

A Translation of and Reflections on Kenji Miyazawa's tale *Obbel and the Elephant*

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宮沢賢治の『オツベルと象』の英訳と一考察

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Obbel and the Elephant

As told by a cowherd

The First Sunday

That Obbel is really something. He's got six threshing machines on the go the whole time, and boy, do they make a noise! What a din! *Chug-a-chug-chug, thump-diddy-thump, chug-a-chug-chug, thump-diddy-thump*, on and on, with sixteen farmhands working flat out, pumping the pedals with their feet, their faces all flushed and red. In goes the rice at one end and out spews a mountain of chaff at the rear. Yellow dust dances in the air like a sandstorm in a desert.

Obbel strolls up and down in his dark dingy workshop, puffing on a big amber pipe. With his hands clasped behind his back, he squints down at his pipe to make sure none of the ash falls on the straw at his feet.

The workshop is a well-built barn the size of a small school, but when those threshing machines are going full belt, the barn walls hum and vibrate so much, it's enough to give you a hearty appetite. Obbel feels it so keenly, he often eats a six-inch sirloin steak or an omelette the size of a man's hankie for his lunch.

I couldn't tell you how it came about, but one day out of the blue a white elephant suddenly showed up. Unbelievable, eh? A real white elephant, he was, the real McCoy.

'Where did he come from?' That's what you're thinking, aren't you? Well, I guess, being an elephant and all, he just simply moseyed on down from the mountain as the mood took him.

You should have seen the farmhands' faces when that elephant stuck his head in the door! They went as white as a sheet! Why? Well, it's obvious, isn't it? They didn't have a clue what

the elephant was going to do next. They didn't want to get involved in any argy-bargy, now, did they? So, on they went with their work, concentrating as hard as they could on threshing the rice.

Standing behind one of the threshing machines, with his hands stuck in his pockets, Obbel sneaked a glance at the elephant. Then he quickly looked away again and went back to pacing up and down as before.

The elephant lifted a leg and plonked it down on the barn floor. The farmhands were bricking it. But they had stuff to do, and besides, they didn't fancy taking the elephant on, so they just ignored him as best they could and cracked on with their work.

Obbel was standing in the gloom at the back of the barn. He took his hands out of his pockets and cast another glance at the elephant. Then, trying to look as bored as he possibly could, he let out a big yawn and folded his hands behind his head. Just then the elephant swung another leg forward and climbed up into the barn. The farmhands jumped out their skins, and as for Obbel, he went a lighter shade of pale, huffing and puffing away on his big amber pipe for all he was worth.

As cool as a cucumber, the elephant climbed into the barn and wandered over to the threshing machines. They showered him with a stream of rice husks which battered his face like hail stones. The elephant screwed up his small eyes as if annoyed with it all, but looking carefully, you could see he was in fact smiling.

Obbel walked over to the elephant and was about to say hello when suddenly the elephant spoke in a beautiful clear voice.

"It's no good! These machines keep spitting in my face, and it hurts."

It was true. Rice husks were flying into his face, covering his head and neck with a fine layer of dust.

Taking his pipe from his lips, Obbel stiffened his sinews, summoned up his blood and asked the elephant, "Do you like it here?"

"Yes, I do," the elephant replied.

"What would you say to staying a while?"

The farmhands held their breath and watched, their eyes like saucers. Even Obbel was shaking in his boots.

"Yes, that would be nice," the elephant replied nonchalantly.

"Really? You'd like that, would you? Well, that's settled, then!" Obbel said overjoyed, running his hands through his hair.

Do you see what he just did there? From that moment on, the elephant *belonged* to Obbel. If he wanted to, Obbel could set him to work or even sell him to a circus. Either way, Obbel

stood to earn a pretty penny by it.

The Second Sunday

That Obbel is really something. And that elephant he's got working for him, he's something else, too. He has the strength of twenty horses. His ivory tusks are beautiful and white. His elephant hide is good and strong, and, what's more, he's a real hard worker. It's his owner who reaps the rewards, though.

"What would you say to a new watch?" Obbel asked, walking over to the elephant's log hut, with his pipe between his lips and a frown on his face.

"I've no need for a watch," the elephant replied with a smile.

"Give it a go, and see what you think," Obbel said, hanging a big cheap watch around the elephant's neck.

"It looks nice," the elephant said.

"You'll need a chain to go with it," Obbel added, and before you knew it, he had tied a two-hundred-pound chain to the elephant's front legs.

"It's a very nice chain, too," the elephant said.

"What would you say to some shoes?"

"Oh, I don't bother with shoes."

"Give them a go, and see how you get on," Obbel said, fastening a pair of red papier-mâché shoes to the elephant's hind legs.

"They're very nice, aren't they?" the elephant said.

"Umm, there's something missing. We need to make those shoes look a bit smarter. I know! I've got *just* the thing!" In the twinkling of an eye, Obbel had attached two-hundred-pound buckles to the elephant's new shoes.

"They look nice!" the elephant said happily, walking as best he could.

The next day the elephant walked about as pleased as punch with his new presents. But sadly, the watch and the papier-mâché shoes soon fell to pieces. They were useless.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but what with all the taxes they slap on us these days, I don't suppose you could help out a bit and get us some water from the river, could you?" Obbel asked the elephant, clasping his hands behind his head and frowning.

"Sure, no problem. I can do that for you. Just tell me how much you want," the elephant said with a smile. Within the space of a few hours, he had drawn fifty buckets of water from the river and poured them on the vegetable patch.

That evening, the elephant went back to his hut and ate ten bales of straw. Looking up at the three-day-old moon, he said, "It feels good to have done a day's work."

The next day, Obbel went to the elephant's hut. His hands were buried deep in his pockets.

"Sorry about this, but they've gone and put up my taxes again. You couldn't get some firewood from the forest for us today, could you?"

"Sure, no problem. The weather's fine today and I love the forest!" the elephant said with a smile.

Obbel was so knocked back by this, he almost dropped his pipe. He watched as the elephant sloped off, and then wandered back to see how the farmhands were getting on.

That day the elephant brought back nine hundred bales of firewood. In the evening, he ate eight bales of straw. He looked up at the four-day-old moon.

"Whew, I'm whacked," he murmured to himself.

The next day Obbel was back.

"Sorry, but they've gone and doubled my taxes, and then doubled them again! You couldn't go to the smithy for us today and make us some charcoal, could you?"

"Sure, no problem. If I set my mind to it, I could send stones flying with just one puff!"

Obbel was caught off-guard for a moment, but quickly regaining his composure, he smiled.

The elephant ambled off to the smithy, where he knelt down on his front legs and made charcoal for hours on end, blowing the furnace, keeping it piping hot.

That evening back in his hut, the elephant ate seven bundles of straw as he looked up at the five-day-old moon.

"I'm tired, but happy."

The next day, the elephant made even more money for his boss. He ate five bundles of straw. No one feels full of beans on just five bundles a day, do they?

Elephants are cheap to keep. Obbel is one smart cookie. He really is a piece of work.

The Fifth Sunday

Well, I could see it coming, and sure enough it did — one day Obbel's luck ran out.

Sit yourself down and I'll tell you what happened.

You remember that elephant I was telling you about? Well, Obbel started treating him a bit *too* harshly. He treated him so badly in fact the elephant lost his smile. Sometimes the elephant would just stand there, looking down at Obbel with red bleary eyes.

One evening, the elephant was in his hut, eating three bales of straw, looking up at the ten-day-old moon.

"I can't take much more of this."

The next evening, the elephant was slumped on the ground in his hut. He'd collapsed. He didn't even have the energy to eat straw. He looked up at the eleven-day-old moon.

“Farewell,” the elephant said.

“What did you say? *Farewell?*” the moon replied.

“I’m not long for this world.”

“What’s *wrong* with you? For someone so big and strong, you’re a bit slow off the mark, aren’t you? Why not write a letter asking for help?” the moon suggested with a smile.

“I don’t have a pen or paper!” the elephant wailed.

“Here you are,” said a sweet voice. Looking up, the elephant saw a little boy in a red coat. He was holding a pen and paper. The elephant didn’t waste another moment.

“I’m being badly treated. Please rescue me!”

The boy took the letter and headed straight to the forest.

It was lunchtime when he arrived. The mountain elephants were playing chess in the shade of a tree. When they saw the letter, they put their heads together and read what it said.

“I’m being badly treated. Please rescue me!”

The elephants jumped to their feet, and with faces black with thunder, they began to bellow and roar.

“Let’s go get him!” the boss elephant shouted.

“Let’s go!” they all trumpeted in reply.

They went absolutely bananas, hurtling off down the mountain like fireworks exploding, tearing up trees by their roots as they went. When they caught sight of Obbel’s mansion’s yellow roof, their fury knew no bounds.

It was one-thirty. Obbel was enjoying an afternoon nap on his leather couch. He was dreaming of crows. The elephants were making such a noise, the farmhands stepped out from the barn to see what it was. It looked like a tsunami of elephants coming towards them faster than a steam train. With the blood draining from their faces, the farmhands ran screaming.

“Boss! Boss! Elephants are coming! There are hundreds of them!”

You have to hand it to Obbel, though. He’s cut from a different cloth to the rest of us. The moment he opened his eyes, Obbel knew what was up.

“Is our elephant in his hut? He is? Good! Right, shut the door. Go on, get it shut this minute! Close the door of the elephant hut, I’m telling you! Now, go and fetch some logs. Let’s barricade him in. That’ll teach him! Tie the logs and put them down there! We’ll show him what we’re made of. He’s not been pulling his weight. That’s the ticket. Get another half-dozen logs and put them down there. That’s good. We’re in business. Keep calm, people, we’re going to be okay. Right, next up is the gate. Lock the gate and put the bar across! That’s the way. That’ll keep it nice and strong. Alright, everyone, there’s no need to worry. We’re going to be fine, so let’s stayed focused!”

The farmhands were in no mood to put up a fight. They had no intention of getting caught up in a quarrel their boss had started. They wrapped their arms in anything white they could find: towels, handkerchiefs, anything at all vaguely white, whether clean or dirty, it made no difference to them. They simply wanted the elephants to see they were ready to surrender.

Obbel was running about like a headless chicken. Even his dog was getting hot under the collar, barking madly as if a fire had been lit under him. Soon the ground started to shake and the air darkened. The elephants had surrounded Obbel's home.

"You can relax now. We've come to save you!"

"Thank you! I'm so happy you're here!"

Hearing his voice, the elephants bellowed and trumpeted even louder than before, as they ran round and round the wall surrounding Obbel's house. Some angrily swung their trunks like swords, but it made no difference — the wall was made of steel-reinforced concrete — even the elephants couldn't break it down.

Inside his compound, Obbel stood all alone, shouting at the top of his voice. The farmhands were huddled in small groups, looking sorry for themselves. Some of the elephants took up position next to the wall and let their friends use their backs to climb up. When they reached the top of the wall, Obbel could see the whites of their eyes. When his dog saw the elephants' large wrinkly grey faces peering down at him, he collapsed in a faint.

Obbel fired six shots with his pistol, but his bullets couldn't pierce the elephants' thick hide.

"What a darn nuisance!" said one of the elephants. "That hit me in the face."

Obbel remembered having heard words like these somewhere before. He took a cartridge of bullets from his belt. One of the elephants had managed to get his front legs over the wall, and others soon followed. Five elephants came flying into Obbel's garden in one fell swoop, dropping out the sky.

Obbel was flattened, with his bullets still in his hand.

The gate was thrown open and the elephants came storming in.

"Where's the prisoner?"

They surged forward towards the elephant's wooden hut. They snapped the logs that were piled up and threw them aside. Out staggered the white elephant, nothing but skin and bones.

"You're safe now, my friend, but, my, how *skinny* you are!"

The elephants removed the chain and buckles from his feet.

"That's better! Thank you so much! You've really saved my bacon!" the white elephant said, with a sad little smile on his face.

"Careful! Don't go playing in the river!"

Notes on the story

The story begins with a name, a man's name, and it isn't Bond, James Bond, it's Obbel. Or is it? John Bester translated it as Ozbel, and Ryoji Arai as Otber. However you decide to transliterate the Japanese オツベル into English, the end result will remain distinctly non-Japanese. It's a foreign-sounding name (to Japanese ears) and it's not clear whether it is a surname or a given name. When I first read it, it reminded me of the German car maker Opel, but beyond that it rang no bells with me.

The eponymous hero (or villain) is clearly not supposed to be a native of Japan. Not only does his name point to foreign parts, but also the lie of the land, the animals that live there, and the buildings that appear all lead us to draw the conclusion that this is a story set in some land far from Iwate, across the seas and far away. Maybe it is supposed to be India or somewhere thereabouts where elephants are put to work. No place names appear in the tale, but we learn of there being white elephants, mountains and plains and rivers, of yellow roofs and steel-enforced walls, of leather couches and thick sirloin steaks. As an Englishman I can say with some certainty it's definitely not England. Obbel likes thick sirloin steaks? Eating beef would rule out India. Obbel's house is made of stone, and not wood. He pays high taxes. His farm machines thresh rice not wheat, so it's more likely to be somewhere in Asia than somewhere in Europe.

This is a story written by a Japanese man, aimed at a Japanese readership, written in the Taisho era (1912-1926) when Japanese people had little direct contact with non-Japanese. Obbel the villain of the piece is not Japanese. How would this story have fared if it had been entitled *Suzuki and the Elephant*? It is difficult to say what sort of reception it would have received, but we can safely assume it would not have gone down well with anyone called Suzuki. For a writer looking to sell his work in Japan, it would clearly not be wise to alienate a large number of the buying public.

This tale starts with a line that at first glance is a bit mystifying: "As told by a cowherd". And it ends with another equally enigmatic line: "Careful! Don't go playing in the river!" What are we to make of these two lines that frame the story?

One interpretation might be that this is a story being told to a group of children by a cowherd. The children were playing in the fields when they met a farmer looking after some cattle. The farmer asked them if they wanted to hear a story. Much in the same way as Charles Dodgson asks Alice Liddell and her sisters if they wanted to hear a story as they played on the

banks of the river near Oxford. The story we the readers are reading is a story being told to children. Just as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* started as a story told to three sisters one summer's day in 1862.

When the cowherd finishes his story, he warns the children not to play in the river. As an adult he knows how much kids love to splash about in water, but also how dangerous that can be if they are unsupervised. The farmer doesn't want the children to run the risk of drowning.

This is just one possible reading of the opening and closing lines, but it ties in with what we know about Kenji Miyazawa. He grew up in the countryside of Iwate, he liked telling stories and he wanted to educate people. He was born into wealth, but chose to be a highschool teacher and also a farmer.

The cowherd (and Miyazawa) are telling a story to children. It is being spoken aloud. It should entertain its young audience. It needs to contain humour and surprise to keep the children from growing bored. It should be easy to understand but contain characters and themes that the children will find intriguing.

So, the hero is a man who has a strange name. The name will pique the children's interest. It's a name they will never have heard before. It doesn't sound like any names they know. They will wonder where Obbel is from.

The story is about Obbel employing sixteen farmers to work at his threshing machines.

In the Taisho era Japan was seeing a shift from agriculture to manufacture, and children would have been aware that working on the land was hard and often did not bring in enough money to support a family. In Tohoku families had to sell daughters in times of famine. Working the land was too fraught with risk to remain the only viable option for a career. Children would not have the option of school until sixteen. They would have to grow up much earlier than children do today.

The cowherd wants to keep the children's attention, so he introduces a fantastical element: one day a white elephant walks into the barn where the sixteen farmers are working at the threshing machines. And there is the element of surprise: this is not just any old elephant, it is a white elephant. Children might never have seen a real elephant or even a picture of an elephant, but they would surely have known that elephants are grey.

Children want to ask questions. Here they will be asking the cowherd, "Why's he called Obbel?" and "Why is the elephant white?"

In the story itself, we read the line:

'Where did he come from?' That's what you're thinking, aren't you?

The cowherd is speaking directly to the children gathered around him. He can see their faces and their looks of incredulity when they hear that an elephant walked into the barn. He

addresses their concern and answers their unspoken question.

The cowherd wants to make the children laugh, or at least smile, but at the same time he is telling them a story that deals with serious subjects that are no laughing matter: abuse and cruelty; slave labour and exploitation.

The cowherd can be read as a cipher for the author. In other words, the cowherd is Kenji Miyazawa. He is a farmer in the fields, but he is keen to entertain and educate the children he sees. He was the son of a wealthy pawnbroker and grew up in comfort, but Miyazawa clearly felt sympathy for the downtrodden and the underdog, the poor families who had to sell their meagre belongings to the pawnbroker when they had nothing to eat. His depiction of the well-off landowning class as represented by Obbel is almost worthy of a Marxist. But framing the story as a political diatribe would negate its effectiveness. The children would lose interest, not understanding the terminology, and not engaging with the plot.

But there is clearly a message here, a message Miyazawa wants the children to grasp.

Obbel lives a life of wealth and ease because he gets others to do his work for him. Obbel is a factory-owner. He employs sixteen farmers. We never learn their names. They have nothing much to say. They get on with their work and keep their heads down. When danger comes unexpectedly to their barn (in the form of the elephant) they are frightened but do nothing. They pump the pedals that drive the threshing machines. They are the power that drives the machine, but there their power ends. They are powerless to prevent Obbel from exploiting them. They are powerless when the unexpected (white elephant) comes. They are powerless when the elephants attack. They are the downtrodden who have no voice. Or, to be more precise, they have a voice, but they do not use it. They accept their fate and do nothing to make any changes to the status quo. They are so passive in their behaviour, you can only wonder how they will survive at the end of the story when their employer has died. They have become so accustomed to being ordered about, they will find it difficult to survive on their own. Their lack of assertiveness has allowed one man (Obbel) and his dog to live off the fruit of their labour. They are not slaves in name, but in practice they are. They have no identity of their own and remain nameless and faceless. We learn nothing about them but that they feel no loyalty to Obbel. They will not fight for their boss, as they clearly feel no allegiance to him.

Obbel oppresses the poor farmers and grows rich from their labour. He eats steak. He has a leather couch. His wall is reinforced with steel. The many are made to toil while the few enjoy the fruits of that endeavour. The sixteen farmhands (sixteen!) go red in the face worn out by the exertion of working the threshing machines. They sweat and toil while Obbel walks about puffing on his pipe, with his hands stuffed into his pockets (to keep them clean perhaps). There is no dirt under his fingernails, that's for sure. Pomade perhaps.

When Obbel is not scoffing down a six-inch sirloin steak or a enormous omelette for his lunch, he is taking a siesta. And when his mouth is not busy giving out orders or chewing on food, it is kept busy with a pipe. Obbel's pipe is not a cheap, run-of-the-mill clay pipe. No, the big man needs a big ostentatious pipe that will show people how rich he is. Obbel's pipe is a big amber pipe. The size and the material act as markers of his wealth and status.

But it is only when the white elephant arrives and begins to work for Obbel that the children will begin to see how the system works. Farmers being exploited by pawnbrokers was the natural order of things in rural Japan in the Taisho era. To show the young audience that this 'natural order' was a system set up by the few to exploit the many, Miyazawa introduces a character the children will instantly fall in love with: a white elephant with a gentle character and a willingness to help others.

Not content with exploiting his workers, Obbel snaps up the chance to use the elephant for his own economic benefit. He works the poor creature into the ground to such an extent, the elephant is ready to curl up and die within a month.

But this is not a political text. It does not seek to make us feel revulsion at the factory-owner Obbel. It seeks to paint him as vain and ridiculous, and as an object of fun. We should not hate him or despise him, we should pity him for his lack of humanity and for his miserable lonely existence. He has no friends. He has no wife. He has no children. His only companion is a dog. Who does he talk to when he eats his steak? Who does he share his joys and his worries with?

To make the story entertaining, we need to have a rousing finale and we want the bad guy to get what's coming to him. Obbel is a villain and he deserves to meet a sticky end. But his death should not be a grisly death but a comic death, one that will make children squeal with delight at the ridiculousness of it all.

Obbel dies when he is crushed under the weight of five elephants that jump down from the wall around his house. It is worthy of a scene from a comic book or a children's cartoon like Tom and Jerry. In the cartoon-like finale the 3-D villain turns into a 2-D corpse.

This tale is similar in many ways to *The Restaurant of Many Orders*. There is the same focus on self-centered men only interested in themselves and their status; men who treat the world and the creatures in it with scant regard or respect for others' well-being; men whose short-sightedness and stupidity bring them to ruin (or to the brink of ruin).

In these stories Kenji Miyazawa is trying to show children the dangers of being selfish, of being obsessed with wealth and status, and of being unconcerned about the plight of others. If we want to survive, we need to live in harmony with our surroundings, respecting the right of all animals (and not just humans) to live in peace.

The joy of Miyazawa's work lies in the humour with which he delivers his message. Without a leavening of wit and irony, the stories would fall into the category 'worthy but dull' and would earn our respect but not our love. Within a short time they would soon be forgotten. Miyazawa manages to suffuse his stories with enough drollery and acute observation of man's (or perhaps more accurately, men's) foibles to keep us coming back to his work again and again. His characters are deeply flawed but eminently human, and because they are drawn with a gentle touch and with warmth and with wit, we find it impossible to hate them. Obbel is a villain, but he is also a figure of fun. He huffs and he puffs as best he can, trying to act the big boss, fidgeting with his hands in constant motion, going in and out of pockets and through his hair (but doing no constructive work). It is obvious to the reader how nervous and unsure of himself he feels in spite of all his bluster. He suggests things and is mightily relieved when no one (including the white elephant) refuses. He can scarcely believe his luck. He orders his men about but knows he is skating on thin ice; he knows they do not love him, nor feel any bond to him. He is aware how fragile, how precarious his position is. If the sixteen farmers decided to stand up to him, he would be powerless to fight back. His dog and his gun are his only ways of maintaining the status quo.

If he were a Marxist, Miyazawa would denounce Obbel as an oppressor of the proletariat. Thankfully he is nothing of the sort and shows Obbel warts and all. He pokes fun at Obbel's appetite for a high protein diet of steak and eggs despite doing not an ounce of manual work; at his inability to inspire any loyalty in his staff who leave him to his fate when the elephants attack; at his pathetic attempt to halt a herd of rampaging elephants with a handgun.

The story ends with Obbel's death and the white elephant's rescue, but there is no jubilation, only relief. The white elephant is safe. He will return to the mountains where he will recover from his ordeal and regain weight. The fate of the farmhands is left hanging in the air. What will become of them?

Unless they learn to think for themselves and to work together to build a fairer society, they will no doubt end up working for another factory-owner who will exploit them and work them into the ground.

The satisfaction the children listening to the cowherd's tale will feel when they see justice being done will be enough for them to go home happy to have heard a story that entertained them. The message that Kenji Miyazawa will want children to take away with them is the need for us all to build a fairer and more egalitarian society where no one is made to work like a slave.