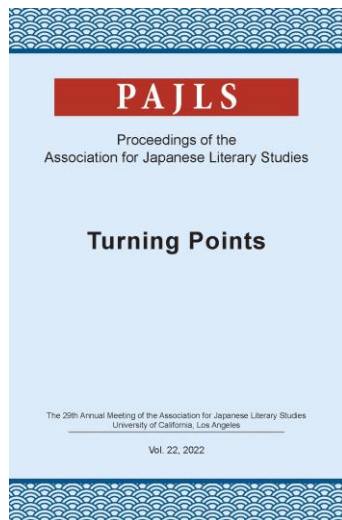


“Make it Sing: John Nathan and the Poetry of Translation”

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MAKE IT SING: JOHN NATHAN AND THE POETRY OF TRANSLATION

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This paper examines the early contributions of John Nathan to Japanese literature in English translation. It engages with the 2022 conference theme “Turning Points” in two ways that are intertwined: the act of translation, carrying over Japanese into English, is a “turning point”—after all, a literal interpretation of the Japanese word for translation, *hon'yaku*, is “to turn meaning.”² More specifically, I will show “turning” in a poetic sense by examining points in Nathan’s translations where he makes “poetic turns,” so to speak, that allow for the meaning of his English prose to turn and turn again like in poetry.

These poetic turns focus the reader’s attention, forcing us to pause and feel or think. These turns speak to how English literature scholar Marshall Brown describes a turning point represented by the lines “Dying into a dance, / An agony of trance” in a William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) poem: “a suspension, a hiatus, the summer or winter solstice of the intellect,” which can be “vertigo or reverie.”³ I will argue that Nathan’s translations enhance moments of suspension in the original, or even produce new ones, to make Japanese literature in translation worth reading (or for the mind’s ear, worth listening to)—in other words, to make it sing.

My claim that Nathan’s translation appeals to our ear by making a literary work “sing,” so to speak, might suggest that I am referring only to song—or music—that can be heard. I am not. By making a work sing, I am referring also to what Brown has described as “unheard melodies” in his reading of a John Keats (1795–1821) poem, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”: “Unheard melodies are structure, skeleton, attitude, feeling: they are inside

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² The Chinese graphs *hon* 翻 and *yaku* 訳—whether as stand-alone verbs (*honzu* and *yakusu*, respectively) or combined to form a compound verb (*hon'yaku*)—can mean “to translate;” in related contexts the former, as a transitive verb, also means “to flip” or “to turn” (*hirugaesu*), and the latter, as a noun, refers to “the meaning of a word” (*wake*, which is a native reading of the Chinese graph). *Nihon kokugo daijiten*, accessed January 2023, <https://japanknowledge.com>.

³ William Butler Yeats, “Byzantium” (1930), in William Butler Yeats, *Yeats’s Poetry, Drama, and Prose*, ed. James Pethica, Norton Critical Edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 2000), 108–109. Marshall Brown, *Turning Points: Essays in the History of Cultural Expression* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 8.

of the piece, or of the urn.”⁴ In what follows, I examine Nathan’s translations as a work of art—or a Grecian urn, to use Keats’s idiom—drawing attention to heard and unheard melodies that make his translations sing. And as Keats’s silent urn tells us, “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter.”⁵

NATHAN AND TRANSLATION

Nathan might be called a living legend. Born in 1940, he became a student of Japanese language and literature in the 1960s when Japanese studies was still a new discipline. He gave up a professorship at Princeton to become an Emmy Award-winning film producer, director, scriptwriter, and chairman of a film production company; for twenty-five years he taught as the first Koichi Takashima Professor of Japanese cultural studies at University of California, Santa Barbara, where he retired in 2019.

Nathan has always had the general reader in mind, offering glimpses into Japan and Japanese culture from a global perspective. Drawing from his years of experience living in Japan and working in the Tokyo business world, he authored a corporate biography on Sony and a cultural study of postwar Japanese society, both of which were published by Houghton Mifflin, a commercial publishing house.⁶ As a translator, Nathan introduced English readers around the world to the seminal works of literary giants of modern Japan—including postwar writers Mishima Yukio (1925–1970) and Ōe Kenzaburō (1935–2023) as well as prewar writer Natsume Sōseki (1867–1916).⁷ Nathan has also given us illuminating portraits of Japanese artists—his 1974 biography of Mishima and his most recent contribution to Anglophone Japanese literary studies, a 2018 biography of Sōseki, whom he calls “modern Japan’s greatest novelist.”⁸

⁴ Brown, *Turning Points*, 255.

⁵ John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” Poetry Foundation, accessed January 2023, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/>.

⁶ John Nathan, *Sony: The Private Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999); John Nathan, *Japan Unbound: A Volatile Nation’s Quest for Pride and Purpose* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004).

⁷ John Nathan, trans., *The Sailor Who Fell From Grace with the Sea*, by Mishima Yukio (New York: Vintage International, 1994). Translation first printed 1965. John Nathan, trans., *A Personal Matter*, by Ōe Kenzaburō (New York: Grove Press, 1968). John Nathan, trans., *Light and Dark: A Novel*, by Natsume Sōseki (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

⁸ John Nathan, *Mishima: A Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974; Rpt. Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2000); John Nathan, *Sōseki: Modern Japan’s Greatest Novelist* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

In translation lore, should there be such a thing, Nathan might be remembered as one of the greatest translators of Japanese, a greatness that comes from standing out as a maverick. He has always rejected the academic convention that views “literal” translation as “faithful” translation; Instead, Nathan expresses his fidelity to literary texts by finding his own English-language idiom through the crafting of style. In a 2016 issue of *The New York Review of Books*, Nathan argued that a translator’s style “is inevitably intrusive, not just visible,” contending that “without style... a translation cannot hope to convey the voice of the original author.”⁹

In what follows, I show how intrusive and visible Nathan’s style can be—qualities that are evident even in Nathan’s earliest translations. I take passages from two short stories published in *Japan Quarterly*, comparing them to the Japanese original and the English versions that followed his own. While these shorter works are overshadowed by Nathan’s better known and more widely-read translations of full-length Japanese novels—namely, Mishima’s *The Sailor Who Fell From Grace with the Sea* and Ōe’s *A Personal Matter*, central among the works for which Ōe won the 1994 Nobel Prize for Literature—I focus on them because another translator chose to translate them after Nathan, presenting an opportunity for comparison. I also focus on these short early works because they reveal the origins of Nathan’s style as a translator.

It goes without saying that the long 1960s was an era of unprecedented experimentation across the arts—Nathan’s translation style was no exception. Plus, hanging out with the likes of experimental artists—writers including Mishima, Ōe, and Abe Kōbō (1924–1993) and film makers such as Teshigahara Hiroshi (1927–2001)—likely informed Nathan’s own view on what art should do for the reader.¹⁰ Through examinations of the heard and unheard melodies—the rhythm—of his English prose, I contend that Nathan’s voice as translator commands the voice of the writer, which he demonstrates in the way he reproduces the experimental quality of the Japanese work by engaging in experiments of his own, enhancing and creating “turning points” that seduce the reader into a daze of dizzying delight.

⁹ John Nathan, “Who Can Put Across Genji?” review of *The Tale of Genji*, translated by Dennis Washburn, *The New York Review of Books* (Jan. 14, 2016): 64–66.

¹⁰ For personal accounts of these literary giants, see John Nathan, *Living Carelessly in Tokyo and Elsewhere: A Memoir* (New York: Free Press, 2008).

ON READING NATHAN'S YOKOMITSU

In 1965, *Japan Quarterly* published what might be considered Nathan's first translation, of Yokomitsu Riichi's (1898–1947) short story "Haru wa basha ni notte" (1926).¹¹ Nathan, at age twenty-three, rendered the title as "Spring, in a Surrey"—a title whose pithiness, brevity, and sibilant alliteration rolls off the tongue like poetry.¹² In 1974, Yokomitsu's story was translated again by British translator Dennis Keene (1934–2007), who took a more literal approach to translation, beginning with the title: "Spring Riding in a Carriage."¹³

Nathan's choice to render the Japanese word *basha* in English as "surrey"—and not "carriage"—speaks to what George Steiner has called giving translation a "patina": "Translators may opt for forms of expression centuries older than current speech. They may choose an idiom prevalent only a generation back. Most frequently, the bias to the archaic produces a hybrid: the translator combines, more or less knowingly, turns taken from the past history of the language, from the repertoire of its own masters, from preceding translators or from antique conventions which modern parlance inherits and uses still for ceremony. The translation is given a patina."¹⁴ These antique conventions in literary writing were likely evident to both Yokomitsu, writing in the 1920s, and Nathan, translating in the 1960s, as both *basha* and *surrey* are words that apparently date to the late nineteenth century.¹⁵

The word *surrey* also conjures in the mind of the English reader the pleasant image of "an American four-wheeled two-seated pleasure carriage."¹⁶ Yokomitsu's story presents a touching yet also disturbing conversation between a man and his wife, who is bedridden and dying from tuberculosis. When it becomes clear that the wife's ill and emaciated body is what makes her look so elegant and beautiful in the eyes of her husband, we realize that the sense of fleeting springtime beauty evoked by Yokomitsu's title is meant to be poetic and ironic.

¹¹ Yokomitsu Riichi, "Haru wa basha ni notte," in Yokomitsu Riichi, *Teihon Yokomitsu Riichi zenshū* (Tokyo: Kawade shobō shinsha, 1981), 2: 279–297. Where appropriate, I have converted the orthography to modern style.

¹² John Nathan, trans., Yokomitsu Riichi, "Spring, in a Surrey," *Japan Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (Jan. 1965): 65–71.

¹³ Theodore W. Goossen, ed., *The Oxford Book of Japanese Short Stories* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 112–123.

¹⁴ George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, third edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975/1998), 360.

¹⁵ *Nihon kokugo daijiten*, accessed January 2023, <https://japanknowledge.com>; *Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed January 2023, <https://www.oed.com>.

¹⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed January 2023, <https://www.oed.com>.

Nathan's version of Yokomitsu's opening lines continues the pithiness and sibilant sounds of his version of the title, allowing for his translation of the narrative to reverberate beyond the Japanese original:

[Yokomitsu] 海浜の松が凧に鳴り始めた。庭の片隅で一叢の小さなダリヤが縮んでいった。

[Nathan] An icy wind hissed through the pines on the beach. In one corner of the garden small dahlias withered.

[Keene] The cold late-autumn wind began to sound among the pine trees on the shore. In a corner of the garden a clump of small dahlias shrank in upon themselves.

Although Yokomitsu's story is, for the most part, written in prose, Nathan's approach to translation shows how even a line of prose can be "sonic," speaking to the way U.S. literary critic and poet James Longenbach has described a line in a poem: "Poetry is the sound of language organized in lines... The line's function is sonic, a way of organizing the sound of language, and only by listening to the effect of a particular line in the context of a particular poem can we come to understand how line works."¹⁷ In Nathan's opening line, we can hear the wind in the assonance between "icy" and "hissed," a sibilant sound that makes our ears shiver. This sonic approach prepares the reader for the poetry to come: Yokomitsu quotes several passages from "Book of Psalms" in the Bible (translated into *bungo*, or literary Japanese), giving his narrative a plangent and solemn tone. In Keene's version of the opening, however, the most the reader gets is a flat description, a matter-of-fact acknowledgment that there was a sound.

In his version Keene tries to retain each grammatical constituent in Yokomitsu's original. Nathan, however, omits details like *hitomura*—which appears as "a clump" in Keene—expecting that his reader will be able to imagine a group of flowers from the plural noun "dahlias." Keene attempts to represent, more literally, the verb used to describe the dahlias, *chijinde itta*: "shrank in upon themselves." Nathan, however, renders the verb as "withered," a word that marks the decay and imminent death of a flower—a short and simple idiom for *chijinde itta*.

¹⁷ James Longenbach, *The Art of the Poetic Line* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2008), xi–xii.

The image of dahlias appears several times throughout the short story, serving as poetic figures for the married couple waiting for the worst to arrive. In the flowers' final appearance toward the conclusion of the narrative, this figuration is made clear to the reader:

[Yokomitsu] 彼と妻とは、もう萎れた一対の茎のように、日日黙って並んでいた。しかし、今は、二人は完全に死の準備をしてしまった。もう何事が起ろうとも恐わがるものはなくなった。そうして、彼の暗く落ちついた家の中では、山から運ばれて来る水甕の水が、いつも静まった心のように清らかに満ちていた。

[Nathan] Side by side they waited together in silence like a pair of withered stems. But now they were ready for death; nothing could frighten them. And the water carried from the mountain into the dark hush of his house brimmed in the jugs as purely as a heart forever placid.

[Keene] So they waited together, two linked stems of a flower that is dying, every day in silence. But they had made total preparation for death. Whatever happened now could be no cause of fear. The pure water carried from the hill brimmed over in its water jug like the heart now finally at peace in his dark and quiet house.

In his version Nathan uses the English verb “withered” again, echoing his own translation of the story’s opening. The Japanese verb in question is *shioreta*, which, indeed, means “withered”; Keene finds another way to represent this state in English: “is dying.”

Nathan’s repetition of “withered” gives his narrative as a whole a sense of roundedness, much like Keats’s urn. The rhythm of Nathan’s passage above—like his translation of the story’s opening—gestures toward poetry in its brevity and its beat. We might say that the concision and naturalness of his choices—“side by side,” “they were ready for death; nothing could frighten them”—afford the sound of his prose a recognizable form. Brown writes: “Music is composed of sounds and sound shapes, and there is only noise if we don’t hear the forms within the sounds.”¹⁸ In Nathan’s version, form is audible. Keene’s version, however, is flat and wordy—“they waited together,” “they had made total preparation for death. Whatever happened now could be no cause of

¹⁸ Brown, *Turning Points*, 260.

fear”—offering little to no sense of rhythm, making the extra words sound like noise.

Furthermore, the two versions of the last sentence could not sound more different. Nathan shows his penchant for poetry in the imagery and alliteration of his renderings “the dark hush of the house” and “as purely as a heart forever placid.” Unlike Keene, Nathan ends the sentence with the image of the heart placid, simulating the way images are presented to the reader in the original Japanese. The final image of any sentence is likely what lingers most in the mind of the reader—Nathan’s “forever placid” asks us to sit longer—perhaps forever—with peace and quiet, while Keene’s “at peace in his dark and quiet house” lets our eyes blink and read on.

Nathan’s version of the final lines of the narrative also attempts to seduce the reader:

[Yokomitsu] 妻は彼から花束を受けると両手で胸いっぱい抱きしめた。そうして、彼女はその明るい花束の中へ蒼ざめた顔を埋めると、恍惚として眼を閉じた。

[Nathan] She took the bouquet and hugged it against her breast.
And burying her pale face in the bright flowers, closed her eyes
in ecstasy.

[Keene] She took the flowers and hugged them full to her breast.
The she buried her pallid face among the bright flowers, and
closed her eyes entranced.

When we compare “eyes in ecstasy” with “eyes entranced,” it is clear which translator was thinking about sound, while still preserving meaning. The Japanese phrase *kōkotsu toshite* can be translated as both “to be in ecstasy” and “to be entranced.” In English, the meanings of the words “ecstasy” and “entranced” are similar; but their feel, texture, and, above all, sound are different. And only one affords what we might call an unheard melody. Once we hear in Nathan’s ending, “eyes in ecstasy,” the distant echo of his version of the story’s title, “Spring, in a Surrey,” the narrative has unknowingly come full circle in the mind of the reader. To use Keats’s idiom, our eyes and ears have made a full turn around the urn.

ON READING NATHAN’S ABE

Nathan’s poetic turns are perhaps the most bold and experimental in his 1966 translation of Abe Kōbō’s 1950 short story “Akai mayu”—a

surreal, absurdist, and existential first-person narrative about, among other things, homelessness. It ends with the protagonist finding a home, but inside a cocoon that completely envelops his body and wherein time is stopped at eternal sunset. Nathan's translation of the opening lines goes beyond Abe's original, channeling its spirit by pushing the envelope of English prose to represent the sound of the narrator's mental anguish:

[Abe] 日が暮れかかる。人はねぐらに急ぐときだが、おれには帰る家がない。おれは家と家との間の狭い割目をゆっくり歩きつづける。街中こんなに沢山の家が並んでいるのに、おれの家が一軒もないのは何故だろう？……と、何万遍かの疑問を、また繰り返しながら。¹⁹

[Nathan] The day is dying, time for men to hurry home: but I have no place to go. I slowly walk the narrow crack dividing house from house and wonder-wonder-wonder how there can be so many and none, not one, for me.²⁰

In a fashion similar to Keene's approach with Yokomitsu, in 1986 Lane Dunlop (1937–2013) produced a more literal translation of Abe's short story, representing each grammatical constituent and mirroring the syntax of the original Japanese:

[Dunlop] The sun is starting to set. It's time when people hurry home to their roosts, but I don't have a roost to go back to. I go on walking slowly down the narrow cleft between the houses. Although there are so many houses lined up along the streets, why is there not one house which is mine? I think, repeating the same question for the hundredth time.²¹

In his version Nathan compresses the four sentences in Japanese into two rhythmic sentences in English; Dunlop reproduces them in five. Nathan's approach would seem to anticipate Edward Seidensticker's (1921–2007) view on translating sentences, which he voiced in a 1998 round-table

¹⁹ Abe Kōbō, "Akai mayu," in *Kabe* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1951), 220–224.

²⁰ John Nathan, trans., "Red Cocoon," by Abe Kōbō, *Japan Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (April 1966): 217–219. I thank Haruko Iwasaki for teaching Abe's story in Japanese to me as an undergraduate in 2003, and using Nathan's translation as an example of what a great translator can do.

²¹ Lane Dunlop, trans., *A Late Chrysanthemum: Twenty-one Stories from the Japanese* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1986), 159–162.

discussion with Nathan and two other esteemed translators of Japanese literature, Edwin McClellan (1925–2009) and Howard Hibbett (1920–2019): “There is a kind of translator who insists you must translate sentence by sentence, and when you come to a period in the original, you come to a period in translation, not before and not after—precisely then. I think that’s nonsense.”²² Back in 1966, it would seem that Nathan, too, had thought that was nonsense.²³

The differences between their versions of Abe’s opening sentence—including where to put the period—are striking: Dunlop’s version merely describes the time of day, sunset; Nathan’s version does this too, but more poetically—lyrically—by carrying over the other meanings of *kureru*, “to darken” and “to end”: “The day is dying, time for men to hurry home.” By letting the opening line run into the next with a comma, the words “dying” and “time” are brought closer, suggesting that the end awaits all men. Nathan’s rendering of the second sentence reproduces the repetition in Abe’s original, but he experiments with the English—perhaps in admiration of modernist poetry—to find a creative idiom for thinking about the same question hundreds and thousands of times: “wonder-wonder-wonder.” Echoing this repetition, Nathan concludes the sentence with rhyme and rhythm: “how there can be so many and none, not one, for me.”

There are many other examples in “Red Cocoon” that showcase Nathan’s creative style, moments of suspension that force the reader to pause and, like Abe’s narrator, “wonder-wonder-wonder.” Even a simple stutter can be made to sound and feel more dramatic in Nathan’s voice:

[Abe] だが、何故 . . . 何故すべてが誰かのものであり、おれのものではないのだろうか？

[Nathan] But why-why-why is everything someone else’s and not mine?

[Dunlop] But, why . . . why does everything belong to someone else and not to me?

²² “Edward Seidensticker on Nagai Kafū and Kawabata Yasunari,” in Donald Richie, *Words, Ideas, and Ambiguities: Four Perspectives on Translating from the Japanese* (Chicago: Imprint Publications, 2000), 33.

²³ For more of Nathan on translation, see Richie, *Words, Ideas, and Ambiguities*, 51–68.

Dunlop carries over each word from Japanese into English, producing the same “why . . . why” in Abe’s original. Nathan amplifies Abe’s original with his translation “why-why-why,” echoing his earlier sonic creation “wonder-wonder-wonder.”

The repetition of “w” does not end there in Nathan’s translation. He takes even simple sentences and crafts his English prose so that it performs the madness and anxiety of the narrator, weaving the idea of his spinning thoughts into the fabric of language:

[Abe] 日が暮れかかる。おれは歩きつづける。

[Nathan] The day wanes. I walk: walk.

[Dunlop] The sun is setting. I keep walking.

The same sentence that opens Abe’s story—*hi ga kurekaku*—appears again in the middle of the narrative. Neither translator reuses his earlier translation of the same line—Nathan, “The day is dying”; Dunlop, “The sun is starting to set”—and opts for variation. Dunlop represents the echo in Japanese verb tenses—*kurekaku*, *arukitsuzukeru*—with “setting” and “walking” in English. Nathan refigures this echo, amplifying it in the alliteration of “w” in a series of words with a single beat: “waned . . . walk: walk.” Nathan’s translation of the second sentence in particular draws our attention, causing us to pause: “I walk: walk.” Our eyes stop at the colon only to find the same word on the other side, as if the word is looking at itself in the mirror. Instead of making the narrator state simply that he will keep walking—as Dunlop does in his version—Nathan’s translation enacts this movement, moving beyond Abe’s original, while at the same time forcing the reader to pause and look back.

Repetition continues throughout the narrative; at its horrific conclusion, the narrator’s limbs unravel into silk threads that slowly envelope his entire body, transforming it into a cocoon. In Abe’s Japanese prose, form mirrors content, as the sentences feel as sinuous as the winding threads:

[Abe] もうこれ以上、一步も歩けない。途方にくれて立ちつくすと、同じく途方にくれた手の中で、絹糸に変形した足が独りで動きはじめていた。するすると這い出し、それから先は全くおれの手をかりずに、自分でほぐれて蛇のように身にまきつきはじめた。左足が全部ほぐれてしまうと、糸は自然に右足に移った。糸はやがておれの全身を袋のように包み込んだが、それ

でもほぐれるのをやめず、胴から胸へ、胸から肩へと次々にほどけ、ほどけては袋を内側から固めた。そして、ついにおれは消滅した。

[Nathan] Already I can't move another step. I stand dead still, bewildered, and the thread in my bewildered hand, the thread that is my leg, began to move with a will of its own. It slithered out of my hand and to the ground, then wrapped around my body like a snake. When my left leg had unraveled completely the thread transferred itself to my right and soon enveloped my whole body in a silken bag yet continued even then to unwind, unraveling me as it filled the bag in from the inside. Then, finally, I was gone, extinguished.

[Dunlop] I can't take one more step. I don't know what to do. I keep on standing. In my hand that doesn't know what to do either, my leg that has turned into a silk thread starts to move by itself. It crawls out smoothly. The tip, without any help from my hand, unwinds itself and like a snake starts wrapping itself around me. When my left leg's all unwound, the thread switches as natural as you please to my right leg. In a little while, the thread has wrapped my whole body in a bag. Even then, it doesn't stop but unwinds me from the hips to the chest, from the chest to the shoulders, and as it unwinds it strengthens the bag from inside. In the end, I'm gone.

Abe's original paragraph comprises six sentences; Nathan transposes them into five sentences, Dunlop into ten. Much like the examples examined above, Nathan's version attempts to perform the structure, skeleton, attitude, or feeling—the unheard melody—of the original, which, here, is the snakelike motion of winding thread. The length and wordiness of Dunlop's version certainly gives the reader a sense of the sequence of events, much like a play-by-play in football. Nathan's prose, however, attempts to simulate the actual game in play.

For the Japanese phrase *tohō ni kureru*, Nathan finds the English idiom “bewildered,” which is more compact and easier to repeat in comparison to Dunlop's “I don't know what to do.” Nathan's translation really seems to sing in the way he renders the penultimate sentence: “the thread... enveloped my whole body in a silken bag yet continued even then to unwind, unraveling me as it filled the bag in from the inside.” Nathan orchestrates his words, placing the word “unraveling” at the heels of

“unwind,” mirroring the way *hodokete wa* immediately follows *hodoke* in the Japanese. He ends the sentence with a sound that we repeat in the same breath: “in from the inside.” Such choices give the sound of the sentence a form—a beat, a rhythm—that makes us attuned to the heard and unheard melodies. To be sure, Dunlop includes the corporeal details that Nathan, curiously, omits—“from the hips to the chest, from the chest to the shoulders”; but Dunlop’s version overall tends to include too much, at the risk of sounding wordy and doubling the number of sentences that appear in the Japanese. As a result, one might hear the repetition in Dunlop as more like a representation than a presentation of Abe’s original.

TILL I HEARD NATHAN SPEAK OUT LOUD AND BOLD

Nathan’s ability to take serpentine sentences in Japanese and reproduce them as long, winding sentences in English translation might be informed by his close reading of Henry James (1843–1916), an American novelist known for writing long and complex sentences. In the preface to *Light and Dark*, his 2016 translation of Sōseki’s 1916 novel *Meian*, Nathan writes that he attempted to “cure” his translation by using words and turns of phrases he pulled from James novels.²⁴ Elsewhere I have examined Nathan’s stylistic choices in *Light and Dark*, showing how he worked pithiness and brevity into a style of prose that generates poetic rhythm.²⁵

V.H. Viglielmo’s 1971 translation *Light and Darkness* had been the only English translation of *Meian* for over forty years before Nathan took it upon himself to produce his own version. After completing *Light and Dark*, Nathan was interviewed in 2018 by journalist Dreux Richard for the *Kyoto Journal*:

Richard: “What exactly are you expecting this book to *do*?”

Nathan: “To carry me back into the game.”

Richard: “What game is that?”

Nathan: “One worth playing, I hope.” “Worth reading.”²⁶

Nathan’s reply that he wanted to produce a work that was “worth reading” was perhaps, in part, a response to *Meian*’s—if not Sōseki’s—underwhelming reception among even the most experienced English

²⁴ Nathan, *Light and Dark*, 20.

²⁵ Matthew Mewhinney, “Translating ‘Jamesian Precisions’ in Natsume Sōseki’s *Light and Dark*,” *The Wenshan Review of Literature and Culture* 15, no. 1 (Dec. 2021): 77–113.

²⁶ Dreux Richard, “Last Light,” *Kyoto Journal* (Dec. 2018). <https://www.kyotojournal.org/in-translation/last-light/>

readers of Japanese literature in the postwar era. In his history of modern Japanese literature, Donald Keene (1922–2019) called *Meian* a “prolix and explanatory novel”—a description that might have turned away potential readers from opening the first page of the final work left by “modern Japan’s greatest novelist.”²⁷

By aspiring to produce a work that is “worth reading,” Nathan might also be hoping to give his reader the same feeling of wonder and discovery that the speaker in Keats’s poem “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” finds after reading a work of literature in translation:

Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;²⁸

British literary critic Lucasta Miller has discussed “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” as Keats’s “breakthrough poem,” describing it as “a poem about the potentiality of reading to inspire creative thought.”²⁹ I would hope that my brief examination of passages from two of Nathan’s earliest works of translation—“Spring, in a Surrey” and “Red Cocoon,” which might be called “breakthrough poems” in their own right—have shown how his voice speaks out loud and bold, and how his stylistic choices might inspire creative thought for future translators of Japanese literature.

In each case, I have tried to show how Nathan creates “turning points” in his translations, infusing them with rhythm to make them sing. This attention to rhythm in the translation of Japanese into English prose speaks to Yeats on the purpose of rhythm in poetry:

The purpose of rhythm, it has always seemed to me, is to prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake, which is the one moment of creation, by hushing us with an alluring monotony, while it holds us waking by variety, to keep us in that state of perhaps real trance, in which the mind liberated from the pressure of the will is unfolded in

²⁷ Donald Keene, *Dawn to the West: Japanese Literature of the Modern Era*, Vol. 1 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984), 346.

²⁸ John Keats, “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer.” Poetry Foundation, accessed January 2023, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org>.

²⁹ Lucasta Miller, *Keats: A Brief Life in Nine Poems and One Epitaph* (New York: Knopf, 2022), 26.

symbols. If certain sensitive persons listen persistently to the ticking of a watch, or gaze persistently on the monotonous flashing of a light, they fall into the hypnotic trance; and rhythm is but the ticking of a watch made softer, that one must needs listen, and various, that one may not be swept beyond memory or grow weary of listening; while the patterns of the artist are but the monotonous flash woven to take the eyes in a subtler enchantment.³⁰

Whether the rhythms in Nathan's translations are crescendos or soft ticks of a clock, they have the potential to seduce the reader, liberating the mind from the will and affording a long moment of contemplation. As I have tried to show, this experience can be dizzying as well as delightful. In this way, we might describe the experience of reading Nathan's translations as an "event" or "something that happens." English literature scholar Derek Attridge writes: "Meaning in a poem is something that happens, it's not a conceptual system or entity. Language's manifold powers are made even stronger in this way, and the staging of linguistic acts are given greater emotional resonance."³¹ What Nathan makes "happen" in translation is literature itself—an experience that the reader can hear as poetry, and if he or she is lucky like the speaker in Keats's poem, an experience that might be described as "when a new planet swims into his ken."

³⁰ Yeats, "The Symbolism of Poetry" (1900), in Yeats, *Poetry, Drama, and Prose*, 271–275.

³¹ Derek Attridge, *The Experience of Poetry: From Homer's Listeners to Shakespeare's Readers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 2.