

Awakening to the Art of Literary Translation

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翻訳の文学的側面

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It is a great pleasure to be with people who are interested in translation because that has been the passion of my life. There are some who translate as a sideline, but I'm a translator all the time, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

I became enthralled with the idea of translation back in high school, when I first read Japanese literature to prepare for a paper I was going to write. The experience of reading two works by Natsume Sōseki opened my eyes to the translator's crucial role. One was *Botchan*, and the other title I've forgotten. Whatever it was, I thought, wow, this is great! And then I expectantly read one more by him—and what a disappointment! It was so clumsy. I thought, well, Sōseki can't write English. (Little did I know that he was in fact an accomplished writer of English whose translation of *Hōjōki* holds up well today.) Just saying those words to myself—"Sōseki can't write English"—made me see that when we read a work in translation we are reading through a filter—we can only see the author as he or she is presented to us by the translator. And in Sōseki's case, it seemed pretty clear to me that one translator had done better justice to him than the other.

The translation that most impressed me in my reading for that paper was by Edward Seidensticker. (Oddly, I'm not sure of the author or title—though it may have been Tanizaki's *Some Prefer Nettles*. The name that stuck with me was Seidensticker.) That was the one that made me want to become a translator—it was so perfectly rendered. The sentences were jewels. I knew

a little bit of Japanese at that point, enough to realize how difficult it would be to pull that off, and how wonderful it would be if one only could! The idea of translating Japanese literature became a distant goal, a star to hitch my wagon to.

I ended up studying with Edward Seidensticker at the University of Michigan, and what he used to say about translation is that the translator is a counterfeiter, that you're not supposed to improve upon the work that you're translating, tempting as it may be; you should not try to make it "better" than the original. He used to mention that people would gush, "Oh your translation is so much better than the original, I like it more," but he did not take that as a compliment. I enjoyed many decades of association with him after I left Michigan, and we even worked together on one translation—an introduction to the teachings of Shinran—before he passed away several years ago.

Co-translating *Clouds above the Hill*

As John Breen was just telling us, the literary aspects of translation involve various difficulties. In the case of Japanese and English, the languages are very different, and writers in Japanese and English follow different conventions, have different ways of doing things. Although Seidensticker might not approve, sometimes there is indeed a strong temptation to tinker so that the work will be more accessible and enjoyable for the reader. For example, in Shiba Ryōtarō's historical novel *Clouds above the Hill* (Routledge, 2014, Vols. 1-4), the translation "improves" on the original by adding explanations where needed, by changing the organization, and most conspicuously by judicious cutting.

The project involved a team of three translators, an editor, a checker, and various consultants with expertise in different languages, naval affairs, and the like. Fellow translators Paul McCarthy, Andrew Cobbing, and I divvied up the eight volumes, of which I ended up translating four.

The original work, *Saka no ue no kumo*, was serialized in a newspaper. Readers who missed previous installments might have been lost if they read today's section with no background. Shiba therefore made a point of frequently recapping or building on what came before. Over the course of the novel, that adds up to quite a bit of repetition, much more than Western readers are prepared to accept, we felt. So our "counterfeit" version did end



up omitting most of those repetitions. Not only are Western readers less tolerant of repetition in general, but they are unfamiliar with the conventions of a newspaper novel and would be encountering the work in a different format anyway. So we thought that that did justify making changes, and that Shiba, had he been alive, would have understood and approved.

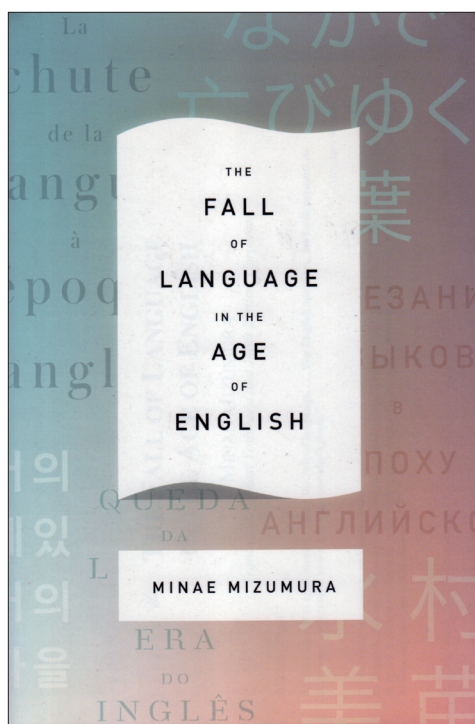
Incidentally, Shiba is also famous for the expression *yodan da ga* (though I digress...), and although frequent digressions and insertions of the author into the narrative of a work of fiction are rare in the West, those we maintained as inseparable from his distinctive style.

Collaborating with Minae Mizumura on *The Fall of Language*

What I have brought today to show you are cases where changes to the text were worked out in collaboration with the author. First I will consider collaboration with Minae Mizumura—she prefers her name in that order—an author whose English is so good that people frequently marvel that she chooses to write in Japanese. The book in question is *Nihongo ga horobiru toki: Eigo no seiki no naka de*, translated as *The Fall of Language in the Age of English*. This just came out in 2015 from Columbia University Press.

Mari Yoshihara, a professor of American studies at the University of Hawaii, asked permission to do the translation while Minae and I were

hard at work on the translation of her novel *Honkaku shōsetsu* (*A True Novel*, Other Press, 2013). Minae agreed, not really expecting results anytime soon, knowing that Yoshihara was very busy. But Yoshihara surprised her by ably translating the whole book in six months and finding a prestigious publisher, Columbia University Press. Nevertheless, Minae decided she wanted to rework the translation, not because she objected to it but because she thought the book's content needed to be adapted for Western, non-Japanese-literate readers. Much of the original book is geared to urge Japanese to shed feelings of inferiority about the Japanese language and recog-



nize what she calls the miracle of modern Japanese language and literature. After delving into the history of the language, and also the history of translation East and West, she writes about the need to have a literary canon, a living heritage that everybody knows and shares, and criticizes the amount of time and energy expended on English at the expense of the Japanese curriculum. But all of this is not necessarily of great interest to people who don't know anything about Japanese. Other important subjects of the book are how various languages besides Japanese are faring in the age of English, and what it means to write in a language other than English today—the situation Minae herself is in. In any case she decided, after receiving the draft from Yoshihara, that she wanted to further shape and expand on her arguments.

We went through the translation as we always do while collaborating, painstakingly considering and re-considering it page by page, line by line, and word by word.

Cleaning up a “Dirty” Translation: *The Fall of Language*

To illustrate how the translation evolved, I prepared three versions of what we did in one section. The first one is called the “dirty version”—I don’t mean to cast any aspersions on what Mari did; this is just what I call a draft. It’s a version that hasn’t had its face washed yet, so to speak. I run through and produce something very “dirty”—rough. Then later on I can go back and clean it up. I often think of translating, or polishing a translation, as kind of like housecleaning. For one thing, your house is never going to be completely clean, just as your translation is never going to be perfect. There’s always going to be a corner that you forgot, a window that you can’t quite see out of, some cobwebs left untended—but you get it as clean as you can, and as nice-looking and welcoming as possible. Sometimes you may end up moving the furniture around, or making structural changes—let’s put a window in the wall here!—but the goal is the same. I find it a useful way to think about the translation process.

1) Dirty version

It is well known that in a lecture titled “The Development of Contemporary Japan,” Sōseki characterized Western development as “internally driven” whereas referring to Japanese development as “externally driven.” According to Sōseki, although Japan of bygone days certainly developed with the influence of Korea or China, such influence was of a nature that prompted a gradual “internally driven” development. Yet, the shock of the West that modern Japan experienced was of unprecedented magnitude. The shock forced a “twist” on Japan.

From that moment on, Japanese development quickly began to be twisted. And it experienced a shock so great that it could not help but be twisted. To use the phrase that I have used earlier, whereas Japan’s development until then had been internally driven, suddenly it lost its own capacities and was pushed by external forces and had no choice but to do as it was told to do. Since Japan probably cannot exist as Japan without forever being pushed in the way it is today, there is no other way to characterize this than to call it externally driven. (emphasis by Mizumura)

Sōseki concludes in a slightly comical tone: “I don’t know whether to see the Japanese as unfortunate or miserable; in either case, we have fallen into an unspeakably difficult situation.”

2) Slightly cleaned up version

In a lecture entitled “The Development of Contemporary Japan,” Sōseki famously characterized Western development as “internally driven,” Japanese development as “externally driven.” He argued that although in the past Japan certainly developed with the influence of Korea and China, that influence was of a nature that prompted gradual, internally driven development. In contrast, the shock of the West experienced by modern Japan was of unprecedented magnitude, forcing on Japan what Sōseki called a sudden “twist.”

From that moment on, Japanese development quickly began to be twisted. And it experienced a shock so great that it could not help but be twisted. To use the phrase that I have used earlier, whereas Japan’s development until then had been internally driven, suddenly it lost its own capacities and was pushed by external forces and had no choice but to do as it was told to do. Since Japan probably cannot exist as Japan without forever being pushed in the way it is today, there is no other way to characterize this than to call it externally driven. (emphasis by Mizumura)

Sōseki concludes in a slightly comical tone: “I don’t know whether to see the Japanese as unfortunate or miserable; in either case, we have fallen into an unspeakably difficult situation.”

3) Final version

In a public talk, “Gendai Nihon no kaika” (The Development of Contemporary Japan), Sōseki describes the cultural transformation Japan had to go through as a “sudden twist [*kyokusetsu*].” According to him, development within the West was “internally driven,” that in Japan “externally driven.” He argues that although in the past Japan certainly developed under the influence of Korea and China, that influence was of a nature that prompted gradual, internally driven development. In contrast, the “shock of the West”

experienced by modern Japan was of unprecedented magnitude, forcing on Japan a “sudden twist”:

From that moment on, Japan's development took a sudden twist. It experienced a shock so great that it could not help but do so. To use the phrase that I used earlier, Japan until then had been internally driven but suddenly lost the power of self-determination and, pushed by external forces, had no choice but to do as it was told.... Since Japan probably cannot exist as Japan without forever being pushed in the way it is today, there is no other way to put this than being externally driven. (Emphasis added)

Sōseki concludes in a slightly comical tone: “Call us unfortunate, call us wretched or what you will—we Japanese have fallen into one hell of a predicament.”

The Fall of Language in the Age of English
by Minae Mizumura. Columbia UP, 2015 p. 151.

Maintaining Flow, Clarity, and Impact

As John said, a lot of translating is just *writing well*, trying to get the words into the best possible form, the form that's not only close to the author's meaning but is also the most helpful to the reader, something that has clarity, that hopefully preserves some rhythm. Good writing is concise, it's logical, and what I think is very important, it has *nagare*—it flows. To remind my students of this I often start my translation classes with the opening lines of *Hōjōki*:

ゆく河のながれは絶えずして、しかももとの水にあらず。

淀みに浮ぶうたかたは、かつ消えかつ結びて、久しくとゞまりたるためしなし。

The flowing river never stops and yet the water never stays the same.

Foam floats upon the pools, scattering, re-forming, never lingering long.

Hojoki: Visions of a Torn World, translated by Yasuhiko Moriguchi
and David Jenkins (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 1996)

The translation needs to flow in English, without leaps of logic.

Then what changes did we bring to the translation? Here, as often happens, in the final version we added a topic sentence to clarify the meaning: “In a public talk, ‘Gendai Nihon no kaika’ (The Development of Contempo-

rary Japan), Sōseki describes the cultural transformation Japan had to go through as a sudden twist [*kyokusetsu*].” English expository paragraphs tend to lead with the main point rather than building up to it. Since the idea of the sudden twist is key, and that’s what we want the reader to understand, we moved that up to the front.

To help ideas flow in a clear and logical way, it is important to consider the structure of paragraphs, and often that involves asking the question, do I need a topic sentence? The answer is often yes. Incidentally, I once used a textbook for English to Japanese translation that had the exact opposite advice: “Topic sentences are often unnecessary in Japanese, so if it reads better without the topic sentence, get rid of it.” This was a revelation to me, but it makes sense. Either way, the translator should feel free to make the changes that work best in the target language and facilitate the flow of the text.

What other changes did we make? One point is the translation of the key word *kyokusetsu*, “twist.” Look at the italicized line in the “dirty” version of Sōseki’s quote: “*From that moment on, Japanese development quickly began to be twisted. And it experienced a shock so great that it could not help but be twisted.*” While “twist” itself is neutral in English, using “twisted” here, in the part Minae chose to emphasize, is problematic since the word has a negative meaning. A person who is twisted or who has a twisted personality may be psychopathic. That isn’t the right word to convey Sōseki’s meaning, which is rather an abrupt change of course—a twist in the road of development.

To bring out that meaning, we changed “quickly began to be twisted” to a noun phrase, “sudden twist.” The point is, Sōseki is saying there was a sudden break in how Japanese culture developed. And this is very true. In *The Fall of Language*, Minae states, “Today’s Japanese readers cannot browse literature from before 1887, the year Futabatei Shimei began writing.” (p. 147) That immense body of literature is virtually inaccessible to all but specialists.

I’m a member of a study group at my university now translating an influential 1867 essay called “Kanken” (A Personal View) by Yamamoto Kakuma.¹³ The essay describes Kakuma’s vision of changes Japan needed to make at

13 The project, which began in 2012, is scheduled to be finished in March 2019. The essay will be published with five versions of each section: the original, followed by three progressively more legible Japanese versions—*shakubun*, *yomikudashibun*, modern Japanese—and finally an English translation.

that crucial time in history—changes in everything from defense and women’s education to hairstyles and clothing. To be honest, we’ve had a tough time figuring out what it says (only partially because Kakuma was blind and in fact dictated the work). Anyone with a high school education in English would have no difficulty reading English literature from 150 years ago, but in Japanese there’s a huge linguistic and cultural gap between then and now—everything truly changed with great suddenness. And as one result, people are cut off from their literary past in a way that has no parallel in the West.

To return to the sample here, notice also that the repetition of the word “twist” at the end of the second sentence gets eliminated. Repetition can be a powerful rhetorical tool, but it needs to be used judiciously, and here it seemed to weaken rather than strengthen the sentence, so we removed it. A similar change takes place at the end of the first paragraph, where the two short sentences with “shock” have been merged into one.

This is the process, then. You read through your translation again and again, sharpening and clarifying, deleting or adding, avoiding unnecessary repetition. Another metaphor for translation (or writing in general) is trimming a photograph, sharpening the focus so that you can see what’s there, so that the part you’re supposed to look at shows up properly.

Now let’s look at the beginning of that topic sentence. As you can see, the Japanese title of the lecture has been inserted, partly to avoid giving the impression that Sōseki was lecturing in English. The dirty version begins “It is well known that in a lecture titled . . .” Minae’s original has *Kono hanashi wa yūmei de aru*, so this is a reasonable translation, but if the reader doesn’t know anything about it, how famous is it, really? It’s kind of insulting to imply, “Well, we know all about this, though you don’t. Anyway, it is famous, take our word for it.” Part of the problem is that the comment begins the sentence. In the slightly cleaned-up version, the idea has been moved to a less prominent position: “In a lecture entitled ‘The Development of Contemporary Japan,’ Sōseki famously characterized Western thought...” I could live with that. Maybe I’m not being a good counterfeiter by taking out a word like this, but I feel more comfortable without it. And you’ll notice that in the final version, it’s gone.

I struggled most with the last sentence of this passage, which Mari Yoshihara rendered “Sōseki concludes in a slightly comical tone: ‘I don’t know whether to see the Japanese as unfortunate or miserable. In either case, we

have fallen into an unspeakably difficult situation.” Now, is that comical? The tone only has to be “slightly comical,” so maybe it’s comical enough, but I wanted it to sound a bit more so. Here is Sōseki’s comment in Japanese: “*Dōmo Nihonjin wa ki no doku to iwanka aware to iwanka, makoto ni gongodōdan no kyūjō ni ochiitta mono de arimasu.*” Well, you might not burst out laughing, but it is rather amusing, so we needed to bring that out.

In the end, as you can see, we changed it to this: “Sōseki concludes in a slightly comical tone, ‘Call us unfortunate, call us wretched, or what you will, we Japanese have fallen into one hell of a predicament.’” Now there’s no word that corresponds to “hell” in the original. But he is using quite strong language, and I think this is pretty strong language, I would say, for English. And this is where my talking it over with Minae helps a great deal. We considered various ways of rendering this, and ended up with this one, and she liked it. Four-letter words can pack quite a punch in English. Here I think it’s fun, and maybe it makes Sōseki a little bit more likeable too. I hope so.

Creating Dialogue: *Inheritance from Mother*

I’d like to look at some other examples. The next one is from *Haha no isan*, also by Minae Mizumura, the book that we’re working on currently, to be entitled *Inheritance from Mother*.¹⁴ The passage I’ve selected here is one I found mysterious when I read it through the first time. Mitsuki, the main character, is talking in the garden with somebody she just bumped into. They’re both going to be staying at the same hotel.

ややあって、美津紀は声の調子を違えて訊いた。

「しばらくのご滞在ですか？」

「ええ」

「私もです」

ホテルに到着して名前を告げたとたん副支配人たちが飛び出して来たのに同じように驚かされたのがわかって二人で小さく笑い、それをきっかけに空気が打ち解け、二人は並んでホテルに戻った。(198頁)

14 Published in 2017 from Other Press. <https://www.otherpress.com/books/inheritance-from-mother/>

After a pause she said in a different tone of voice, “You’ll be staying here for a while?”

“Yes.”

“Me too.”

Realizing that they both had been startled on checking in to have the assistant managers come rushing out to fuss over them, they exchanged small smiles. That cleared the air, and they walked back to the hotel side by side.

How did they know? How did they know that they had both had the same experience? The answer seems to be that in Japanese, the reader understands the need to imagine the conversation that they had, and does so. But in English I think it’s asking too much of the reader, and so, with Minae’s approval, I created a bit of dialogue. I think it works much better this way:

After a pause she said in a different tone of voice, “You’ll be staying here for a while?”

“Yes.”

“Me too.” She paused again. “Did the assistant managers take you aside when you checked in, by any chance?”

“Yes! I couldn’t imagine what was happening. And then it was just about the menus.”

“I know! Wasn’t that strange?”

They laughed. That cleared the air, and they walked back to the hotel side by side.

Again, the fact that humor is involved—that the characters share a light-hearted moment and so grow closer together—is important. I wanted the reader to be able to share fully in their laughter and appreciate their new closeness.

When Not to Be Funny

My next example is one I often use in class to illustrate principles of literary translation. It’s from an essay by the Buddhist thinker Takamori Kentetsu about the physical and spiritual dangers of anger. Just as anger poisons relationships, it also can poison our bodies, apparently, by triggering the

release into the bloodstream of potentially lethal substances. The author illustrates this by recalling a newspaper article about a pregnant hippopotamus. The zookeepers wanted to move her to another room for the delivery, and she got so angry at being moved that she went berserk and ended up losing her baby. The author murmurs pityingly, “Kaba wa baka na koto o shita mon da.”

When I invite my students to translate this line, they are always so blinded by the similarity between *kaba* and *baka* that they can’t see beyond that, and they do all sorts of acrobatic stunts to try to duplicate the effect in English. One student’s rendition was very creative and clever, really: “The hippo went flippo.” The trouble is, it sets the wrong tone. It might conceivably work for a headline, but not in the middle of a serious essay. Here, humor is completely inappropriate. We don’t want this sentence to be funny; the author isn’t laughing—he’s shocked. It’s important to realize that *baka* has various meanings besides “silly” or “stupid.” For example in a television drama, you might have a scene in which a woman learns that her brother has died in the war, and in her grief she cries out, “Oniichan no baka!” The word captures deep-seated anger at a desperate situation that has no remedy.

My rendition was “I was shocked by this senseless tragedy” (or “needless tragedy,” something like that). I think such a translation faithfully conveys the author’s purpose in telling the incident and the emotion it aroused in him. Rather than focusing on specific words or turns of phrase—even in a literary translation—the translator needs to be constantly asking “Why is this here? How does it fit into the whole? What is the purpose and effect of having it here?” We think of literature as being all about words, but it really is all about emotions and the deeper meaning behind the words. That’s true for whatever genre of literature you may be trying to translate.

An Elaborate Collaboration: *You Were Born for a Reason*

Over the years I’ve translated several books by Takamori Kentetsu. Our first project, a Buddhist philosophy primer called *Naze ikiru*,¹⁵ took years to complete, with endless telephone and, later on, Skype conferences—I was very interested to hear about the ones mentioned earlier at the symposium. Why did it take so long? Partly because of the difficulty of the content, but

15 *You Were Born for a Reason*. Ichimannendo, 2007.

also because everyone involved had an area of expertise and also an area of complete ignorance. The author, an erudite Buddhist, knew no English, nor had he ever been involved in translation. The highly dedicated team I worked with were knowledgeable about Buddhism and more or less fluent in English but knew nothing about translation. I knew English and translating but next to nothing about Buddhism. I must add that this is the book I mentioned earlier that Edward Seidensticker was involved in, as supervisor of the translation rather than as an active participant in the nuts and bolts process. Of us all, he had the greatest overall expertise in the three fields.

Takamori-sensei is revered by his followers as the reincarnation of Shinran, the thirteenth-century founder of True Pure Land Buddhism. And he really is a remarkable man, active as ever at 86. Everything I translated into English had to be translated back into Japanese for him. The process was further complicated because for every quotation from Shinran's writings, sutras, and the like, I had to translate the original and also Takamori's rendition of it into modern Japanese, without wearying the reader with repetitions. (The modern translation set forth Takamori-sensei's signature interpretation of the passage and so was indispensable.) The two renditions had to use different registers and different wording. Then, because no translation is ever an exact rendition, and Takamori wanted to know clearly what the translation exactly meant, three people on the team would back-translate each passage in his or her own way. Takamori would then choose the version he liked best and make suggestions about how it could be improved. What I found interesting was how often, even in this roundabout way, he managed to put his finger on what wasn't working in the translation. Afterward, the team and I would go through detailed suggestions they drew up based on his comments and answers to questions. I would submit a new draft, and we would begin the whole mind-boggling process all over again, not just once but time after time. Truly, an entire book could be written about how that translation came about.

Choosing between Two Conflicting Translations: *Naze ikiru 2*

Anyway, my final example is from chapter two of the sequel, *Naze ikiru 2*, which we are now working on.¹⁶ The key point here is a line of explanation

¹⁶ Now about to resume working on the translation after a lengthy delay; if all goes well the book will be published in 2019. —JWC (April 2018).

that appears just after a quotation from Shinran's masterwork, *Kyōgyō shin-shō* (Teaching, Practice, Faith, Enlightenment).

難思の弘誓は、難度の海を度する大船、
無碍の光明は、無明の闇を破する慧日なり
(『教行信証』総序)

その言や、古今東西、人無きがごとく冴えている。

滝壺に向かう舟の十方衆生（すべての人）の

究極の目的は、この大船に乗ることに違いなかろう。(34 頁)

“Amida’s inconceivable Vow is a great ship that carries us across the sea that is difficult to cross, and his unimpeded light is the sun of wisdom that destroys the mind of darkness.”

General preface to *Teaching, Practice, Faith, Enlightenment*

These words of Shinran’s outshine those of any other person in any time or place. The ultimate goal of the sentient beings of the ten directions in the boat heading toward the plunge pool—all people—must be to board Amida’s great ship.

I find the line of Japanese in bold very difficult. The author likes Shinran’s words, I get that. He’s definitely for them. But how exactly to translate it was quite challenging. At first I had this: “These words of Shinran’s outshine those of any other person in any time or place.” Certainly, it is easier to understand than the original sentence. When this sentence was translated back into Japanese, the great man approved of it, so all seemed well. But then some team members objected that the translation was not close enough to what the Japanese actually says. With their help, I came up with this alternative rendering: “Shinran was direct and unequivocal in asserting the truth, unconcerned about how others might react.”

The interpretation of “hito naki ga gotoku saete iru” is different in the two versions. And indeed, there’s a page-long exposition of this very phrase somewhere, because apparently Japanese readers had trouble with it as well and wrote in asking for clarification. (The “plunge pool,” incidentally, is what comes after death, which Takamori likens to a cataract. We are all in a boat (our life) heading for the waterfall of death, and will inevitably land in the plunge pool at its basin.)

This is the gist of Takamori’s explanation: People, we’re all dying, but we don’t know it. We don’t want to hear it. We don’t have ears to hear this mes-

sage, it's impossible for us. And so the great message of salvation through Amida's Vow goes unheeded. No one pays any attention, and if you bring it up they laugh at you, because nobody believes they're going to die in the first place. Despite this, Shinran devoted his ninety years of life to preaching Amida's Vow, not caring if people were indifferent or even reviled him for doing so.

The second alternative does convey that meaning, but to me it sounds inexplicably harsh. Without the fuller context given in Takamori's explanation—which is not part of the book and which no one voted for including—I find the assumption of negative reactions to Amida's salvation something of an anticlimax or even a non sequitur. It was like saying, "Amida's inconceivable Vow is a great ship that carries us across the sea that is difficult to cross, and his unimpeded light is the sun of wisdom that destroys the mind of darkness. Well, take it or leave it." Shinran's words are powerful and beautiful, and I thought that the comment begged for words that resonated with it. Therefore, I suggested we stick with the first version after all, which the author had already approved anyway.

And so, of these two possible translations, while I think either one works, we decided to go with the first one even though its literal meaning may be different, as having a little bit more melody and a little bit more beauty, perhaps, than the other one.

Thank you.