Mori Ogai
– Pioneer of Modern Japanese Literature –

By Yoshino Toshihiko

The Two-headed Lion – Mori Ogai

"Maihime" (The Dancing Girl) written by Mori Ogai in 1890 in the magazine *Kokumin no Tomo* should be commemorated as the first novella in the history of modern Japanese literature. A number of successive literary gems that Ogai published thereafter solidify his place alongside Natsume Soseki as one of the most prominent Japanese writers. He did not, however, devote his full attention to literature from morning to night. Rather, he was a doctor in actual military service, eventually becoming the highest-ranking military doctor in the army. Furthermore, in addition to the stories published during his early years, beginning with *Maihime*, which are based on his experience of studying abroad, he published many stories set in Japan as well. Adding to this the fact that he published an astonishing number of translations of well-known works of foreign literature one after another, one can justifiably say that no other literary figure possessed such a rich, international cultural sensibility. He was a military doctor and a literary figure; he was conversant with Japanese and Chinese thought; and he also translated works from German into Japanese. These two aspects – which he pursued with irresistible force – make me think of Ogai as a "two-headed lion."

Mastery of German at an Early Age

Ogai's real name was Mori Rintaro. He was born as the eldest son of an official doctor in the service of the Lord of Tsuwano *han* (feudal domain; now the western part of Shimane Prefecture) in 1862, during the waning days of Japanese feudalism when the entire nation was still divided into hans and ruled by the central Tokugawa shogunate. As a consequence of being born at a time when there was no freedom to choose one's profession and when one's social status was fixed, it was preordained that he would become a physician. In that period, Germany stood at the forefront of medical research and in order to pursue medical studies one had to learn German. To do this, Ogai went to Tokyo with his father in 1872 – four years after the Meiji Restoration of 1868 – in order to study at the Shimbungakusha, a small school in Tokyo's Hongo district which specialized in the teaching of German. Following that, he went to study at the preparatory course for the Tokyo University medical school, which shortly thereafter became the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Tokyo. At the time, much of the instruction was given by German lecturers and the examination were written in German, so it was not possible to graduate from medical school without knowing German well, but for Ogai, who had mastered German early on, this was an easy hurdle to overcome.

Photo: Iwanami Shoten, Publishers

Mori Ogai (right), Harada Naojiro (center) and Iwasa Shin (left) in Munich in 1886

Commission as an Army Doctor and Study in Germany

After graduation from medical school, Ogai was commissioned as an army physician in December 1881. Although the modern Japanese army had originally been based on the French

system, the system was required to be switched to the model of the recently victorious Prussian Army, and because personnel fluent in German were in demand, Ogai surmised that he would have a reasonably good chance of being sent to Germany to study if he entered military service. Among those who entered the army medical corps at the same time, he had the best command of the German language, so three years after assuming his duties, he received orders to go to Germany for study. In August 1884, he boarded a French vessel at Yokohama, sailed via the Indian Ocean, through the Suez Canal, eventually arriving at Marseilles. From there he traveled by train via Paris to Berlin, arriving on Oct. 11. In *Kosei Nikki*, the diary of his journey to Europe he describes his aspirations prior to departure. He wrote originally in *kambun* (classical Chinese), but the gist of it is as follows.

"Medicine, which is my specialty, stems from the West, and even if one reads books in Western languages and takes lectures in those languages, unless one goes to the actual country to study, there is no way that one can be certain he has a proper understanding. Hence from the moment I graduated from the University of Tokyo, I have wanted to go abroad to study at the earliest possible opportunity, and I composed a poem in Chinese on the subject of my desire to come into direct contact with highly developed medical scholarship. The poem showed that my spirit had already begun to wing its way toward the banks of the Elbe. Not long after that, I became an army doctor and waited three long years, but now at long last my dream is coming true and I am setting out for Germany. Even if I were told not to show my joy, it would be impossible for me not to be jubilant."

And in the last entry of that journal, that of Oct. 11, he writes:

"Arrived at Köln at 7:00 a.m. During the journey on the French vessel, and from Marseilles through Paris until arrival in Köln, I was troubled by being unable to comprehend French. But in the instant the train arrived in Köln in Germany I was easily able to understand the conductor's German, and I enjoyed a sense of satisfaction at being able to converse comfortably with him."

Judging from the passage where he writes that he is able to understand quite well the language of the country where he is to study, and that he enjoyed a comfortable conversation, it is clear that Ogai had become highly proficient in German prior to his departure. This is a major difference with Soseki, who despite having considerable ability at reading and writing was unable to converse as he would have liked, and who as a result of a combination of other factors became somewhat neurotic during his time abroad. To Soseki, the years he spent in London may have seemed an inconvenience sometimes, but in Ogai's case, from the moment he entered the country he enjoyed using the local language.

The first qualification for being an internationally minded person is to be able to converse in the language as well as to read and write it. In these terms, Ogai excelled, and with the self-awareness that he would be employing that proficiency in the building of a modern Japanese nation, he set out to absorb as much of European culture as possible. The opening passage of *Moso* (Daydreams), which was published in 1911 and might well be regarded as a history of his psychological development, cannot help but leave the reader with an impression of vitality.

"I was still only in my twenties, a time of life when one reacts to every external stimulus with instinct pure and simple, when one still retains an inner strength of purpose as yet unbowed."[1]

Studying Hygiene and Observing the Hygiene System of the Prussian Army

Ogai's stay in Germany lasted from 1884 to 1888, and the first of his assigned duties was to absorb the achievements that had been reached within the field of hygiene. To accomplish this, he studied in turn under Franz Hoffmann at the University of Leipzig, Max von Pettenkofer at the University of Munich and Robert Koch at the Hygienishces Institute of Berlin University. The hygiene studies of the day included bacteriology, so he undoubtedly had the actual sensation of being in contact with the essence of the most up-to-date research in natural science in Germany. The fact that he was permitted to publish a paper in German in a journal specializing in hygienics indicates the results of his own research were considered to have reached a remarkable standard in the eyes of German colleagues.

The second purpose of his studies was the observation of the hygiene system of the Prussian Army, and for that reason during his transfer from Leipzig to Munich he visited Dresden where he participated in the regular autumn training maneuvers of the Saxony army and attended lectures on military medicine. In addition, during his stay in Berlin, he was attached to the Prussian Imperial Guards for three months and during the latter part of this stay in Berlin he accompanied Ishiguro Tadanori in the observation of the Prussian Army's hygiene facilities. It is worthy of note that he attended the fourth International Conference of the Red Cross at Karlsruhe – in the role of assistant to Ishiguro – where he actively spoke on behalf of Japan in Ishiguro's stead. That he was respected by the entire gathering is substantiated by the minutes of the assembly. These various experiences clearly laid the foundation for his promotion to the highest medical post in the Japanese army.

Absorbing Western Literature, Philosophy and Social Thought – *Maihime* and *Doitsu Nikki*

However, the accomplishments of Ogai's studies in Germany were not limited to military medicine. Quite to the contrary, making full use of his particular linguistic skills, in spare

moments off duty, he absorbed the literature, philosophy and social thought of the West centered in Germany. I see this as particularly significant in giving birth to Ogai's remarkable career as a literary figure and critic. If one looks at *Maihime*, which made him at a single bound a favorite among literary circles, the protagonist is a young government official dispatched abroad for study. He has a self-awakening, discovers the preciousness of romantic love, and begins to live with a German woman who eventually becomes pregnant. Despite this, he is compelled to tearfully bid her farewell and return home to take up a role in the modernization of his homeland. Such a novella, with antinomy motifs against this kind of international background was a large-scale work, the likes of which had never before appeared in the history of Japanese literature. The prominent poet Sato Haruo declared that the publication of *Maihime* – and in turn Ogai's years of study in Germany – was in effect the "origin of modern Japanese literature" and the "beginning of Romanticism in modern Japanese literature." I fully concur with that appraisal.

On Oct. 12, 1884, the day after Ogai arrived in Berlin, he visited Hashimoto Tsunatsune and at the latter's directive set off 10 days later for Leipzig. There he conducted research in hygienics under Hoffmann in the daytime and at night diligently read German literature. The day after the final entry in his voyage diary *Kosei Nikki* Ogai began his *Doitsu Nikki* (The German Journal), a journal recording his daily regimen of research in the natural sciences – especially hygiene – and his nightly absorption of Western culture primarily through literature. This journal began on Oct. 12, 1884, and concluded on May 14, 1888. As with *Kosei Nikki*, it appears that he wrote these entries in classical Chinese during his stay in Germany, but the version that we have today was rewritten by Ogai himself in later years in the same Japanese style as *Maihime*. It is a literary record of his younger years, and it is no exaggeration to say that it is like a picture scroll depicting with great verisimilitude the transformation of Ogai, who came from a small island-nation in the Far East, into a world-class international figure.

Ogai recorded in *Doitsu Nikki* only a small portion of the literature that he became acquainted with during his stay in Germany, so for a fuller picture it is helpful to consult his personal library which was donated to the University of Tokyo. One gets an overall view of the process by which he absorbed not only literature but also philosophy and social thought in the previously mentioned *Moso*.

Career as a Military Physician after Return to Japan

Following his return from Germany to Japan, Ogai was appointed as an instructor at the Army Medical School and in 1893 was appointed head of the school. During that period he published in succession three exceptional works based on his German experiences and set in Berlin, Dresden and Munich: *Maihime*, *Utakata no Ki* (A Sad Tale) and *Fumizukai* (The Courier). He steadily built his reputation as an excellent literal figure, and it was a time of dynamic and enlightening production for Ogai in two different fields – literature and hygienics.

In 1894 with the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, Ogai went to Manchuria as head of the medical corps of the commissariat attached to the Second Army, and in 1895 he returned to Tokyo to take up his old post. In 1898 he became head of the medical corps of the Imperial Guards in Tokyo; in 1899 became Chief Medical Officer of the 12th Division in the city of Kokura in northern Kyushu; and he remained there until returning to Tokyo in 1902 as Chief Medical Officer of the First Division. Upon the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904 he was sent to the front again as Chief Medical Officer of the Second Division, stationed in Manchuria until January 1906 when he returned to Japan to resume his former post. During these two wars, it was only natural that as an army officer and physician Ogai suspended literary activity, with the exception of composing *waka* poetry and short poems. But the fact that he did not resume writing at all in the period between the wars during his time in Kokura was due to the fact that he had become better known for his literary career than for his career as a military physician, and he wanted to avoid giving any cause for others in the military organization to find fault with himself. My interpretation of this is that for a number of reasons he felt that he should refrain from writing and publishing any novella that might be taken as flamboyant. However, especially during the Kokura period, he did complete his translation of the *Improvisatoren* by the well-known Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen, along with continued efforts to systematize his views on aesthetics and translate part of Karl von Clausewitz's *On War*. In addition, he devoted time to the study of French with a Father Bertrand, priest at a Catholic church in Kokura, while patiently awaiting a brighter day in the future.

Promotion to the Highest Rank for a Doctor in the Army – Contrasts with Soseki

The Russo-Japanese War came to an end, and in November 1907 Ogai was appointed to the highest rank for a doctor in the army, that of Surgeon General, and simultaneously appointed Director of the Bureau of Medical Affairs for the War Ministry. This promotion came about through the support of General Yamagata Aritomo, founder of Japan's modern army and the most powerful figure within the military. Approximately two years following this appointment, Ogai resumed his literary output.

That same year, 1907, was also a significant one for Ogai's rival Soseki. In April, Soseki resigned from all his positions at the First Higher School and the Tokyo Imperial University (now the University of Tokyo), and took a position with the Asahi Shimbun publishing company, where he was contracted to serialize novels in that newspaper. He

Photo: Mori Ogai Memorial Library

Mori Ogai at the age of 50 in 1911, in the period of his "abundant harvest"

was to go on to publish a large number of works every year that would build an admirable literary reputation. He undoubtedly came to the conclusion that, as long as his family's livelihood was guaranteed, it was better to be free to concentrate on writing than to continue as a halfhearted lecturer in a government school, suffering from any number of restraints.

In contrast, as an army officer on active duty Ogai and his flamboyant literary productivity were met with frowns within military circles. He endured the indignity of serving under Koike Masanao, a former classmate at the university, who was appointed Director of the Bureau of Medical Affairs nine years and several months before Ogai. But his abilities were recognized by Yamagata and he was finally promoted to the same highest position. Although he was not freed from all restrictions within the military circles, at the very least the mumblings from other active military doctors subsided. From 1909 on, he simultaneously produced translations of Western literary works and published his own writings. Many things led to this burst of activity, but there can be no doubt that the most important factor was his promotion to Surgeon General and Director of the Bureau of Medical Affairs two years previously.

Herein lies the clear distinction between Ogai and Soseki – the former writing in free time away from the duties of a full-time position as the highest-ranking military doctor in the country, and the latter surrendering his position as a lecturer to concentrate on writing full-time. As a consequence of this, the majority of Ogai's works are shorter, while Soseki serialized his much longer works in the newspaper – a fundamental difference in their work. Ogai's longer historical works were not written until he retired from active military duty.

Translations of Western Literature in a Period of Abundant Harvest

In comparison with the first period of Ogai's literary career – the period prior to the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1894, the period following the resumption of activity in 1909 was far superior in terms of both amount and quality, and that is why this period is referred to as that of his "abundant harvest." In contrast with the works of the early period from *Maihime* onward which were characterized by Romanticism, the works of the later period span a wider range. There are so-called "I"-novels like *Hannichi* (Half a Day) and *Vita Sexualis*; highly literary works like *Seinen* (Youth) and *Moso*; intellectual stories like *Chinmoku no To* (The Tower of Silence), *Shokudo* (The Dining Hall) and *Ka no yo ni* (As If); historical novels like *Okitsu Yagoemon no Isho* (The Last Testament of Okitsu Yagoemon); and historical biographies like *Shibue Chusai*. On top of this was a prodigious output of translations of Western masterpieces, and it must not be forgotten that these works had a major impact on the development of modern Japanese literature.

The early translations were primarily of novels by such writers as Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann, Heinrich von Kleist, Friedrich Wilhelm Hackländer, Alphonse Daudet and Ivan S. Turgenev. In contrast, the second period covered a broad range of works, including the writings of Hermann Sudermann, Arthur Schnitzler, Gerhart Hauptmann, Rainer Maria Rilke, August Strindberg, Henrik Ibsen, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Maurice Maeterlinck, Gustave Flaubert, Henri de Régnier and Aleksei K. Tolstoi. His greatest accomplishment in this period is surely the publication of the complete translation of parts one and two of *Faust* (1913) by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

From 1936 to 1939 Iwanami Shoten published *Ogai Zenshu* (The Complete Works of Mori Ogai) with his own writings in one portion and his translations in another. Of the total, his own novels, plays, poems, waka poetry, occasional essays, criticism, letters and diaries amounted to 22 volumes, while his translations filled 13 volumes. From this breakdown we can see just how significant a portion of his literary output the translations occupy. Moreover, the novellas of the early period including *Maihime* are based on his experiences abroad, and his works of the latter period employs the French that he acquired during his years in Kokura.

It is also important to note that in "Mukudori Tsushin," (Tidings from a Gray Starling) published from 1909 to 1913 in a monthly magazine *Subaru*, and "Mizu no anata yori," (From across the Waters) which he published from 1913 to 1914 in another monthly, Ogai introduced items that appeared in the

Photo: Kitakyushu City Board of Education

The German inscription on the plaque at the entrance of the Mori Ogai Gedenkstätte der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

daily German newspaper *Berliner Tageblatt*, articles ranging from the literary to the political to social. A perusal of these articles leads one to recall what must have been for Ogai the sweet, urbane years of his stay in Europe during his younger days. At moments one is astonished by the astuteness of his verdicts on certain events. In June 1914, for instance, at the end of an article introducing the story of the assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand, the heir apparent to the Austro-Hungarian throne, and his wife, Ogai writes, "The death of the Archduke and the Princess may be the starting point of a great war that will consume all of Europe" – a veritable prediction of the start of World War I.

From the summary above, I believe it is clear that among the literary figures of modern Japanese literature, there was no great man of letters who was as impressively internationally minded as was Mori Ogai. However, he was not a blind venerator of all of Western culture. It is clear in the opening passage of the first issue of the literary journal *Shigarami-Soshi* (The Weir) in October 1889 that he did not neglect to discriminate between what ought to be learned from the West and what could be ignored.

Attaining Lifelong Position

In April 1916 Ogai retired after 35 years of service as an army doctor to make way for the next generation, and in December 1917, upon the recommendation of Yamagata, he was appointed a curator for the Imperial Household Museum (now the Tokyo National Museum) and the director-general of the *Zusho-ryo* (now the Archives and Mausolea Department, Imperial Household Agency), a high position within the hierarchy of the Imperial Household Ministry and one which he held until he fell ill and died at the age of 60 in July 1922. Apart from the very brief periods when he held no post, he was on active duty to the end of his days. During the day he worked at the museum and the Imperial Household Ministry; at night he continued writing biographies of the Confucian physicians of the Tokugawa period (1603-1867). This pattern continued until October 1921, the year before his demise. In addition to this, he composed poems, read waka poetry, and continued writing a series of articles of criticism called "Furui Techo kara" from November 1921 to July 1922. These latter articles, in which he followed closely the transitions in social thought, continued until just before his death. The literary works, translations and academic articles on his specialty in military medicine – included in the Iwanami Shoten collected works, the first edition of which was published in 1975 and the second edition which was completed in 1990 – comes to a total of 38 volumes, evidence that Ogai lived a life several times fuller than that of an ordinary human being.

The Mori Ogai Memorial in Berlin

Ogai arrived in Berlin in 1884 and stayed in a hotel there. Following that he went to Leipzig, Dresden and Munich, returning to Berlin in 1887. He remained there from April until July of the following year, staying at three different pensions. Of these, the one at 32 Marienstrasse is the only one to survive the fires resulting from the battles of World War II. Today that building is preserved as the Mori Ogai Gedenkstätte der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, a memorial to Ogai and a center of Japanese culture attached to Humboldt University. I have visited this facility a number of times, and am always impressed to read the German inscription on the plaque, written by the university members, at the entrance to the building attesting to Mori Ogai as an international figure.

Von 1887-1888
wohnte hier
MORI OGAI
1862-1922
der Mitbegründer
der modernen
Japanischen
Literatur
Schriftsteller
und Kritiker
ERSTER JAPANISCHER
ÜBERSETZER DES FAUST,
DER WERKE LESSINGS
KLEISTS UND
E.T.A. HOFFMANNS

It reads: "Mori Ogai resided here (Berlin) from 1887 to 1888. As a writer and critic he solidified the foundation of modern Japanese literature, completed the first Japanese translation of *Faust*, and translated the works of Lessing, Kleist and Hoffmann." JJTI

Reference

1. Translation by Richard Bowring, in *Mori Ogai: Youth and Other Stories*, edited by J. Thomas Rimer (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), p.169.

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