

## 宮沢賢治の『革トランク』の英訳と一考察

ジョージ・ウォレス

### The Leather Trunk

A Translation of and Reflections on Kenji Miyazawa's 『革トランク』

George Wallace

Heita Saito went into the town of Naraoka that spring, and sat the entrance exams for its middle school, its agricultural college and its technical college. He was sure he had failed all three, but discovered that by some fluke he had been accepted by the technical college. Once there, he muddled his way through the first two years of study; then, in his third year, his supervisor who was hopeless at the abacus, made a mistake adding up his grades. Thanks to which Heita was able to sneak through and graduate.

Such things happen rarely in life.

After his graduation from the technical college, Heita was summoned back home to the family's farm by his father who was the village chief. With his father's consent, Heita hung up a sign by the gate advertising his services as an architectural planner. Before he knew it, two commissions had come Heita's way: one was for a two-story building to house the fire station and an advice bureau; the other was for a new village school.

Such things happen rarely in life.

It took Heita four days to draw up the plans for both buildings. Then he went around the villages asking all the carpenters to work for him. Finally work began. In his brown jodhpurs and his red tie, Heita went back and forth keeping an eye on the two sites as work progressed. The architectural plans were on display in his workshop. But strangely enough, whenever Heita appeared on site, the carpenters all avoided catching his eye, looking down, working in silence, with the oddest expressions on their faces. They all liked Heita, and besides he was paying them good wages, so it was odd they should act so strangely.

Such things happen rarely in life.

When Heita went to see how work was progressing at the new village school, the carpenters

bustled about, standing up one minute, squatting down the next; they really seemed to be enjoying themselves. But for some reason they didn't seem to want to walk from room to room.

Such things happen rarely in life.

When Heita went to see how work was progressing at the fire station, the carpenters bustled about, standing up one minute, squatting down the next; they really seemed to be enjoying themselves. But for some reason they didn't seem to want to go up or down stairs.

Such things happen rarely in life.

Work on the two buildings was coming along nicely. Heita skillfully used his workforce to ensure both came to completion on the same day.

Such things happen rarely in life.

At last the work was complete. The carpenters all sighed, looking down at the ground in silence. Heita tried to walk from the school's front hall to its classroom but found he couldn't; there was no corridor connecting them.

Such things happen rarely in life.

Heita was terribly disappointed. He rushed off to the fire station and first thoroughly checked downstairs. Then he wanted to have a look at the advice bureau on the first floor, but he just couldn't find a way up. There was no staircase.

Such things happen rarely in life.

By this time Heita was in a foul mood. He opened his wallet and looked inside. He had three shillings. So, dressed as he was in his jodhpurs, he took the ferry over the river, and walked into town where he boarded a train for Tokyo. He was running away. Once he got to the capital, all he had left was sixpence, and that he spent on two meals of tofu. Then he started looking for work. But wherever he went, it was no good: people couldn't understand his thick accent. Heita was in a tight fix. After three days looking fruitlessly for work, his mouth was all dry and cracked. He had been turned away from every door and factory he had knocked at until finally Heita Saito, the former graduate of Naraoka Technical College, passed out. In the street. A passing policeman threw a bucket of cold water over him, and the local municipal hall took him in and gave him something to eat. Whereupon Heita felt a whole lot better. They even gave him a job, as a fireman. Heita sent a postcard home to his family.

"I have had to come to Tokyo at short notice to carry out research into elevators and escalators. Until my research is complete, please kindly use the two buildings I was commissioned to design as they stand. Apologies for any inconvenience caused."

Heita's father, the village chief, did not send a reply. In the summer Heita fell ill with beriberi, and in the winter he came down with the flu. Two years went by. Gradually Heita got used to life in

the big city, and decided to turn his hand once more to his former métier of architectural planner. He found employment with the Hirazawa Construction Company. Their carpenters hated him. They would accidentally on purpose drop blocks of wood on him when he came on site. If he went upstairs to have a look at their work, they would pretend not to see him, banging into him with planks of wood. But in spite of this, Heita was enjoying life. He decided it was time he sent his family another card.

"Recently I have been promoted. In fact I am doing so well, they are paying me so much money I use it to paper my sliding screen. My research will soon be over, and I ask you all to bear with me just a little while longer."

His father did not send a reply. But then his mother fell ill. She talked of nothing but her darling son. There was nothing for it: the village chief reluctantly sent off a telegram to his son:

"Your mother is sick. Come home at once."

Heita had just received his monthly pay packet, and still had thirty shillings left in his wallet. After careful consideration, he bought a big leather trunk for twenty shillings. Apart from his one and only suit, which he was wearing, Heita had nothing to put in his trunk. He asked his boss if he could have some thirty odd old architectural drawings that were gathering dust on a shelf. He stuffed them into his new trunk, filling it up.

Such things happen rarely in life.

Heita took the train back to his hometown. Carrying his trunk, he got into a rickshaw and went through the town till they came to a row of pine trees on the main road where there was a turn-off for his village. When the rickshaw man saw how bumpy the road was, he refused to go any further. He collected his fare from Heita, then sped off back the way he had come. There was nothing for it: Heita picked up his big heavy trunk and started walking. Along by a fence of cypress trees, through fields of hemp, then of mulberries, Heita walked and walked, until finally he reached the jetty for the ferry which would take him across the river. Wires were stretched across the water from one bank to the other, fixed up with a pulley on either side, so the boat could glide over the water without any great effort from the ferryman. It was already evening and clouds were forming stripes in the sky as they moved quietly to the east. A black and white speckled wagtail flew low, skimming the silvery surface of the water that glistened like mercury. The wires over the river hung heavy, dipping down to touch the water, as a half dozen villagers sat in the ferry as it made its way to the yonder shore. On the riverbank evening primrose was in bloom. Heita slumped down and sat on his trunk on the grass, wiping the sweat from his brow, while he waited for the ferry to wind its way back across the river. His white linen shirt stuck to his back, drenched with sweat. Ears of corn appeared like wisps of smoke in the grass. All of a sudden, a group of children came running out of

the fields. Fascinated by Heita's trunk, they gathered around to get a closer look.

"Blimey! Tis all leather!"

"Cow leather, too, like!"

"That bent bit there, that be the skin from a cow's knee!"

And in fact, next to the lock on Heita's trunk, there was a piece of leather shaped exactly like a slightly bent knee. Heita listened in silence to the children's chattering, feeling so sad and lonely, he was on the verge of tears.

The ferry was drawing near. Holding up his hand to shade his eyes from the sun setting behind the white clouds behind the silhouetted figure on the shore, the ferryman stared at Heita as the distance between them gradually receded. Suddenly the ferryman realized that the gentleman dressed in white before him was none other than Heita, and he called out at the top of his voice:

"Ahoy! If it ain't Mr. Heita! It be grand to see you home again!"

It was all Heita could do not to burst into tears. With his trunk in his arms, Heita climbed aboard the ferry, which began to glide over the water at once. Back on the riverbank, the children were still talking about the trunk. The ferryman too would often sneak glances at it as he worked. Waves lapped at the sides of the boat as the wires whistled in the evening breeze.

Suddenly the river grew dark. The sun had set behind the clouds in the west. Two people were waiting on the far shore. As the boat pulled up, one of them ran down to the jetty.

"It be such a grand pleasure to see you home again, sir. Here, let me take your bag for you." It was the family retainer. Without saying a word, Heita handed over his trunk, blinking back his tears. The servant heaved the big heavy trunk up onto his shoulder, grimacing in pain. The two of them set off home through the mulberry fields to the accompaniment of the hum of mosquitoes.

They came to a wide road and had walked a short distance, when the village chief spotted them as he was leaving his office in the town hall. He set off after them, his lips turning into a wry smile when he saw his son's large trunk.

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#### Notes on the translation

This story is not one of Kenji Miyazawa's most famous, but it is fascinating for many reasons. The protagonist Heita Saito is clearly loosely based on Kenji himself. He has an uneasy relationship with his father who is an important man in a rural community. The son is obviously striving to achieve his father's approval, but without great success. The father's attitude towards his son can

be described as indifferent at best. He makes no great effort to communicate with Heita, not replying to either of his letters sent from Tokyo. Kenji's father was a pawnbroker, and was one of the wealthiest men in the small town in Iwate prefecture in northern Japan where the Miyazawa family lived. Kenji disapproved of the nature of his father's business, and left home to make his own way in the big city. His attempts to find work in Tokyo were not wholly successful, and he returned to his hometown, with his tail somewhat between his legs. He strove to improve the lot of the local farmers, but met indifference. So the similarities between Kenji's life and Heita's are manifold.

The tale ends in a typically Japanese understated way: there is no big finale, no climax scene where issues are worked through and resolved in a tempestuous, exciting way. There is a homecoming, but there are no tears of joy, no welcome party, no outpouring of emotion. Heita comes home to his unnamed village, to be met by an unnamed servant, while his unnamed father observes him from a distance and smiles an enigmatic smile to himself, the meaning of which is clear to no one but himself.

村長さんも丁度役場から帰った処でうしろの方から来ましたが、その大トランクを見てにが笑いをしました。

Is this the smile of an indulgent father who realizes his prodigal son has returned, and who is even now thinking of which fatted calf is to be slaughtered to celebrate this joyous event? I think not. Is it the smile of a father who realizes his son has failed miserably in his efforts to make his own way in the world and who is secretly relieved by his son's failure as it now means he will get to see more of him? Again, this seems unlikely. Is the father smiling because he realizes his son is too proud to admit his failure, and has only bought the big leather trunk in a feeble attempt to impress everyone back home? Or is it the smile of a father who is relieved to see his son's return as it reconfirms his own prejudices about the big bad world that lies beyond the narrow confines of his provincial backwater? Perhaps he has always felt it is better to be a big fish in a little pond (the village chief in a rural backwater) rather than a minnow in an ocean.

And how are we to translate this 苦笑い into English? Is it a wry smile or rather a sneer? Does Heita's father mock his son, laughing at him and his vanity, or is he laughing with him, acknowledging his disappointment at his son's lack of success, but accepting it with good grace and warmth? In a nutshell, is there any love in this smile? If it contains love, then Heita's homecoming may not be triumphant, and it certainly won't be raucous (his mother is ill, after all), but it will reestablish the bonds that hold the family together. If on the other hand, the smile does not contain any love, then it is a sign that Heita's return is something unwelcome, forced upon the father, who would prefer

not to have to see his son, a son whom he finds a disappointment, an embarrassment, even an annoyance.

Translating this phrase correctly is vitally important. It is the punch line, so to speak, the culmination of all that has gone before. It summarizes in one phrase what Heita Saito is all about: is he the spoilt son of a provincial bigwig who has indulged his son's whims, and helped him find work when his abilities did not deserve it? It does seem odd that this dimwit of a son should pass the entrance exam into a technical college, should graduate (thanks to a fortunate miscalculation of his test scores), and then should have two commissions immediately come his way to build public works in the village his father is top dog in. That is surely too much good fortune to be merely a coincidence. We might be forgiven for assuming his father's power and influence had something to do with this remarkable train of good fortune.

Or is Heita the dimwit son the village chief once tried to help, but has since given up on? Has he grown weary of his son's foolish ways and scornful of his vanity? The letters Heita sends from Tokyo go unanswered. His father does not attempt to engage his son in any form of dialogue. There are no congratulations on Heita's supposed promotion; there are no words of admonishment for running off to Tokyo and neglecting his duties as the architect of the village school and fire station. The father seems to be beyond caring, either one way or the other; he seems to have given up on his son. One of the most telling details in the story must surely be that the father is referred to more often by his title of village chief than as Heita's father. He is first and foremost the village boss. His role as father is secondary, and this distinction is surely felt by Heita himself.

In light of all this, it might be tempting to translate 苦笑い as 'sneer', but that would not do justice to the ambiguity of the original Japanese. In the English word 'sneer' it is patently clear just what sort of emotion is being conveyed: one of disgust and mockery. In my translation above I have translated it as 'a wry smile', as I feel it retains the ambiguity of the original, leaving the readers to decide for themselves just what feelings the sight of Heita and his trunk are arousing in his father's breast.

And just what sort of figure does Heita cut? If we try for a moment to put ourselves in his father's shoes, and look at Heita from his point of view, it may help us to understand what lies behind his wry smile.

The village of which he is the big cheese remains unnamed and we can only hazard a guess at where it might be, but as this is a Kenji Miyazawa story, we may safely surmise it to be somewhere not a million miles from Hanamaki, Kenji's hometown in Iwate prefecture. That it is a poor village and a remote one is clear: the taxi driver refuses to take Heita any further when he sees how bumpy and potholed the road is that leads to his village. Heita is forced to walk the remainder of

the way, crossing a river by ferry, before continuing on foot. In this rural backwater, we can imagine the role of village headman is one of great prestige. Heita has therefore grown up in a privileged position, enjoying a standard of living few of his fellow villagers could share in. His family has a servant. Although it remains uncertain just how much love and affection Heita has received from his father, we know for sure that to his mother Heita means the world. In her illness, she talks of nothing but her son, and wants him by her side. As a dutiful son, he returns immediately once he hears of her condition. We hear of no other brothers and sisters, which makes us think that Heita may well be an only son. If so, he would be responsible for continuing the family line, preserving its name and status. For this he seems remarkably ill-suited.

Heita is none too bright: he forgets to include stairs in his plans for a two-story building. He is irresponsible: he runs away to Tokyo when he is confronted by the impracticality of his designs. Instead of facing the music, and fixing the problem, Heita jumps on a train and leaves others to clean up his mess for him. He is vain: he wears fancy clothes such as jodhpurs and red ties. The irony is that in spite of his love of riding trousers, he never rides a horse, never even sees a horse, and yet he takes almost every other mode of transport available to him: the train, the taxi, and the ferry. The closest he gets to a horse is what some folk call 'Shanks pony' (a euphemism for his own two feet).

Heita's vanity is also apparent in his letters: he uses high faluting language, and tries to make his life seem much more glamorous than it really is. He claims he has been promoted and is earning so much paper money (implying his wages are high, as he is not paid in coins) that he sometimes uses some of his (bank)notes to cover his shoji screens. He is not beyond barefaced lying, either: he claims he has had to leave for Tokyo at short notice to conduct research (as if!) into elevators and escalators, which would have been the height of modern technology at the time, and hence very exotic items, especially to people living in rural Iwate. The irony is again there for all to see: Heita is the sort of fool that can design a two-story building without a staircase, and yet here he is, in his letter, boasting about his valuable work into the latest ways to get upstairs in tall buildings. He is too stupid to see how implausible his invented story is. It must be galling for his father to have to read such lies while confronted with the physical evidence of his son's incompetence every day in the village, the two unusable buildings he was commissioned to design.

In his hometown Heita is a rich boy, whose path in life is easy thanks to his father's position. This means he will never fit in and be accepted for what he is, as people will always see him in terms of being his father's son. His privileged background ensures his physical well-being, but isolates him and prevents him from making true friends in his own neighborhood. It is understandable when he decides to try his luck in the big city, but life is no easier for him there, either. Indeed, it

is much worse. The carpenters in his hometown felt unable to look Heita in the eye and tell him of the obvious flaws in his architectural plans. But at least they did not throw blocks of wood at him, like the carpenters in Tokyo did. In the big city Heita is simply a country bumpkin with his strong accent proving a distinct disadvantage when he first arrives in Tokyo and looks for work. Nonetheless he tries to dress as a dandy, wearing colorful ties and ridiculous riding trousers. No one takes the least notice of him, only the police and the municipal council who take him in and feed him when he is down and out. In effect, he is little more than a homeless beggar when he arrives in Tokyo. In the country he is a 'gentleman' and will have his bags carried for him by servants, while in the city he is a 'bumpkin' who will be bullied by the carpenters who work with him. In the country he is the man who designs the fire stations. In the city he simply works in one.