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ON TRANSLATING POETRY

TRANSLATED BY SHO SUGITA

The haiku that Miyamori Asataro translated into English is said to be fairly popular outside of Japan, but the impressions transmitted for foreigners through those translations are questionable. Most likely, the level of understanding of the Japanese is either through *The Mikado* or a reading of haiku as *haikai* humor. Too often, Japanese authors revered by foreigners are not purely Japanese, but rather the conceptualization of “Fujiyama” or “geisha girls” they would like to accommodate without any inconsistencies, a kind of “tempura frying” of pseudo-Japan. Because they do not understand what is truly Japanese, what is truly Japanese makes them yawn. Perhaps the reason Miyamori’s translations are accepted in the West is due to his translations of typical *haikai*-esque haikus.

Komiya Romioka, who wanted to provide examples for the impossibility of translations, references the following translation by Miyamori:

The ancient pond!

A frog plunged—splash!

(*koike ya kaeru tobikomū mizu no oto*)

Komiya claims that the rhetorical axis of haiku is placed on particles like *ya* from *koike ya* that serves as a *kireji*¹. In this particular example, *ya* implies a temporal development, accentuating the ancient pond as something that existed from long ago. In addition, he also claims the particle implies a permanent idea of reality in conjunction with the aforementioned idea of temporality, as the two are displayed against an emotional subjectivity. The poem is split by the *kireji*, and the following *kaeru tobikomū mizu no oto* (“a frog plunged—splash!”) is expressed as an “immediate impression of the real.” By cancelling out an “immediate impression” with “permanent reality,” Basho’s quiet view of “nothingness” is achieved. However, Miyamori translates this *ya* by using the “!” of foreign languages. The symbol “!” merely signals an interjection, so it cannot possibly express a conceptualization of the temporal or existential. Because *kireji* like *ya* used in haiku holds a wealth of meaning in this complex language, Komiya states that this very point is most problematic in translations.

Komiya also writes on the associativity of language. For example, the work *koike* (“pond”) can directly associate itself with ponds in old temples or the small moss-covered pools in gardens for the Japanese imagination; in the West, they would probably imagine the bright blue lakes found in the Alps or Switzerland, because they do not have the same kind

1 Lit. “cutting word,” a Japanese particle used in poetry to often provide emphasis/es on the preceding words. Because Japanese poetry does not traditionally use line breaks, the effect could be thought of as analogous (though this is only my own interpretation for the function of *kireji*)

of humidity in Japan. A frog jumping into such an image can't possibly be of any poetic value. Moreover, a "frog" has a special poetic value attached to it, making us feel a kind of seasonality specific to our experience of summer. For a Westerner, these special associations are probably replaced with hideous bullfrogs.

Komiya's criticism seems common sense and obviously truthful, and it's even strange to think that it caused a problem in the literary coteries. Even for someone like myself without much knowledge of foreign languages can read the English translations of Basho and think his haiku was not properly interpreted. To be honest, reading these translations is too much monkey business, and I can't help but to always bust out in laughter. What is more convincing of the impossibility in translation is that these translations are by a respected language scholar like Mr. Miyamori and regarded as a "classic translation."²

Someone long ago translated the poem *hana no kumo kane wa ueno ka asakusa ka* as the following:

The clouds of flowers
Where are the bells from?
Ueno or Asakusa

Westerners read this and responded by asking, "is this a poem about a funeral?" For such an eccentric question, their reasoning was very convincing. With the word "flower," the Japanese readers immediately associate the word with cherry blossoms, but to a Western reader, flowers are often associated with flowers like dahlias, tulips, and cineraria. And so, the phrase "clouds of flowers" provides an image of a flowerbed, wreath, or bouquet full of these Western flowers. In addition, the word "bells" would suggest to the Japanese reader a Buddhist temple or a subtle and profound temple bell; however, the Westerners think of the lively melodious bells of Christian churches. Thus, perhaps for the Western reader's mental image, a Christian church rings throughout the town and beautiful bouquets pass through them like clouds, rendering an image of a funeral.

If one is supposed to legitimately translate these haikus, some words should be kept in its original language, e.g. *hana* should replace "flower" and *kane* should replace "chimes" or "bells." In other words, without using the original words from the original poem, translation

2 Miyamori's translations are still reprinted today by Dover Press (2002, 2006, and 2011).

could be thought of as an impossible task.

Possible translations of haikus are limited to ones with very little associative and poetic content, but in place of that kind of content, provide an intellectual description. An example would be Basho's *mono ieba kuchibiru samushi* (Were I to say a word / my lips turn chill / in the autumn wind), or Buson's *makemajiki sumo wo nemonogatari kana* (An invincible sumo wrestler / never should have lost / a bedside conversation with his wife). Particular representative works of mediocre "humanist" haiku like that of Kagano Chiyojo, like *tonbo tsuri kyo wa doko made itta yara* (Dragonfly catching / where was it / that they went today?), *mi ni shimiru kaze ya shoji ni yubi no ato* (To impress deeply in the body/ the wind and shoji window / like fingerprints), *asagao ni tsurubetorarete morai mizu* (Morning glory / robbing me of my bucket / I ask my neighbor for some water)—these poems have diluted the poetic values from image and vision into primarily "humanistic" concerns, which makes the poems easy to translate for a foreign reader.

Although Patrick Lafcadio Hearn (also known under his Japanese name Koizumi Yakumo) was perhaps the most informed of Japanese culture of the Japanese, his understanding of haiku was limited to the type of mediocre haikus written by Kagano Chiyojo. Needless to say, there is no way that a Westerner who has not read Japanese literature or know anything about Japanese culture would understand Basho and haiku by reading Mr. Miyamori's translations. It is likely that what they would feel from the phrase *koike ya* through the translation would be akin to the aforementioned *hana no kumo*, painting an entirely different subjective poetic-vision with what they imagine through their fantasy of Oriental exoticism.

Quite reasonably, poetry's special characteristic is that each reader can have a different kind of subjective fantasy in relation to the work, and translation of poetry can construct a capricious vision by the foreign reader with a capriciously subjective interpretation of the work. It could be said that the translation of poetry actually welcomes that kind of interference, and that that interference is one of the goals of translating poetry. A rigorous linguistic investigation is therefore unnecessary, and from the personal standpoint of the translator, that free and capricious adaptation is favored. One could even say that all translations are better if they are mistranslated.

Against Mr. Komiya's opinion, Mr. Miyamori's response on the Yomiuri Newspaper was utterly senseless. Mr. Komiya simply quoted Mr. Miyamori's translations to illustrate an opinion that claims the haiku is impossible to translate into foreign languages. The intension

was not to criticize the work itself. However, Mr. Miyamori, after proudly boasting how his translations have been accepted abroad by making a list of his translated works, expresses his anger by stating that Mr. Komiya's criticism is outrageous—that even foreigners are praising his work, and that a criticism from a Japanese is a disgraceful act, not something a compatriot should do. For all that bickering, he never addresses the fundamental issue on the possibility of translation, not once providing an honest argument, only to cry like a little child that it's *possible*, playing a wily trick with a straw-man to beat up on Mr. Komiya's "linguistic capabilities."

Though a person like Miyamori is a famous language scholar, reading the Yomiuri article made me feel a kind of disdain for his character. The things he says are completely senseless, and his mind is like that of a junior high school student. Claiming that a Japanese couldn't criticize a translation that is praised abroad because of the social standing of a Japanese, he probably thinks that Komiya is commenting upon the linguistic results of his translations. Komiya's opinion, however, is not about Miyamori's linguistic capabilities, but rather about the mere possibility of translating poetry. In Miyamori's mind, the translation of poetry is possible as long as one has the linguistic capacity to do so. I thought to myself, language scholars must really be stupid. All honest translators in the past have put disclaimers in prefaces that are similar to that of Mr. Komiya's opinion. Horiguchi Daigaku, for example, titled one of his prefaces in a book of translation as "A Lost Jewel," and Professor Ueda Bin has constantly apologized in books for the impossibility of translations. The reason for this is that the more one reads poetry, or the deeper they get a taste for poetry, the more they eventually understand that it can't be translated into another language. Provided that Mr. Miyamori actually understands haiku, he must feel a sense of embarrassment when he is praised abroad. That would at least indicate that he understands that the translation of poetry (especially haiku) can never satisfy itself as a translation, no matter how much linguistic talent the translator might have.

Poe's expressive effect in the vers libre titled "The Raven" comes from words like "never," "more," and "Lenore"—words that suggest a remoteness, like a wind blowing through a cemetery, somehow sorrowful but at the same time creepy, with phonemes that constantly reverberate in that way. Poe consciously repeats these as a motif in his poem, and the poem is composed through the cyclic reverberation of his expressive language. Take out that reverberation out of "The Raven," and the reader is left with nothing but a meaningless word salad. With that in mind, can anyone translate his poetry into Japanese? I think this example illustrates again the impossibility of translation.

I once wrote a poem called “Fowl.” To be honest, this poem was an adaptation of Poe, expressing the cry of a fowl by elongating the mora of phrases like *toutekuuru* or *mourutou*³, imitating his poetic imagination and techniques of expression found in the “Raven.” What can be taken from this exercise is that poetry is something a poet should “adapt,” and not something a poet should “translate.”

Someone long ago translated the Chinese poem *Er yue san yue ri chichi. Dongxing xixing yun youyou*⁴ into Japanese. This was translated into Japanese as *Kisaragi, yayoi, hi nodoka. Todamayuki kozamayuki, kumo uraura*. This is definitely a faithful translation. The problem is, this Japanese translation doesn’t have any value as a work of art, and it fails to transfer a poetic impression into an effective representation. There is a waka in the Shin-Kokinshu that is a Japanese-style translation of the Chinese poem *Lushan yueshen caoan zhong*⁵, rendered as *Mukashi omou kusa no iori no yoru no ame ni namida nasoeso yama hototogisu*. This is not a translation, but an adaptation of the poet Bai Juyi. However, the song possesses an independent value as art, at the same time retaining the essential poetic mood of the original. In terms of a poem translated from a foreign language, what readers really want are not verbatim translations of a poem, but a direct *poesie* of the original, the poetic mood as a whole. That explains how poetry is something to be adapted, not translated. What I mentioned earlier about mistranslations being the favored translations of poetry lies here. The function of translated poetry is merely to transfer the ideas of the original poem. Its self-imposed limitations cause people to think translating poetry is possible. But thoughts in poetry are carried by words that wrap associations, images, and rhythm inside itself, living as an organism that can’t be analyzed by science. Only translating the literary composition of the original can’t possibly convey the meaning of the poem. To be able to convey the holistic meaning of the poem, one would be forced to analyze every single word of the original and provide exhaustive annotations, but ultimately to make it work, the translator would have to compose his own creation as an adaptation—his only surviving tactic.

All translated poetry is a creation of the translator, and holds its own value as an adaptation. In other words, the translator infuses the original inside of himself as a “cellularization” of

3 Adds an extra moraic vowel sound to the phrases meaning “to pass through” and “in coming,” respectively.

4 “February, March, the days are slow. Towards East, towards West, the clouds meander.” The Japanese translation reads as a “Japanese reading of Chinese,” rather than a translation.

5 “While on Mount Lu, I listen to the night rain in a grass hut” The Japanese version metaphorizes the “night rain” as a cuckoo’s cry.

his artistic body, and with that successful infusion he gains authorship for the first time. An example of this can be Baudelaire's translation of Poe, still considered a "classic translation." All classic translations are the translator's creation, and are ultimately adaptations.

Mori Ogai's translation of "*Improvisatoren*" is said to have surpassed the original. The people who read the translation expressed their discontent and loss of hope when they read the original. "*Improvisatoren* wasn't a translation. That was Ogai's creation. We were duped by Mr. Ogai," they said. They're completely right about that—the *Improvisatoren* that we read in Japanese was definitely Ogai's own adaptation. Furthermore, that's what makes it a "classic translation." All good translations are "creations." People who are reading Poe through Baudelaire's translations are actually reading Baudelaire's poems—they're not reading Poe.

Horiguchi Daigaku is well known as a poet and translator of French literature. The Verhaeren, Simmons, and Cocteau translated by Horiguchi are written in Horiguchi's singular style, a "Horiguchi-style lyric." In essence, his translations are his own creations. I met a young kid once, who claimed he loved Verhaeren, passionately read Verhaeren, and adored Verhaeren in his heart. He wanted to show me his own poems, and he said, "I think I'm quite influenced by Verhaeren..." I answered him when I finished reading his poems, telling him, "I see no influence of Verhaeren here. It looks like an imitation of Horiguchi."

There was a time when the Symbolist Verhaeren was popular amongst the Japanese coteries. Back in the day, young progressive poets were praised for "being influenced by Verhaeren." Reading the poems written back then, what amazes me is that they're complete imitations of Kawaji Ryuko. Kawaji Ryuko translated many Verhaeren poems back then—there's no truth as laughable as this.

What I caution people who read poetry in translation is, first and foremost, that they make sure the translator is as a poet and literary scholar who is at least in equal footing or above the original author. In a worst-case scenario, the reader should see whether or not the translator has talent in line with the original author. If the translator doesn't have the credentials that compare to the original author—a bogus poet—it would be much smarter for them to avoid reading the translation. The reason is, poetry in translation is the creation of the translator himself, and only through the unification of the translator's various characteristics like conception, technique, and style passing through his bloodstream can one see through the spirit of the original poem. Moreover, the value of the original poem continuously matches the value of the translator as a poet. If

the translator is a bogus poet, the original poem's value becomes that of a bogus poem. Baudelaire sold Poe to the French at its retail value. However, many other translators have depreciated the value of its original authors, selling them at a give-away price.

The impossibility of translation, all together, as a fundamental problem, is not limited to poetry. It is a problem related to literature in general, and more essentially, it is related to the process of transplanting foreign cultures. As one example, the word real was translated as *genjitsu* in Japanese. The problem is, the word real has more implications than our word *genjitsu*—implications of a deeper philosophical meaning related to “something truthful,” “something certain,” something devoid of illusions and semblances, absolutely “something existential.” Because the Japanese mistranslated the word real into *genjitsu*, the so-called realism of Japan simply wrote the aesthetics of the everyday, penning the flat and meaningless reality of their lives, reduced into “*mijika shosetsu*,” a novel depicting the author's personal life. Such kinds of “realism” do not exist overseas—not one example of this would you be able to find in the West. Similarly, naturalism was translated as *shizen shugi*, a mistranslation of a similar magnitude. The malformation of naturalism in Japan created a fad in Japanese literature with a unique sense of sketch-like “ekphrastic” novels.

To be truthful, there is no way that we can translate foreign languages. We have similar words that can approximate the original—nothing more than rough “make do's.” However, because the Japanese don't historically have a literary ideology, we didn't have the approximate words for the importation of Western literature that is rooted in philosophical ideologies. Diving deep into the seas of words, we reluctantly chose the words “*genjitsu*” and “*shizen*,” forcing a strained translation onto ourselves. Eventually, realism and naturalism, along with various other Western literary movements, ended without ever faithfully translating its ideals.

In terms of importing foreign cultures, we find through the above example that translation is impossible, that we actually only “adapt,” and that all importation of foreign cultures are nothing more than our subjective “creations.” Our own Japanese history that assimilated itself with Chinese culture can be a testament to this truth.

The Japanese military takes all foreign loanwords and translate them into unnecessarily difficult Japanese (though actually Chinese). For example, they call tanks *gunyou jidousha* (“military automobiles”) or *soukou jidousha* (“armored automobiles”). Certain military officers tell their new recruits, “the Japanese military is fundamentally different from foreign

militaries,” and their naïve recruit asks them, “Sir, aren’t sabers Western swords?” The officer responds, “you’re not holding sabers, son, we call these *shidoutou* (“parade sword”) in the Japanese military. Do you understand me, rookie!” The recruit asks another question, “then what do we call *rappa*, sir?” The officer says, “you idiot! *Rappa*⁶ is Japanese!”

This illustrates a caricature of ultranationalism. Ultranationalists work hard to unnaturally create a strained translation of foreign cultures. In contrast, progressive and international people try to faithfully translate the original as it is. If we look at the end result, both merely adapt, but speaking in terms of conscience, the latter is more correct. The former mistranslates foreign cultures with a goal of mistranslating.

The converted Marxists knew the impossibility of translation. They’re more intelligent than literary scholars. The reason is, Japanese literary scholars still take their mock-naturalism and mock-realism, flatter themselves with their later-period capitalist modern literature, and they act as though it’s in equal footing with current trends abroad. Absurdly enough, the scholars are still proud of themselves.

6 Rappa: trumpet. The word “rappa” is usually written in katakana, a phonetic writing system that differentiates itself from hiragana. Katakana is usually used exclusively for foreign loanwords, while hiragana is used for domestic/domesticated words. Katakana is occasionally used for Japanese words when the kanji characters (Chinese characters) are excessively complex, which creates Hagiwara’s caricature of the ultranationalists. In addition, the caricatured officer doesn’t realize that the word “rappa” is itself a domesticated word of Dutch origin. 喇叭 (roeper [Dutch] → laba [Chinese] → rappa [Japanese]) → ラツパ *rappa*