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The Japanese Hobbit

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The Japanese Hobbit

Abstract

Tolkien, J.R.R. The Hobbit. Translations into Japanese.



The Japanese Hobbit by Robert Ellwood

A beautiful Japanese version of The Hobbit has recently appeared, translated by Teiji Seta and published by Iwanami. The binding and format are technically superb. Entitled Hobitto no Bōken ("The Adventure of the Hobbit"), the book may be ordered for \$3.50 from Tamura Shoten, 1-7 Kanda Jimbocho, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo, Japan.

This edition should become a collector's item even for those for whom the Japanese language is nothing but a mass of chicken-scratches. The marvelous illustrations by Ryuichi Terashima, executed with the taste and skill one would expect of Japan, are undoubtedly the best which have appeared anywhere. Rather than falling into the temptation of making Tolkien's characters merely cute, Mr. Terashima takes them with the seriousness to which the epic dimensions of Tolkien's work entitles them. Yet the opposite danger, of creating mere heroic archetypes (a failing of some of the art-work in The Tolkien Journal), is also avoided. Hobbit, dwarf, and wizard, Bilbo and Gollum, emerge in these sensitive line drawings as real, discrete personalities, "human" yet equal to the dimensions of the story. The illustrator's given name means literally "Dragon #1," and appropriately he begins the book on page one with his masterpiece, a colored frontispiece sketch of Smaug.

The translation is smooth, idiomatic, simple in vocabulary. Personally, I would have liked to have seen a little more effort to indigenize the world of Middle Earth by using oriental equivalents of wizards, elves, dwarves, trolls, and so forth. Possibilities abound in Eastern folklore. To have translated "wizard" (that is, Gandalf) as sennin, the title of the colorful Taoist "Immortals" who enrich the folklore and religion of China and Japan, or even as bosatsu (Buddhist bodhisattva), would for me have opened splendid new and universal vistas for the understanding of the story. The eight Taoist Immortals are persons who have achieved magical powers and eternal life through religious practices, and who now, dwelling in the "Heavenly Grottos" or wandering unobtrusively about the earth, work good in unexpected and marvelous ways, and are the subject of many a tale. Seta prefers, however, the literal but drab term mahōtsukai (actually "magician"). Other such words -- elf, dwarf, troll -- are just transliterated. Elf might have been tenjin,

Buddhist angel, and troll tengu or kappa, comparable ill-mannered spirits of mountains or lakes. But it may be, on the other hand, that Japanese readers prefer to expand their own horizons of imagination by entering the world of European folklore. At any rate, both text and illustrations maintain entirely the European setting; the hobbits sit in chairs, and eat with forks rather than chopsticks, like modernized Japanese. Seta does show some imagination in his rendering of "Gollum" -- rather than just transliterating, he used Gokuri, a Japanese onomatopoeic word for the sound of drinking or swallowing.

The six-page afterward by the translator reflects the spirit of a true Tolkien enthusiast, and contains a few critical observations of interest. I will present my translation of a few paragraphs.

(The Hobbit) is in fact a masterpiece of the fantasy type. It has even been said that it is destined to become a classic. If I were to speak for myself, I would say that, for as many uncounted years as the story has been passed on from the remote past of Bilbo Baggins to the present day, for that much longer in the future it ought to continue to be read. . .

The aforementioned Bilbo Baggins is one of the Hobbits, a race which has come into life wholly from the author's mind. I wonder (though it is only a guess) if the author may not once have seen a rabbit-hole, and then imagined the dwellings of the Hobbits. He says the Hobbit-hole is like a tunnel bored into the ground, and that a distinguishing feature of the Hobbit is brown hair growing abundantly on head and feet. They are expert at walking stealthily, and are timid in time of peace. Was not Mr. Baggins a young rabbit when he slid down on the troll, or when he jumped over the head of Gollum?

But even though the story mirrors traditions of northern Europe, or on the other hand suggests small animals, what raises admiration is that the characters -- though set against a deceptively marvelous world -- are nonetheless all definitely humanized. Now to say that fairies or Little People have been humanized is not to say they are like us. It is rather that one feels in them that warmth of heart, and high dignity, and a sense of movement which makes personality live, that makes us human. The hero, Bilbo Baggins, is mediocre like us in peacetime, conservative in his plans, timid, a little stupid, always making mistakes. But he is tempered through situations and events. He finds strength of heart, he devises stratagems, and finally comes to heroism. Moreover, while the world is a world of magic, magic is not used cheaply. (Indeed, there is no hint of calling on gods for easy rescue in emergency.) To the end Bilbo lives entirely out of his own powers. He grows by meeting difficulties with serious attention. We, like Bilbo, experiencing mixed joy and sorrow, are thrust into the midst of events, and in their course broaden our characters. Character grows like the annual rings of trees. Hence when we discover that little Baggins has become a poet we are surprised. A poet, in antiquity the noblest of men and beloved of the gods, is a person before whom even Gandalf had to take off his hat. Bilbo carries himself with high unself-conscious dignity, but we can clearly see how he became what he was at the end.

Even Gandalf, while an excellent magician, is portrayed not at infallible but as a soothsayer who employs deep wisdom. Thorin, heroic but haughty, is made to live as a chieftain troubled by the conflict between his desires and righteousness. Insofar as these are secondary roles, such characters illustrate the depth and range of the story.

This sort of fantasy is utterly different from trivial works of whimsical escapist fantasy which pursue the flutterings of butterflies or the sparks of



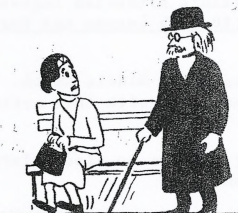
stars or the fragments of dreams, but like a great masterpiece of a tapestry worked by a hand which has woven together the whole mandala of heaven and earth, this fictional world, possessed of splendor and archetypes, spreads itself out as a separate universe. Whether in mountain or valley, under the earth or over a river, the magnificent plot-line maintains an alternating rhythm, now fast, now slow, until it suddenly changes at the end to become fast with the thrill of the ordeal by fire and the climactic battle. This tapestry is exceedingly brilliant, different from the average work, because it makes a design different from this world out of real grass, trees, and rocks taken from the living earth. . .

Thus, despite its setting and subject matter in remote antiquity, are we not impressed with a definitely modern feeling in the story? The characters are made into human beings like us, and the story is guided toward a warm-hearted conclusion, in a way unlike ancient literature. The humans who appear in the Nibelungen and Beowulf and the sagas and myths are no more than obstinate, strong-minded characters from beginning to end. Because of this, and because the tales are governed by a heavy destiny which inflexibly metes out retribution (lit: karma), the heroes can only be guided toward pitiable ends. In our story, too, many persons, such as Thorin, move toward death. But in the fight against evil, death and retribution are not the important issues. The issue is the faith and love and heroic spirit displayed by Bilbo. That is a magnificent and wise spirit which opens living portals toward the dimension of tragedy. . .

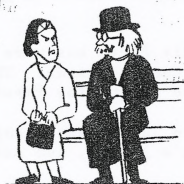
The translator ends with an account of J. R. R. Tolkien and the writing of The Hobbit, including a suggestion that there may be a half-unconscious contemporary allusion in the "wave attack" of the dragon on lake and town, which seems to him to "plainly duplicate the pattern of the fearful air-raids which we knew in the Second World War."* He concludes

*Of course The Hobbit was first published in 1937, before the Second World War, but aerial bombing would have been known from the then-recent wars in Spain and Ethiopia, as well as to a limited extent from the First World War.

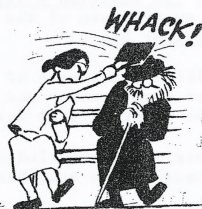
with an enthusiastic tribute, very well-deserved, to the illustrator, and a promise to translate the LOTR, which he mentions very briefly, if there seems to be a desire for it on the part of readers of the Japanese Hobbit. He says that, "as one utterly engrossed in imaginative tales like this," doing a translation of the great three-volume work is his ambition and dream. May he soon be enabled to bring that task to completion, and may the epic of Frodo and the Ring find many responsive readers in those beautiful islands which are, to us, the Uttermost West.



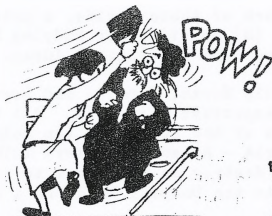
Tum-de-dum...hmm...
hmm...hmm...Walnettoes."



"Wanna come to a
Mythopoeic meeting?"



"Wanna buy a copy
of Mythlore?"



"Wanna make a hobbit
outa this?"

Zuber (D.M.)