present but perhaps not perceived.

Duthie: In a nutshell, I think that the reason we retranslate as a collective or as a field is that retranslating, like rereading and reinterpreting, is an essential activity of transcultural memory. Let’s take the case of Spain, for example, where early translations of Japanese literature tended to be from English or from French. In the last two decades, there has been an explosion of first-hand translations. That shift is the result of Spain’s changing economic and cultural status and of certain historical advantages, such as the widespread use of the Spanish language. There is no question that this shift has transformed Spanish society by opening up and expanding cultural life in Spain as well as the cultural life of global communities of Spanish readers and speakers around the world. As we

know, translation has also been key to Japan's modern and contemporary history. I think retranslation thus participates in the creation of a global cultural memory and transcultural interpretation of the past. In that sense, I don't think it's much different from the question of why multiple monographs are published on the same particular book or topic or why premodern scholars wrote commentaries to texts that already had numerous commentaries.

Copeland: I have not retranslated anything myself. However, I remember that when Sonja Arntzen's translation of *Kagerō nikki* came out, there was so much excitement over it—excitement about the sense of redirection, a reclamation of sorts of a female voice. I was excited by and greatly admired the way she took so much risk in her use of English in her translation, disrupting what I had always thought about how a translation should read. Now when I teach translation and we look at Seidensticker's translation and Arntzen's translation, my students are so excited by her work, more so than by Seidensticker's. That hurts me because I love his translation, and I really resonated with what Keith said about how a translation also captures the voice of the translator, kind of like a biography translates or captures the voice of the biographer in addition to the subject of the biography. As has been said, translations and retranslations are products of their time, and because time is not static, we always need more translations of the same thing in more voices.

Q4: I have a question for Meredith, because you keep talking about copyright, which I totally agree is a major factor that plays into what gets retranslated. What is your opinion about why people don't retranslate books that they already own the copyright to, for example, books by Mishima Yukio? Because Mishima is trending almost as much as Dazai, perhaps not quite as much, but *Temple of the Golden Pavilion* has always seemed like a translation that could use an update to become more accessible. Or *Confessions of a Mask*—that translation is from 1958, and language about gender and sexuality has changed so much since then. These seem like things that would both sell and have a reason to be retranslated.

McKinney: This whole issue of copyright is quite complex and interesting. It is also crucial to a lot of what we're talking about. The copyright for those existing translations of Mishima don't belong to the publisher, they

belong to the translator. In order to retranslate them, you need to go to the people who own the copyrights of the original works. That's where it gets sticky because, in my experience—though I haven't done this at all recently—it has often been very difficult to negotiate the rights to retranslate or translate works from Japanese. I think it may have become smoother recently, but very early on, I translated works by Furui Yoshikichi, a fascinating modern novelist. I had such a hard time getting hold of the copyright. He would not respond to me. Finally, I got a very curt note from him saying, “Talk to my agent.” The agent decided that I couldn't do it because I hadn't had enough translation history. It was just a nightmare. I finally did it, and it was fine—it even won a prize. Essentially, copyright is a question of how many years have gone by since the author died, so it's not really about who's translated it since and who owns that copyright because that belongs to that translator.

Q5: I would love to go back to Meredith's story about the movie club in your town and the readers, because we've been discussing classics—works we love, those that are canonized, and that we in this room, along with publishers, choose. Publishers need to sell, and we critics help decide what gets translated, aside from copyright issues. As a scholar of children's literature, I find it fascinating how the diversity of approaches discussed here is accommodated by the idea of being a delegate to the text. Keith, your point about feeling more comfortable rearranging the text for an audiobook, knowing that there were more scholarly translations out there, is very interesting. In children's literature, I have observed that Antoine Berman's principle is, while interesting, applicable largely to retranslations of canonical or classical works, while many retranslations actually depend much more on what I think Anderson has described as accessibility, an update that makes the text more accessible. There's a belief that the text must be transmitted to particular audiences, whether that's school children or the general public or so on. So the challenging original text is simplified into more accessible language, with less focus on preserving the flavor of the original language. This is true of children's literature as well, or adaptations for children of adult works. My question is ultimately about where the reader is in all of this. Because yes, we all love the text; we're close to it and we spend so much time with it. How do you think the reader plays a role in translation?

Vincent: That's an incredibly important point. For all of us, ultimately,

what matters is the reader. Emily Wilson, the translator of *The Odyssey* (tr. 2017) and *The Iliad* (tr. 2023), is coming to Boston to speak in our seminar later this semester. And she sent me in advance of her visit some of her own reviews of earlier translations of the *Iliad*. It was very interesting to read these and see how she gradually became more and more frustrated by the existing translations until she finally just decided to do it herself. At one point in one of those reviews, she's talking about Venuti's idea of foreignization and how it can enrich the English language and all of that. She is talking about how Venuti championed Francis Newman's famously "archaizing and unidiomatic" translation as a courageous and bold example of foreignization. That's all very well, Wilson says, but the only problem with Newman's translation is that "... Venuti is not able to cite any evidence of any non-elite Greek-less reader who actually read Newman's version with pleasure or enlightenment. And the reason I suspect is that such readers did not exist."⁶

Duthie: This is something I thought about a lot, too, when I was doing my translation of the *Kokinshū*. With modern Japanese editions that include a modern Japanese translation, the text basically says, "Here is the original classical text, and here is a paraphrase of the poem in modern Japanese prose." The gloss is there to help you understand the original classical Japanese, to help you get a peek at something that existed a long time ago. But when we translate a poem into a different language, we are basically saying, "Let's pretend that this is the original," and asking the reader to make an imaginative leap into another world. This is why I did not include romanized transcriptions of the original with my translations—because I wanted the translations to stand on their own, and I did not want romanized transcriptions to act as a barrier for that imaginative leap. When I tried out the translations in some undergraduate classes, I measured their success by whether students reacted emotionally to some of the poems. I wanted some of the poems to hit hard. I wanted the translated poems to open up a space for English-speaking readers in which they could imagine themselves as inhabiting the emotional world of the *Kokinshū*. This is the kind of relationship I wanted my translation to have with its non-Japanese speaking readers, not one where the romanized transcriptions would be a constant presence reminding them that the actual world of the poems exists beyond the book they are holding and is, in fact, inaccessible to them

Q6: You all showed us beautifully, in your various ways, your love for the

text that you're taking on. But I wonder if you could look at it another way, which is that we all know there are tons of wonderful Japanese literature out there. And it's a pity that people don't have access to it. There are not many people like you who are able to translate it. So I just wondered if you have any sense of obligation or responsibility to widen the range of Japanese literature that is out there for people who can't read Japanese. Whether there might not be a risk in retranslating things. It's basically enforcing a canonization, which may be proper, because that's the way it's canonized in Japanese. But it may also be mistaken, because it's the way that things have ended up getting translated.

Vincent: I just have a quick comment about that, which is that I do think it's important to find new literature and translate it. It's incredibly important. But at the same time, I think there is an equal value to rereading. In fact, I might even say that the privileging of new work can imply a kind of colonialist mentality—you know, that you're going to go and conquer new territory and bring new stuff in. But I think that the value of rereading and going back to retranslate is every bit as great as bringing new works to light.

I'm afraid we are out of time, but thank you all so much.

NOTES

- ¹ See Gomez, *Cannibal Translation*.
- ² Conrad wrote to Moncrieff, "I was much more interested and fascinated by your rendering than by Proust's creation." Davies and Stape, eds., *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad, Volume 7, 1920-1922*, 623.
- ³ Beichman, "Beichman's Bookshelf," 37.
- ⁴ Richie, "Everything About Tanizaki."
- ⁵ Richie, ed., *Words, Ideas and Ambiguities*, 81.
- ⁶ See Wilson, "Homer's Iliad."

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