Loss and Betrayal: Some Little Pitfalls of Translation

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> It's better to ask and be embarrassed once, than not to ask and be embarrassed always.
>
> Japanese proverb

Rather than repeating the famous remark by the poet Robert Frost, or the well-known Italian adage, with which writings on translation usually begin, I will let the title do that for me, and move directly to the subject. I should like to gather some reflections on what can go wrong in translating haiku, drawing partly on my own experience, and partly on observation of other people's work. I hope that at least some of this might be instructive.

Though never formally trained in Japanese, my interest in haiku, and then living in Japan, brought me into contact with others who wished for some assistance with translation. Poetry, particularly modern Irish poetry, was my point of entry, so I began with a sense that the language of poetry was different and special, not just bits of prose cut up. (Irish poetry, even while embracing Modernism, has tended toward formality, leading one contemporary poet to complain of "the tyranny of the well-made poem"). After first being asked by the late Kazuo Satō to help him revise some English versions of haiku for publication in a journal, I was then asked, on his introduction, to help Kōko Katō in the same capacity. She did not then have her own group or journal, but was a member of another *kessha*, from which she later broke away. The small book she brought out before that, called simply *Haiku in English*, had a verse by then prime minister Yasuhiro Nakasone, who is now, at the age of a hundred, figure-heading the move to have haiku listed as a form of Intangible Cultural Heritage at UNESCO.

Once Kōko Katō had declared independence and set up her own group and journal *Kō*, with a twice-yearly issue in English, I was asked to help with further translations, and happily agreed. The work that I did with her, like most of what I have done, consisted of my revising the English versions that she had already selected and prepared. There was some confusion at first as to how this would be accomplished, since in order to do the revision I felt I needed to try and understand the original as well as I could, so it was not merely a question of grammar and punctuation, and could not be done simply on the telephone. Although the drafts came from her in English, we have always spoken in Japanese, which probably helped my understanding, and over the years I became accustomed to reading her notes in Japanese as well. But for the principles and process of revision, I had no models and was feeling my way. When the results were then assembled into a book some years later, the questions became more pressing.

The book that eventually appeared, some twenty years ago, had vocabulary notes and commentary, besides the translation, and each haiku was allotted a single page, though the notes occasionally ran onto a second one. All the names in the book appeared in Japanese order, family name first (the method that I shall use from now on here), except for the editor herself on the cover and the title page. That was one of many small matters that needed some consideration as the book took shape, and I was careful, for example, to add "she" to the note about the poet when it was appropriate. Dates of birth and group affiliation were also given, but even this information often did not help much with the interpretation of the poem, so I decided to add some further notes, about things that a reader like myself might want to know. These notes included information about plants and flowers, for which I assiduously searched reference books. Often plants have more than one name, besides the Latin one, and at the very least, I thought, the reader would want to know the colour of a flower that was mentioned. Books and artworks were also occasionally invoked, and seemed to merit explanation too. It was interesting to do this, but in one case it led to an interpretation that was itself misleading. Making up the method as I went along, I generally aimed at a three-line

pattern of 5-7-5, testing the sound of it myself. Inevitably the rhythm came out of a British or Irish speaking voice, and I did not invariably cleave to the syllabic pattern, but was prepared to abandon this if it did not seem to work, and often did so. Now only a dozen, or perhaps a score, of the English versions seem to me satisfactory still, but one in particular was misconstrued, and remained so even after some corrections had been made to a second printing. I was not aware of this until one day when I was taken to visit the author of the verse, Kaneko Tohta, at his home in Kumagaya, and the book was produced:

蒼海に鵜や餓鬼やいて泳ぎけり
sōkai ni u ya gaki ya ite oyogikeri

In the blue sea
where cormorants and hungry ghosts
have already swum[1]

The poet's son, who was holding the book, said simply that *gaki* just means "kids," and I realized that this embarrassing mistake was the result of over-explanation. The literal meaning of the word, which I had dug out of the dictionary, is indeed "hungry ghosts," or *preta*, a Buddhist term for someone whose desires can never be satisfied, but in ordinary speech it is a colloquial term for kids, brats, urchins, active and restless as they are. It is humorous as well, and my error had been to take the primary meaning of the word, and not its contextual one, the one intended in this case.

Literalness, then, can be misleading, and I am not the only one to have encountered it in rendering this poet. One of the four volumes of his work introduced by Richard Gilbert, leading a group of translators, has a similarly puzzling verse. The books are replete with information, and stimulating to read, though occasionally careless. I was puzzled by this poem in the first of the two volumes devoted to the haiku:

屋上に洗濯の妻空母海に
okujō ni sentaku no tsuma kūbo umi ni

in the loft
my wife does the laundry —
on the sea
the aircraft carrier[2]

Although *okujō* is usually "rooftop," the Kon Nichi Translation Group have chosen to render this as "loft" (*yaneura*), the space below a sloping roof. What is hard to understand is why anyone would do their laundry there. Are we to imagine the poet's wife climbing up and down a ladder with buckets of water and wet washing? It doesn't make sense. The poem is dated several years after the war, when the recently married poet and his wife were living in the port of Kobe. Whether they had a washing-machine isn't clear, but certainly the place for doing the laundry would have been on the ground floor, and possibly outdoors. What is intended here is the small platform for drying laundry (*monohoshi-dai*) that often extended from the roof of a house, or an upper part, and would have been common then. This can still be seen occasionally today, especially in the country. What the poet's wife is doing, then, is hanging the laundry out to dry, and this domestic image is combined with the ominous presence of an aircraft carrier (lit. "sky mother," a mother ship for planes) in the offing. Perhaps the poet can see both and is himself outside. The poet has returned to ordinary civilian life and the war is over, yet the aftermath of war still lingers, like the ship in the distance.

Neither this poem nor the one above occurs in either of the two small volumes of commentary that I have on the work of Kaneko Tohta, so I am not able to clarify them any further, but in each case the rendering of a single word has skewed the meaning of the poem. In neither case is this disastrous for the book in question, among hundreds of other poems, but both show what can go wrong when the wording of the original is not seen in sufficient context.

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A frequent tendency, or temptation, in translating haiku, is to reverse the order of the poem, to make it sound more natural according to the rules of English syntax. It is not only beginning translators who tend to do

this, though experience inclines one perhaps more towards preserving the original form.

There are numerous questions of style that might be discussed, but these are subsidiary, and often a matter of taste. Sometimes the reader may feel they want to alter or improve the poem to their own liking, a habit that has been encouraged by translations that include literal versions, word for word renderings. This is by no means something new in the business of rendering poems into English, and it was done extensively with Chinese and then Japanese poetry in the early days of Modernism, a century ago. It may, however, lead the "translator" to produce versions that, for better or worse, depart from the meaning of the original, or the intention of the poet. Haiku being so short, and scholarly volumes with literal translations or notes, such as those by Harold G. Henderson or Makoto Ueda, being widely available, anyone can have a go. A matter for concern in this may be how far it travels from what it started with, how much it is actually altered. Versions of Bashō, for example, are now so numerous that anyone can make their own, but one case that did give me a little pause came when an Irish friend asked me to find the original of a verse by Bashō, for publication.

The poem was to be quoted in an essay on philosophy by an American scholar, who wanted to add the words in Japanese to accompany what he had come across in English. It took me about two hours to track it down, from book to book, and with some help from the internet, and I concluded that it was a version of a version, both by Sam Hamill. This is what I had been originally given:

> Come out to view
> the truth of flowers blooming
> in poverty

There was an accompanying query as to whether the word "truth" was an appropriate translation. I found the poem in a volume selected by Sam Hamill called *The Sound of Water: Haiku by Bashō, Buson, Issa, and Other Poets* (1995), but without the Japanese.[3] Searching a bit further, I found what appeared to be another version by the same author, in *The Essential*

Bashō (1998), this time with the Japanese in roman letters:

> Grass for a pillow,
> the traveler knows best how
> to see cherry blossoms[4]

The first word, literally "grass pillow," is a reference to travel, life on the road. It is not a well-known verse, but Oseko Toshiharu, in *Basho's Haiku*, Vol. 2 (1996), gives it as:

> 草枕まことの華見しても来よ
> *kusamakura makoto no hanami shite mo koyo*
>
> Sleeping on a journey,
> Learn the right way to enjoy
> Viewing the blossoms![5]

It was presented as a mild admonition, the explanation tells us, to Rotsū, one of Bashō's more refractory disciples, who was about to set off on a journey to the north. It is a piece of advice, then, rather than a sermon ("Consider the lilies of the field") or meant to impart a profound spiritual truth. Whether this *makoto* means "truth" in the sense implied by the first version above, is a moot point. To the gentle Onitsura, a contemporary of Bashō, it meant something more like "sincerity." I advised caution in the use of the haiku, and supplied what information I had found. It may no longer be necessary to be a scholar to render Bashō, or the other major haiku poets, so many versions being available already: in the late Jane Reichhold's *Basho: The Complete Haiku*, there are no titles in Japanese at all among her sources.[6]

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The explosion of the internet has made all this much better, and much worse. On the one hand, it is now very easy to find information about the flora and fauna referred to in the poems, and even to call up images for reference. The names of obscure people can be discovered quickly, and unusual readings of characters revealed, but care still has to be taken. I always keep in mind an experience that I once had in helping somebody

translate a poem: the draft I had been given had a young girl stepping on "pedals," but when I checked the original I discovered that it was actually "petals." So she wasn't riding a bicycle, but walking over fallen blossoms, quite a different thing.

The editor of the Irish haiku website *Shamrock*, Anatoly Kudryavitsky, occasionally adds haiku from other European languages, with his own translations into English. Born in Russia, I supposed that he might be familiar with some East European languages, for instance, and perhaps make use of dictionaries or translation software for others that he did not know. I went to a library once myself for help in revising some haiku from Romanian, hoping to enlarge my understanding of the original in order to clarify the English versions. I also turned to the internet to try and decipher the introduction to a Hungarian edition of an anthology that I had worked on, mainly to discover what approach the translators had taken to their task.[7] This was merely curiosity. I was quite surprised to find that the editor of *Shamrock* had uploaded some translations of work by a modern Japanese haiku poet last year.

The poet in question, Iida Ryūta (1920-2007), though distinguished, has hardly been translated into English, though I was familiar with the name since I had worked on a couple of his haiku myself, and these were among the twenty-one given on the website. In one that I recognized the grammar seemed a little skewed, but nonetheless I read them all through. They were given in Japanese and English only, without any roman letters, and there were plainly some mistakes. I sent an email to the editor, about errors that were immediately obvious: that in a verse about plum blossoms that clearly mentioned both red and white, only the red was given in the English, or that the final verse was given in the wrong script (*katakana*) in Japanese. These things were hastily corrected the next day, though there was no acknowledgment of my communication. Out of interest, I went through the rest of the haiku more carefully with a native speaker, and was dismayed to find how inaccurate they were. In one, for example, the word *kana*, the kireji or cutting-word with which it ends, is given in English with a capital letter as the name of a mountain.[8]

This is the rendering of another one, which remains unchanged at the time of writing:

母いまは睡りて花の十姉妹

mothering…
Bengalese finch
and a sleeping flower[9]

It is hard to know what this is meant to convey. The Japanese is quite correct, and this is how it goes in roman letters, literally translated with grammatical equivalence, and a break in the sense shown in the middle:

haha ima wa nemurite hana no jūshimatsu
mother now (subject particle) sleeping / / flower (of/at/by) society bird

It is true that a couple of words are properly rendered, but the whole is so misconstrued in Kudryavitsky's version that it is virtually nonsense. The subject of the verb "sleeping" is clearly marked as "mother," while "now" has been omitted. The rest requires a bit more interpretation, so I went to the library to see what I could find. Evidently this is one of a set of verses that the poet wrote about his ageing mother in 1965, after she had had an operation. The procedure seemed to have been successful, so she was sleeping peacefully. The bird or birds had been brought by visitors, and near the cage there were potted primroses. It is a spring scene, but sadly the poet's mother died in the autumn of that year.[10] This much I learnt from the poet's own account, but as so often with haiku, there are other things that need to be explained.

The Bengalese finch (*Lonchura striata domestica*), also known as a society bird, does not exist in the wild, only as a cage bird, and whether it is singular or plural here is not stated. Its curious name literally means "ten sisters," perhaps reflecting its sociable nature.[11] The word *hana* does of course mean "flower," but in haiku indicates spring blossoms, often though not always or necessarily cherry blossoms. The description by the poet calls them "primroses" (*sakura-sō*), and is a detail that the reader would not know. It is a pink flower (*Primula sieboldii*), native to Japan. The scene is set indoors, and the haiku might be rendered something like this:

Mother now resting…
a Bengalese finch next to
the potted primrose

The mood is calm, relieved, hopeful, after the anxiety that went before. As the only remaining child of four boys, the poet's feelings must have been intense. A prefatory note to the poems on the *Shamrock* website states that Ryūta's three older brothers "died in their childhood," whereas in fact they all died as adults in the war, one as the result of illness, and the other two in action, one in the Philippines and the other in China.[12] So much misconception is a discourtesy to the poet, as well as a disservice to the reader.

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Translation is a ticklish matter, with many contentious details to consider, and perhaps finally impossible. We try and do the best we can. Sometimes, as W.H. Auden suggested, mistranslation can lead to new ideas, though I doubt that any of these examples will do that. Now that I think of it, I must have another look at that Hungarian translation, to see if they avoided my own mistake in the verse by Kaneko Tohta. I hope they did. Their method and approach, of including two separate versions of each poem, one by a scholar of Japanese literature, and the other by a poet, is certainly an original and interesting one.

Notes

[1] Katō Kōko, ed. *A Hidden Pond: Anthology of Modern Haiku* 隠沼:現代俳句詞華集. Translated with commentary by Kōko Katō & David Burleigh (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1997 & 2003), p. 131.

[2] The Kon Nichi Translation Group, trans. *Kaneko Tohta: Selected Haiku With Essays and Commentary, Part I: 1937-1960*. (Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2012), pp. 73 & 139.

[3] Hamill, Sam, trans. *The Sound of Water: Haiku by Bashō, Buson, Issa, and Other Poets*. (Boston: Shambala, 1995), p. 25.

[4] Hamill, Sam, trans. *The Essential Bashō*. (Boston: Shambala, 1998), p. 136.

[5] Oseko Toshiharu. 芭蕉の俳句』第二巻 / *Basho's Haiku,* Vol. 2. (Tokyo: Maruzen, 1996), p. 220.

[6] Reichhold, Jane, trans. *Basho: The Complete Haiku*. (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2013). The immensely useful volumes by Oseko would appear to be her main source. Sam Hamill does not give any sources.

[7] Kató Kóko, ed. *Rejtőzködő tó: Modern japán haikuantológia*. Bakos Ferenc és Vihar Judit, trans. (Budapest: Cédrus Művészeti Alapítvany – Napkút Kiadó, 2015). This is the Hungarian edition of *A Hidden Pond*.

[8] 闇よりも大いなる晩夏かな given as "no darkness as dark / as the Kana mountain's shadow / in late summer." *Shamrock Haiku Journal* No. 36 : http://shamrock-haiku.webs.com/shamrockno36.htm Accessed 30 March 2018. It is given straightforwardly as "The mountain is greater / than darkness / in late summer," one of four haiku in the bilingual anthology 現代俳句 2001／*Japanese Haiku 2001* 編現代俳句協会. Edited by the Modern Haiku Association (Tokyo: YOU-Shorin, 2001), pp. 172-3. There are two more haiku in *A Hidden Pond*, op. cit., pp. 3 & 125.

[9] It has not been changed since it first appeared a year ago. Accessed 30 March 2018.

[10] Iida Ryūta. 飯田龍太 飯田龍太自選自解句集, *Iida Ryūta-jisen-jikai-kushū*. (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2007), p. 181.

[11] Google Translate offered this: "Mother is sleeping and the ten sisters of flowers." It is the kind of thing that translation software is liable to produce, especially for haiku. Accessed 30 March 2018.

[12] See: https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/飯田龍太. Accessed 30 March 2018.