

Takasebune
(English Translation of Mori Ogai's *Takasebune*)

森鷗外の『高瀬舟』

Translators: Takumi KASHIMA & Loretta LORENZ

明治・大正期を代表する作家の森鷗外（1862-1922）は、1862年に島根県の津和野に生まれた。家は、代々津和野藩の典医を務めていた。1881年に19歳8ヶ月で東京大学医学部を卒業し、陸軍に入る。ドイツ留学（1884－1888）後に執筆活動を始める。『舞姫』は初期の代表作で、ドイツから帰国直後に鷗外を追って来日したエリーゼ・ヴィーゲルトが素材の一つになっていることは有名である。1899年から1902年の小倉赴任後には、歴史小説の分野に進む。その転機となったのは、時代が明治から大正に代わった時の乃木希典の殉死で、鷗外は『興津弥五右衛門の遺書』を書いた。鷗外の歴史小説は、1916年の『渋江抽斎』として結実する。1916年に陸軍を退官。1919年には帝国美術院の初代院長に就任する。

『高瀬舟』は1916年に書かれた。弟殺しの罪で遠島を申し渡された喜助と彼を護送する同心、羽田庄兵衛。鷗外は、二人が高瀬舟の中で交わす会話で安楽死の問題を提起している。

In Kyoto there used to be a small boat called Takasebune that moved up and down the Takase River. In the days of the Tokugawa rulers, criminals of the area are sentenced to exile. Relatives of the prisoner were called and permitted to meet him at the jailhouse to say their last goodbye. Then the exile-to-be would be put on board the Takasebune headed for Osaka. The prisoner's escort for this trip was a minor official of the Kyoto magistrate's office called a *doshin*, who would give permission for one close relative, some representative of the family, to accompany the fellow on his journey. This was not something decreed from above, but it prevailed as a custom—with tacit approval.

Of course the offense committed by the convict sent into exile was considered grave, but exile was certainly not only for those who had set fires to conceal murder for theft, or for consummate villains who had committed countless horrendous crimes. Over half of the prisoners on the boat were people who had been convicted for what we might call human mistakes, people who had unwittingly committed some serious offense. As a random illustration, we could choose the case, not uncommon, of a pair of lovers attempting double suicide, but in which the man succeeds in killing the woman, while he himself somehow survives.

As it was, they would put such convicts on the Takasebune around the time the night curfew bell could be heard, and sail away. The houses of Kyoto City lining both sides of the river would be steeped in black as the boat moved eastward to where the Takase intersects the Kamo River and sail on down. In the boat the convict and his relative usually talked over the man's case through the night. Always, always they grieved for the exile

of no return as they talked over the circumstances of his life and punishment. The *doshin* beside them listened to the conversation of the exile and his companion and learned the tragic details of the story of each prisoner and his family. Indeed the *doshin* was more familiar with the case than those officials who had heard only the court testimony or read the deposition of the accused from behind their desks and could not in a million years perceive the real circumstances of a person they were about to judge.

Among the men employed as *doshin*, there were many different types. If one rather detached *doshin* thought the talk irksome and didn't listen, there would be another more softhearted *doshin* who would feel pity and identify in an unspoken way with the pain of the prisoner. In some cases, if a prisoner's situation and that of his family had been exceptionally cruel, a Takasebune escort of a compassionate nature assigned to the role would not be able to hold back his tears.

For that reason, the job of Takasebune escort was considered unpleasant work and was not sought after by his comrades at the magistrate's office.

It is not clear when the events in this story occurred. Probably it took place during the Kansei Period, when Sadanobu Matsudaira ruled in Edo. On a soft spring evening when the sound of Chioin's temple bell wafted over the scattering cherry blossoms, a most unusual convict was being placed on board the Takasebune. Going by the name of Kisuke, he was a man of just thirty years old, with no fixed address. Since no relations had called for him at the jailhouse, he was all alone as he boarded the boat, except for the boatman and of course the *doshin*.

The *doshin* assigned to accompany him, one Haneda Shobei by name, had heard only that this Kisuke had committed the crime of murdering his younger brother. Well then. All the way from the jail to the Sanbashi pier, Shobei's observation of the pale, emaciated prisoner seemed to reveal a meek, quiet man who respected his, Shobei's, authority without the least defiance, no matter what he might be subjected to by the other. As a matter of fact, among the run-of-the-mill convicts, who were inclined to show false respect toward their captors, one would never find such a sincerely docile attitude.

Shobei found this puzzling. For that reason, from the moment of boarding the boat, he went beyond his assigned role for once, and kept a close watch on Kisuke's behavior.

Around dusk that evening, the wind subsided, and in the sky a thin swatch of cloud blurred the edges of the moon, as the warmth of coming summer turned to a mist that seemed to rise from the river bed and from the banks on either side. In the hushed stillness, the only sound that could be heard as they left Shimogyo-machi behind and moved down the Kamogawa River was the soft lapping of the water against the prow of the boat.

Even though the criminals were allowed to sleep, Kisuke seemed to have no thought of lying down, but with eyes raised to the sky silently followed the shadowy, shifting clouds as they drifted across the moon. His brow was clear, in his eyes a shimmering radiance.

Shobei was not looking directly at him, yet his eyes never left Kisuke's face. To himself, Shobei kept saying "This is so odd, so odd." No matter from what angle he marked the man's face, it looked pleased. It was as though, mused Shobei, if he had not been under the constraint of being regarded as a murderer, he would have begun to whistle or burst into song.

Shobei thought it over. Who knows how many times the Takasebune had plied these waters on such a mission, with himself as *doshin*? However, the criminals on board were almost invariably the same, so miserable of aspect that you couldn't bear to look at them. But how did this fellow happen to be the way he was? His was a face one would be more likely to see on a cruise boat. His crime was fratricide, and that brother may well have been a bad specimen, but whatever the reason, you would expect anyone with the least bit of feeling to have a heavy heart. Could this whey-faced, frail-looking individual actually be so utterly devoid of a human heart, a monster of evil such as the world seldom sees? Really, that's too hard to believe. Of course it's possible that he's off his head. No, no ... nothing in his way of talking and acting jibes with that. What happened with this man anyway? The more Shobei mulled over Kisuke's manner and mood, the less he understood.

After awhile, when Shobei's curiosity was peaked beyond endurance, he called out to him. "Kisuke. What are you thinking?"

"Yes!" replied Kisuke with a start, looking about him uneasily as if expecting some sort of reprimand. He straightened his back deferentially and turned to face the official.

Shobei felt the need to make some excuse or explain a motive for the sudden question that made him wish to lay aside his position as official escort for the moment. He ventured thus: "You see, I have no special reason for asking you. It's just that, well, from before I wanted to find out what you were feeling about facing your island exile. Up to this time I have had to send countless people to the islands aboard this boat. There were any number of types, but all of them without exception were sorrowing, weeping through the night along with the relative who came along to see them off. Then when I look at you, going to a lonely island seems to hold no dread for you. What in the world is going through your mind?"

At that, Kisuke broke into a smile. "You have spoken very kindly, sir, and I thank you. Yes, it stands to reason that others being sent into exile would be sad. I can certainly see how one could expect me to feel the same way. But may I say, sir, with all due respect, that those people would have had an easy time in this world. Kyoto is a fine place, but in that fine place I have suffered things that could never be as bad anywhere else, if you will forgive me for saying so. By the mercy of the powers above, they have spared my life and deigned to send me to an island exile. Even if life on that island is no paradise, as Your Honor suggests, it would not be too bad for me. Up to now, there has never been a place where I belonged or was welcome. You say that I am about to land in a hellish place. In that hell-on-earth as you put it, I can settle myself down peacefully, and more than anything else, I feel grateful. Though this body of mine is frail, I have never had a serious illness, so even on that island I don't think my health will give out no matter how hard the work may be. And do you know? I was given a present of 200 coppers to use on the island. I have it right here." Kisuke tapped his breast. Being sent into exile to a faraway island brought with it 200 *mon*. It was the rule at that time.

Kisuke went on. "I am ashamed to mention this, but until today I have never had 200 coppers all at once to keep in my breast pocket. I used to tramp about trying to find work and if by chance I found some, I would work myself to the bone at it. Then the little currency I would get for it in my right hand, I had to pass on with my left to the hand of another. Or else, when I did manage to get hold of a bit of cash now and then to buy something to eat, I usually had to pay back a loan and then borrow all over again. After I was put in jail, and

without having to work for it, I was privileged to eat free of charge. I've become a dead weight for the honorable authorities. On top of that, I received these 200 *mon* just like that when I left the jail. Figure that--I am given food to eat and then have 200 *mon* that I can stash away as long as I like. It's the first time in my life for me to have a bundle of money like this clear and free. I have no idea what kind of work I will be doing on that island, but I am delighted to think, sir, about what I can do with this handful of extra change." Kisuke fell silent.

"Ah. I see," murmured Shobei. He was so unprepared for what he had heard, that he didn't know what to say, and he too sat there without a word, deep in thought.

Shobei was close to reaching middle age now, having fathered four children of his wife. His aging mother was still living, so there were seven living in the house. For an ordinary citizen, his way of life was frugal to the point of penury; the only suit of clothes he owned was his official uniform, and the only other garments made for him were his nightclothes. However, what really made him unhappy was that the wife he had married came from a family of well-to-do merchants. She should have been able to make do with the wages her husband would bring home, but having been brought up as the darling daughter in a prosperous home, her husband's provision wasn't enough for her and she didn't know how to economize. Towards the end of the month the money would run out. When that happened, his wife would slip back to her family and bring home money for balancing her household accounts. Her husband detested this habit of begging, which to him was as disgusting as a hairy worm. After all, he was not unaware of her doings. On the holidays, his in-laws would give him things; at the celebration for children when they turned three, five, and seven years old, they would provide the little ones with all sorts of presents, which made Shobei feel uncomfortable. Even though he realized that their kindness filled the hole in the family budget, he could not put on a good face. When occasionally in the peaceful Haneda home, stormy wind and waves did flare out, that was invariably the bone of contention.

Listening to Kisuke, Shobei began to look at his own situation. How much of a difference is there between his lot and mine? I too get my living from above, I too live my life passing the money I earn from my right hand to my left and giving it over to others, don't I? You can say the only difference between us is a digit on the abacus. Shobei had no such thing as the 200-*mon* worth of extra funds that was giving Kisuke so much pleasure.

Now if you discount the digits, it is not hard to understand how a 200-*mon* pittance saved in a man like Kisuke's pocket could make him very happy. Anyone would have the same feeling over a larger amount. However, whatever the figures, the curious thing is that clearly Kisuke doesn't in the least covet more; that it's enough for him.

Kisuke had always had a hard time finding work in the world. When he did find some, he would go at it with back-breaking effort, and be quite satisfied with a mouthful of food for his pains. When he got into jail, he found that meals heretofore so hard to come by, now seemed almost to drop down from Heaven, without his even working to earn it, and he learned to his surprise such satisfaction as he had never known in his life before.

Shobei pondered the difference in amount between his livelihood and Kisuke's and found an enormous gap. Shobei's income did not always cover his living expenses; ordinarily he could barely make ends meet. Yet he could not remember ever feeling real satisfaction, or real happiness or unhappiness, for that matter. Instead, in his heart of hearts Shobei sometimes felt a slight twinge of dread. What if he lost his position? What if he became seriously ill? When he discovered his wife filling the gaps in her household accounts with money from

her parents and things like that, the twinge would swell up and oppress him.

Where did that distance between them come from anyway? On the surface, you could say it was because Kisuke had no one of his own and Shobei had, and let it go at that. But this was false. Even if he himself were single, he would not have a heart's desire as modest as Kisuke's. The real root of it went much deeper than that, thought Shobei.

He ruminated over human life in general. If a person has an illness, it would satisfy him if he does not. If day after day one hasn't enough to eat, he thinks eating would make him content. If, one chance in a thousand, he is without a bit of money laid by, he is sure a certain amount of savings will make him happy. And if he should have some savings put aside, he thinks he needs a still greater amount. If you think about it from start to finish, who knows to what extent a person can keep himself from desiring more and more before he is satisfied? Shobei realized that it was this Kisuke, sitting there before him this very minute, who had shown him that a man could indeed refrain from wanting more.

In the end he gazed upon Kisuke with eyes of admiration and wonder. It seemed to Shobei that the nimbus of light behind Kisuke emanated from the man's head as he sat there contemplating the heavens.

Shobei watched his face attentively. "Kisuke-san," he said. He added san to his name, but not because this tone of address was intentional. The moment he heard his own voice pronouncing the word, he realized it was inappropriate for an official to a convict, but it was too late and he could hardly take it back.

"Yes?" replied Kisuke, who wondered at this unwonted sign of respect and stole a watchful glance at Shobei's face.

Shobei overcame a slight embarrassment. "I seem to be asking you a good many questions, but you are being sent to that island exile for committing a wrong against someone. I was wondering if, since we are here, you wouldn't mind telling me about how it happened."

Kisuke seemed extremely apologetic as he replied, "Certainly, Sir," and in a low voice commenced to tell his story. "Well, I committed a dreadful thing in a moment of panic. Looking back on it, it is a mystery even to myself how I could have done such a thing. It was like something I enacted in a dream.

"When I was still a child, both my parents died in an epidemic, leaving my younger brother and me. At first people in the neighborhood gave us things, exactly like one might feed a litter of motherless puppies; in return we ran errands for them all over town, and we managed to grow up without starving or freezing to death. Next, when we were older and looked for work, we decided whatever happened not to separate. And so the two of us stayed together, working and looking out for one another.

"It was last fall that it happened. My brother and I had gotten jobs with a silk-weaving concern in the Nishijin district where our task was to help the weavers at the loom. Then my brother got sick and couldn't work anymore. Around that time we had a little shack in Kitayama where we slept. We would cross the Kamiya River Bridge daily on our way to work. After he got sick, I usually brought food on the way back, and he would be waiting for me, saying again and again, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' because I had to shoulder the burden for the both of us. One day when I returned as usual, I found my brother sprawled on the mattress with blood around him. I was so shocked, I dropped my pack or whatever it was where I stood and gasped, 'What happened?!'

My brother's face was deathly pale and both cheeks were wet with blood down to his chin; he looked at me but was unable to speak. With each breath, no more than a sort of wheezing sound issued from his throat. I couldn't understand what had happened, so I said again, 'What is it? Did you vomit blood?' As I came closer, he put his right hand on the floor and raised himself up a little. His left hand was pressed tightly under his chin, but thick, dark blood was oozing from between his fingers. His eyes told me not to get closer to him. His mouth began to work and it looked like he would be able to speak. 'I'm sorry. Forgive me. I'll never get well anyway, and without me you'd be a little better off at least. I thought if I slit my windpipe I would die fast, but my breath just leaks out of the hole and I don't die. I pushed hard and deep, but the blade slipped sideways and didn't nick the bone. If you would just draw it out I could die. It hurts to talk and it's useless. Please . . . lend me a hand and pull it out.' That's what he said to me.

"Whenever he loosened his left hand, his breath came out in wheezes. I wanted to say something, but nothing came out. I peered wordlessly at the wound in my brother's throat. Somehow he had thrust a razor into the side of the windpipe with his right hand, but it hadn't succeeded in killing him, so I could see it stuck deep in his throat. No more than a few centimeters of the handle stuck out of the open cut. That was the only thing I could focus on; it didn't even occur to me to wonder what to do. I just stared at my brother's face. He was looking intently at me. I finally came to my senses and said, 'Wait. I'll get a doctor.' My brother's eyes fixed me in a glare, and then he grasped his throat again with his left hand to speak. 'What good is a doctor? Ahhhh . . ., I can't stand it—take it out, quick! I beg you!' I was half out of my mind and could just stare at his face. It's strange how at such a time, the eyes do the talking. My brother's eyes were saying in fierce reproach, 'Hurry! Can't you hurry?!' In my head things were whirling round and round like the wheels of a cart, but my brother's eyes did not cease their terrible demand. Those resentful eyes grew detestable to me, their glare like a slap in the face, hate-filled eyes. Seeing this, I ended up figuring that I had to do as my brother said. 'Have it your way. I'll pull it out,' I said. At that his eyes changed completely, lighting up as if joyful. I felt I had to do his will, so I moved myself forward until my knees rested on the edge of his mat. He took away the hand that had been clutching his throat and let his elbow fall to the floor, then turned over on his side. I gripped the razor and pulled. Just then the front door of my hut, which had been closed, opened and an old woman from the neighborhood came in. This old woman used to come in at my request to give my brother medicine and to attend to a few needs while I was out. The house had become almost dark by then, so I don't know how much she saw. She uttered a short cry, and in the next instant she was out the door, leaving it wide open. I wanted only to pull the razor out fast, to pull it out straight. I was careful, but I could feel the resistance where it had not penetrated before and which had not allowed him to die. The blade was facing outward, so it cut that way. I was in a daze, the razor still in my hand when I saw the old woman come into the hut and rush out again. After she had gone, my wits collected, I looked at my brother; he had stopped breathing. There was a lot of blood gushing from the wound. Then the officials came for me, and until they led me away to the magistrate's office, I sat staring at the razor lying to one side and my dead brother's face with his eyes half open."

From a bowed head, Kisuke raised his eyes to Shobei's face. Then he let his head sink to his knees.

Kisuke's story is reasonable. Maybe almost too reasonable. He had certainly re-lived that happening countless times in the last six months. Added to that, he had been made to rehearse it constantly as he was

grilled again and again by the official investigators, trying to dredge to the very bottom of his case. So much so, that the story had already crystallized in his mind by the time he related it to Shobei.

Although Shobei heard the story with his own ears so that he could almost have witnessed the scene, he doubted that he could call this man who killed his brother a murderer. If he had heard only half the story, there might be some doubt; after hearing the whole story, the doubt was persistent.

The brother thought if the razor were removed he could die, so he begged to have it removed. You can say that whoever removed it caused his death, killed him. But it seems the brother would have died anyway, without help. He wanted to die quickly because he couldn't stand the agony. When Kisuke saw his suffering, he could not bear it. He wanted to save his brother from pain, so he took his life. Is that a crime? It must be that killing his brother was a crime. But if you remember that it was to save someone from suffering, a doubt springs up, and it is hard to shake it.

Shobei turned the matter over and over in his heart and concluded that the judgment had to be left to those above him; there was no other way than to obey the authorities. He thought that he should make the authorities' judgment his own. Even as he thought this, however, that niggling doubt would still haunt him, and he longed to question the magistrate about it.

And so it was that a misty night wore on, while two pensive figures sat in the Takasebune as it moved the surface of the dark waters and went on its way.

Ogai Mori's Chronological Table and His Major Works

1862 (Bunroku Era Year 2)

Born in Tsuwano, Shimane Prefecture. Real name Rintaro Mori. Father, Shizuyasu, doctor of the Tsuwano fiefdom.

1868 (Meiji Period Year 1)

Meiji Era begins.

1869 (Meiji 2)

Attended Youroukan, Tsuwano fiefdom school.

1872 (Meiji 5)

Moved to Tokyo.

1881 (Meiji 14)

Graduated Medical School of Tokyo University.

Took up position in Army Medical Service.

1884 (Meiji 17) – 1888 (Meiji 21)

Studied medicine in Germany.

1889 (Meiji 22)

Married Toshiko Akamatsu.

1890 (Meiji 23)

Divorced.

1894 (Meiji 27)

Active duty, Japanese-Russo War.

1899 (Meiji 32) – 1902 (Meiji 35)

12th Division of Army, Kokura, Kitakyushu.

1902 (Meiji 35)

Marriage Shige Araki.

1904 (Meiji 37)

Active duty, Japanese-Sino War.

1912 (Meiji 45, Taisho 1)

Meiji Emperor demise. New era named Taisho.

1916 (Taisho 5)

Retirement from Army.

1919 (Taisho 8)

First director of the Japan Art Academy.

1922 (Taisho 11)

Died of atrophic kidney and lung tuberculosis.

Major Works

Maihime, 1890 (Meiji 22) *The Dancing Girl*

Sokkyo-shijin, 1902 (Meiji 35) Japanese translation of *Improvisatoren* by Hans Christian Andersen

Gan, 1911 (Meiji 44) *The Wild Geese*

Okitsu Yagoemon No Issho, 1913 (Taisho 2) *The Death Note of Okitsu Yagoemon*

Abe Ichizoku, 1913 (Taisho 2) *The Abe Family*

Sansho Dayu, 1915 (Taisho 4) *Sansho the Bailiffe*

Takasebune, 1916 (Taisho 5) *The Takaseboat*

Shibue Chusai, 1916 (Taisho 5) *The Life of Shibue Chusai*

Izawa Ranken, 1916-1917 (Taisho 5-6) *The Life of Izawa Ranken*

Notes

Takase River: Canal in the central part of Kyoto city flowing parallel to the Kamo River. It was built in 1611 by Suminokura Ryo (1554-1614), a wealthy merchant and overseas trader.

Edo Period: 1600-1868. The Edo period can be also called the Tokugawa period. Tokugawa Ieyasu received the title of Shogun and established the Tokugawa shogunate at Edo (now Tokyo). The year 1600 was when Ieyasu defeated his rivals in the Battle of Sekigahara. Edo period lasted to 1868, the first year of the Meiji.

Matsudaira Sadanobu (1758-1829): Assistant to Shogun in Kansei Period.

Kansei Period: 1789-1800.

Chionin: Head temple of the Jodo sect of Buddhism. It is located in Higashiyama Ward, Kyoto.

Mon: Money in circulation during Edo period. In Kansei Period, 200 mon is equivalent about 5 kilograms of rice.

Kisuke-san: -san is a suffix added to the name of a person as a sign of respect, roughly equivalent to Mr., Mrs., etc. It is also sometimes applied to places and things as a way of recognizing their special value. For example, the moon=otsuki-san.

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