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Translation Both Ways

After some three thousand years of written poetry it still seems necessary from time to time to stress that poetry and prose are separate languages. A convincing method of discovering what poetry is *not* would be to write out, as prose, what appears to be the 'meaning', the 'content' of any genuine poem. The poetry lies in what will have been forfeited in the process.

A comparatively recent publication⁽¹⁾ proves this point. Here, the reduction of Michelangelo's admittedly contorted poems to clotted and involved paragraphs in *prose* makes them extremely difficult to read. Nothing is gained by these unwieldy tactics. The sense that Michelangelo has distilled his reactions and re-cast the experience of 'real life' within the parallel dimension of art is totally lacking. Elizabeth Jennings's limp (and frequently inaccurate) versions⁽²⁾ are at least easier to understand: and although Peter Porter lacks any lyric touch, his attempt at formal translations⁽³⁾ assisted by George Bull's scholarship do coax the originals into some measure of clarity. This is not of course to claim that verse-structure alone 'makes the poem'. However, 'form' (as inseparable in fact from so-called 'free' as from rhymed or metred poetry) is an aspect of the poetic palette which should not (indeed cannot) be discounted.

Italian and English have the advantage of an alphabet in common. Also, versification in the latter (especially where the sonnet is concerned) has derived frequently from the former. Hence, if any translator wishes to mirror the effect of the original, there is a verse-mould already available for the new language to be poured into. Where, though, as in Japanese, not only the traditions of prosody but the very appearance and texture of the language differ totally, the problems inherent in translation enter an entirely new phase.

The haiku has, in many ways regrettably, been commandeered by other cultures. In Japanese itself over-use has meant that any barely literate writer can squeeze some banal aperçu into seventeen syllables. Nevertheless, it may be worth examining a few of the ways in which the finest, the most elusive and resonant haiku have been tackled.

For some odd reason Bashô's idiosyncratic and richly observant travelogue *Oku no Hosomichi* (*The Narrow Road to the Interior*) is wrongly referred to in English as *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. The poet began his journey in 1689, going on foot from Yedo in the east to Ogaki in the west, crossing the main island of Honshu in a loop but remaining the whole time over 150 kilometres from its northernmost shore. The poet records a nocturnal moment on the western coast, looking at the lonely island of Sado across a stormy sea beneath a sky cloud-free and glittering with stars. A tripartite canvas is proposed, set horizontally rather like a painting by Rothko: black water spray-flecked/rocky silhouette/night sky – signifying, as it were, ever-altering danger/distant and forbidding stasis /eternity.

Ara-umi ya Sado ni yokotau Ama-no-gawa

Although a haiku is made up of three units (five syllables/seven syllables/five syllables) there is no line-break for the eye in Japanese: the poem 'drips' down or along the page uninterruptedly. The inner ear detecting its shape makes the two requisite pauses.

The literal translation is 'Wild sea. Over Sado at an angle the Milky Way (in Japanese *The River of Heaven*).' The poem beginning with a turbulent ocean concludes with the peaceful flow – indeed, from a human standpoint, the unchanging brush-strokes – of a divine stream.

Harold G. Henderson in his immensely useful *Introduction to Haiku* preferred to try rhyme in his wish to provide a tight verse-form. He would often add a title in order to supplement the inevitable sparseness and delicate ellipses of the original and insert punctuation (absent in the Japanese) to give the 'spacing' implied:

The River of Heaven

So wild a sea –
and, stretching over Sado Isle,
the Galaxy...⁽⁴⁾

Yuasa Nobuyuki, who translated all Bashô's *Travel-Sketches* for Penguin, preferred a quatrain-form, altering the order sea/island/sky:

The great Milky Way
Spans in a single arch
The billow-crested sea,
Falling on Sado beyond.⁽⁵⁾

I decided to suppress the place-name as, used over the centuries as an unwelcome place of exile – also mined for gold, it must lack those contradictory resonances for an English reader:

Sea raging
while above
the island slanting spreads
The Milky Way⁽⁶⁾

In Ryôta's eighteenth-century poem

Yo-no-naka wa mikka minu ma ni sakura kana

his beautiful allusiveness ends on the wistfully untranslatable *kana*, roughly equivalent to *eheu*, *ahimé* or *alas*. The 'meaning' of the first four syllables is 'this world of ours'. Then there is a monosyllabic pause, the attention-getting sound *wa*, before the succeeding seven syllables: 'in an interval unobserved for three days' (which demonstrates the wry fact that English is often a mirror-language for Japanese, reversing here exactly the latter's word-order). And the word *sakura* is simply the word for 'cherry', implying 'blossom' and reminding us of spring. Ryôta hints human beings are so busy 'getting and spending' that we allow ourselves no time to gauge the changing loveliness of the seasons. Either we glance up from our temporary cares and see with casual surprise that blossom now adorns the boughs on the tree outside our window or we realise too late that the petals are no longer there. We have missed the flourish or the fall – either or both. The ambiguity is left to us.

Henderson gives a credible gloss:

Oh, the wide world's ways!
Cherry-blossoms left unwatched
even for three days!⁽⁷⁾

Bownas and Thwaite, avoiding rhyme, similarly leave much to the reader's imagination:

Oh, this hectic world –
Three whole days unseen,
The cherry-blossom!⁽⁸⁾

My version tries a clarification – perhaps loading the poem by being too explicit:

This is the world:
three days pass, you look up,
the blossom's out or fallen⁽⁹⁾

Written Japanese consisting as it does of *kanji* (Chinese ideograms) and two syllabaries derived therefrom, *hiragana* and *katakana* is far removed from the 'look' of an alphabetic language. *Hiragana*, cursive, more 'feminine', is used for the linking grammar; *katakana*, angular, more 'masculine', for transcribing (more or less accurately) foreign words and also for emphasis. Tanikawa Shuntarô's poem *Seidai (Generations)*⁽¹⁰⁾ wittily explores the differing effects of his written language; *kanji* keep their own counsel; *hiragana* is graceful; *katakana* is crude. When, at an International Poetry Festival in Rotterdam, he confesses that he cannot understand another visiting poet, he couches the word *kotoba (words)* in *katakana* so as to stress how 'foreign' the other language seems to him. Sometimes, if the reading of an ideograph is tricky (as all too often in Japanese), an editor will provide tiny *kana* at the side to indicate pronunciation. Ishihara Yoshirô, a prisoner-of-war in the USSR, included in one poem the two Chinese characters for *truth*, usually pronounced *shin jitsu*, but he ironically placed at the side the *kana* equivalent for *Pravda*. In *Post-War Japanese Poetry* we had to fall back on paraphrase: '*Pravda*/will report the truth from Moscow.'⁽¹¹⁾

I have recently had the privilege of working with the poet Daniele Serafini who has translated some of my poems into Italian. It is

fascinating (and highly salutary) to see one's work from the other side and come across difficulties undreamt of in composition. In 'A Lesson for Narcissus'⁽¹²⁾ I used the word *quite* in the line

the set of sensual tricks I quite enjoyed

to mean 'not especially' but Daniele's brilliant version

lo scenario di trucchi sensuali che a te piacevano molto

takes the adverb more enthusiastically – and, in fact, if one reads the line aloud, stressing the word *quite* – lifting instead of dropping the voice – it does lend quite (!) a different connotation.

I have also been most fortunate in my Japanese translators. There are extremely few plurals in Japanese (only, really, *children, friends, days, we, you not thou*) as each noun floats as a concept which you can interpret as you will. This is why various translators have given the title of a novel like Futabatei Shimei's *Ukigumo* as *Drifting Clouds* or the *Drifting Cloud*. Kijima Hajime in *Siren-Voices*⁽¹³⁾ solves the problem by rendering my *waves* as *nami mata nami* (*wave then wave*). *Hypocrisy* is splendidly translated as *hattari* (*playing to the audience*). Kajima Shôzô's excellent translation of *At Shoreham*⁽¹⁴⁾ solves the difficulty of *linen* in 'Your hair/ Floats, blonde on linen' when he uses the 'foreign' word *sheets* in *katanaka* to imply the presence of the bed: 'Omae no kaxni wa/shiroi *shiitsu* ni kinshoku ni tadayou'. Unfortunately, transcription into *romaji* loses the subtle effect of the way Japanese poets balance their choice of ideographs and either syllabary. Other devices need to be brought into play, typographic and linguistic, in a hopeful attempt to convey not only the 'content' of the original but the sorcery of its shape on the printed page.

Yarnazaki Eiji's luminous translation of line 3 of *A Bar in Lerici*⁽¹⁵⁾ 'Reflecting on what's done, the days contract' is 'Nasareta koto o kaerimitsutsu, nichinichi wa karada o chijimeru'. He chooses the suffix *-tsutsu* to catch the tempo of the present participle and echoes its repetition with *nichinichi* (the plural of *day*). But, putting the line back into the original English, it would be hard to match Yamazaki's sparing use of ideographs (four only) and the leisurely, 'reflective' appearance of the cursive pillar of his *hiragana*.

Japanese lends itself exquisitely to the display of concrete poetry, a genre able to be apprehended with the minimum of ‘interference’ from explanation. Niikuni Seiichi’s work in particular is so scrupulous, so uncluttered, so pared down that, not surprisingly, it has been successfully exhibited internationally, not least at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1974. His ‘Rain’⁽¹⁶⁾ of 1966 places the one ideograph at the precise centre of the base of the page and, extracting the four minute strokes within the character, allows them to fall symmetrically all over the sheet in tiny droplets. In fact, he is giving back to the formalised symbol the visual quality of its remote origin. In the same year he divided a page diagonally: one triangle has, repeated, the three strokes of *River*, the other the same ideograph – but, this time, with its intervening ‘commas’ to indicate *Sandbank* so that we see in language and depiction the juxtaposition – rivalry and co-existence – of a stretch of water and an exposed area of beach⁽¹⁷⁾.

In 1970 another single-page poem of Niikuni’s printed the ideograph for *Snow* (itself the symbol for *Rain* placed above a rake to show what has to be done with frozen rainfall) symmetrically 1,353 times (41 x 33). In the exact centre, vulnerable and hardly detectable, is the tiny ideograph for *Flower*. Here again, the only ‘footnote’ needed is the meaning of each character beneath the poem/picture which is conveying late autumn and the final blossom – or perhaps the defiance of the first primrose in a harsh March⁽¹⁸⁾.

Sky⁽¹⁹⁾ is a tranquil evocation of infinity. An empty square of paper is rimmed by the thin halves of the ideograph for *Cloud*: all that is required to contemplate this vision of endless space is the title translated and the complete character shown with the English word beside it.

Niikuni’s grim warning about pollution⁽²⁰⁾ conveys a pun, showing the sign for *Sea* (pronounced *umi*) isolated in a tiny clear space hemmed in menacingly by dozens of the ideograph for *Pus* (all crammed together and therefore dirty-looking) which happens also to be pronounced *umi*.

Ishii Yutaka (another member of the ASA Group founded by Niikuni in 1964 specifically to experiment with the appearance of a poem) examines the structure of the ideograph for *Darkness* (which is the character for *Sound* inside the one for *Gate*) by placing the

separated components in white in the centre of a jet-black page. The poem is entitled *Evening Bell*⁽²¹⁾: the sound appears larger than the temple-entrance because the ringing of the bell would echo beyond the confines of the precinct. This makes an oblique reference to a haiku in which Bashô wonders what on earth people dwelling in a village without bells can do ‘at dusk, in spring’ if there is no blend of chime and twilight to give magic to evening. In Ishii’s poem *Mirror*⁽²²⁾ we see just one ideograph in the middle of a blank page: it is the symbol for *Face* – reversed!

Tanikawa Shuntarô is almost certainly the best-known Japanese poet writing today. He has been collaborating for years with the American poet William I. Elliott and the scholar Kawamura Kazuo so that his work is lucidly available in English in several bi-lingual editions. This short poem ‘Shukudai’ (‘Homework’) is a fine example of his quasi-throwaway style which flicks a contemporary nerve:

With eyes closed,
I saw God.

When I peeked,
God vanished.

My homework will be to find out
whether I can see God
with my eyes wide open.⁽²³⁾

Another fascinating bi-lingual publication of theirs is *Traveler/Hibi: Poems on Five Themes*. The subjects treated by Elliott and Tanikawa are *Childhood; Poetry; Poets; Parting; Death*. Each poem has been translated into the other’s language. Tanikawa’s reflection on a fellow-poet ‘Nandaka ochikoboreta *supai* mitai na otoko’⁽²⁴⁾ is rendered by Elliott and Kawamura as ‘He looks like an unsuccessful spy’⁽²⁵⁾ – a nice nod in the direction of Browning’s ‘How It Strikes a Contemporary’. The repeated line in Elliott’s ‘Villanelle’⁽²⁶⁾

We have to ask the whether and the why

is translated so as to match both rhythm and alliteration:

Sô da to shite mo dô shite to towanakute Wa.⁽²⁷⁾

Tanikawa's 'Seichô' ('Growing')⁽²⁸⁾ may possibly for Westerners offer one exotic note as a Japanese boy-child loses his 'top-knot' at the age of seven. Apart from this, we surely respond easily and wholeheartedly to the charm and truth of these epigrammatic comments on the path towards maturity, proving once again (if proof is needed) that poetry is an international language:

Three –

I had no past

Five –

my past stopped yesterday

Seven –

my past stopped with a top-knot

Eleven–

my past stopped with dinosaurs

Fourteen –

my past was nothing but school-books

Sixteen –

I timidly looked at the past's infinitude, and

Eighteen –

I don't know what time is

According to Auden 'Time will say nothing but I told you so'. Any good poem will call our attention to unrecognised verities and it is comforting to discover how time and time again the challenge of a foreign language brings us face to face with ourselves.

1. *Michelangelo*. Translated and edited by Christopher Ryan. J.M. Dent. 1998.
2. *The Sonnets of Michelangelo*. Translated by Elizabeth Jennings. Carcanet. 1988.
3. *Michelangelo: Life, Letters and Poetry*. Oxford. 1992.
4. *An Introduction to Haiku*. Doubleday. 1958. p. 41.
5. *Bashô: Travel—Sketches*. Penguin. 1966. p. 131.
6. *The Elek Book of Oriental Verse*. Edited by Keith Bosley. 1979. p. 64.
7. Henderson. Op. cit. p. 114.
8. *The Penguin Book of Japanese Verse*. 1964. p. 120.

9. *A Puzzling Harvest: Collected Poems 1955-2000*. Anvil Press. 2002. p. 483.
10. *Two Billion Light-Years of Solitude*. Hokuseido Press. 1996. p. 20.
11. *Post-War Japanese Poetry*. Penguin. 1972. p. 47.
12. *A Puzzling Harvest*. p. 314.
13. *Ibid.* p. 348.
14. *Ibid.* p. 22.
15. *Ibid.* p. 58.
16. *Post-War Japanese Poetry*. p. 96.
17. *Ibid.* p. 95.
18. *ASA Vol. 4 No. 4*. 1970. p. 47.
19. *Post-War Japanese Poetry*. p. 98.
20. *Ibid.* p. 100.
21. *ASA Vol. 6 No. 6*. 1972 p. 50.
22. *Ibid.* p. 35.
23. Tanikawa. *Op. cit.* p. 30.
24. *Traveler/Hibi: Poems on Five Themes*. Midnight Press. 1995. p. 28.
25. *Ibid.* p. 30.
26. *Ibid.* p. 40.
27. *Ibid.* p. 42.
28. *Two Billion Light-Years of Solitude*. p. 17.