

宋淇：譯詩散論

Notes on Translating Poetry¹

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TRANSLATION, in the strict sense of the term, is impossible. Recent studies of semantics and linguistics have brought out the truth that there can be no completely exact translation. This reduces the question of literal versus idiomatic translation to a meaningless argument. "Seventy years" and "three score years and ten" add up to the same thing but linguistically the two phrases are dissimilar and are used in widely different contexts. "Seventy years" translates into 七十歲 — a colourless and matter-of-fact statement. It would be factually correct to translate "three score years and ten" into 七十歲. But where is the solemn and oratorical ring of the original? As someone has remarked, all translation seems to be simply an attempt to solve an insoluble problem.

If translation appears to be impossible on a prosaic level, what can we expect from the translation of poetry? If "three score years and ten" cannot be adequately rendered into Chinese, what can we do about A.E. Housman's

*Now, of my three score years and ten,
Twenty will not come again.*

Besides content and meaning, we now have the added difficulties of form and meter and rhyme. Sir John Denham's Preface to his translation of the *Aeneid* says: "The business is not alone to translate language into language, but poesie into poesie, and poesie is of so subtle a spirit that in pouring out of one language into another — it will all evaporate, and if a new spirit is not added in the transfusion there will remain but a *caput mortuum*." Yet the translators, knowing full well the process of evaporation, went on translating poetry through the ages. Against many failures we find some masterpieces, as cited by Jean Paris in a symposium on the translation of literature² — from Urquhart's translation of Rabelais to Proust's translation of Ruskin, from Rossetti's renditions of François Villon to Pierre Leyris' version of Gerard Manley Hopkins.

The important thing is to know what we want and where we stand. Another scholar and practising translator, D. S. Carne-Ross, said in this symposium: "True translation is much more a commentary on the original than a substitute for it."³ Again, Jean Paris said: "If I dared to phrase it in family terms, I would say a successful translation should rather be the brother than the son of the original."⁴ And finally Werner Winter said: "(A

¹ The original paper from which this text was made was delivered at the First Chinese Language Conference held in 1966 at the University of Hong Kong. For some of the ideas contained herein I am indebted to various contributors in a Symposium on Translation held at the University of Texas in 1959. The essays from that symposium were collected in *The Craft and Context of Translation*, edited by William Arrowsmith and Roger

Shattuck, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1964.

² In his essay "Translation and Creation" delivered at the University of Texas symposium, *The Craft and Context of Translation*, p. 84.

³ "Translation and Transposition", *ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 87.

translation) may be a guide to the original creation, and it may be the stimulus for another creation, just as great as the original, but quite different from it.”⁵

WITH THESE concepts in mind, we may examine with fresh insight the translation of poetry. First, considerable liberty has to be taken at the discretion of the translator. This, of course, depends on the translator, on what stuff he is made of. In “Hamlet”, Act I, Scene I, Bernardo asks: “Have you had quiet guard?” and Francisco answers:

“Not a mouse stirring.”

One Chinese translator⁶ has it: 一點動靜都沒有 (Not even a little bit of stirring), which is vague, flat and lifeless. Another Chinese translator⁷ has it: 耗子也沒有動一動 (Even the mouse did not make a move), which seems to stick to the original too closely. But for the fact that “Hamlet” is a ghost play, I am almost tempted to use the phrase 鬼影子都沒有一個 (Not even the shadow of a ghost). Now in the standard bilingual text of Shakespeare in French, the French translator renders it thus:

Pas un chat.

It would be absurd to assume that the French translator is unable to tell the difference between cat and mouse.

Sometimes the liberty taken is merely due to “rhyme”. Translating a Welsh poem into English, Oliver Edwards wrote the line

And still the crow feeds by the shore.

We have the rare fortune of hearing him admit “some liberty” with the crow, which in the original was tending its nest “and won’t rhyme in English”.⁸ In translating into German the following lines of T. S. Eliot’s first Quartet, *Burnt Norton*,

*Will the sunflower turn to us, will the clematis
Stray down, bend to us; tendril and spray
Clutch and cling?*

Nora Wydenbruck has replaced “clematis” with “*Die Winde*”, the morning glory. This change has been pointed out as uncalled for, because of the genus and the colour of the flowers.⁹ Obviously, the translator uses “*Winde*” as a device for alliteration with the preceding word “*Wenden*”. This is entirely a matter of opinion. I must confess that I have made a similar switch in my translation of Edna St. Vincent Millay’s “Song of Second April”:

⁵ “Impossibilities of Translation”, *ibid.*, p. 112.

⁶ Ts’ao Wei-feng (曹未風).

⁷ Pien Chih-lin (卞之琳).

⁸ Oliver Edwards, “Translated Lyrics”, *The Times*, London, 1955, cited in *The Art of Translation* by Theodore Savory. London: Jonathan Cape, 1957, p. 85.

⁹ See Werner Winter, “Impossibilities of Translation”, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

*April this year, not otherwise
Than April of a year ago,
Is full of whispers, full of sighs,
Of dazzling mud and dingy snow;
Hepaticas that please you so
Are here again, and butterflies.*

今年的四月還是一模一樣，
和一年前的四月沒有不同，
照樣充滿了低語，充滿了惆悵，
泥土還是耀眼，雪仍舊消溶；
蝴蝶照常飛來，還有雁來紅，
你最喜歡的花，又再度開放。

The dictionary defines hepatica as “a small plant of the crowfoot family, with three-lobed leaves and small flowers of white, pink, blue, or purple that bloom in early spring”.

雁來紅， on the other hand, is *Amarantus tricolour*, an annual that grows most beautiful in autumn, with tiny yellowish flowers, often planted in the garden. It is obvious that the one cannot stand for the other. But what other flower can rhyme with 同 and 溶？

Sometimes the liberty taken is not merely due to the mechanics of poetics. It is, as Sir John Denham has said, “to add a new spirit in the transfusion”. Take, for example, Goethe’s famous “Wanderer’s Night Song”:

*Über allen Gipfeln
ist Ruh,
in allen Wipfeln
spürest du
kaum einen Hauch.
Die Vögelein schweigen im Walde.
Warte nur: balde
ruhest du auch.*

Longfellow translated it:

*O'er all the hill-tops
Is quiet now,
In all the tree-tops
Hearest thou
Hardly a breath;
The birds are asleep in the trees:
Wait; soon like these
Thou too shalt rest.*

Faithful—but the “thou” business jars on the ear. Liang Tsung-tai’s Chinese translation reads:¹⁰

¹⁰ 梁宗岱譯：流浪者之夜歌（「一切的峯頂」，上海時代圖書公司，1936，p. 8）

一切的峯頂
 沉靜，
 一切的樹尖
 全不見
 絲兒風影。
 小鳥們在林間無聲。
 等着吧：俄頃
 你也要安靜。

We notice that the translation is as faithful as can be and the rhyme scheme becomes *aabbaaaa*, which is monotonous. The poem in itself is just like a piece of rhymed composition, rather uninspired. Now I have learned from Prof. Winter's discussion that Lermontov, one of the foremost Romantic poets of Russia, translated this poem by Goethe into Russian.¹¹ Since I know no Russian, I would like to quote his line by line rendering in English of Lermontov's translation:

*The mountain tops
 sleep in the darkness of night;
 the quiet valleys
 are full of fresh mist;
 no dust rises from the road,
 the leaves do not stir
 Wait a little,
 you, too, will rest.*

It is also in eight lines, the rhyme scheme being *ababcdcd*, quite similar to the original's *ababdddc*. As to the content, Lermontov closes on the same note: the leaves not stirring and the promise of rest for the weary. But between Goethe's mountains and trees he sketches, in his own quiet, misty valleys and a dustless road. The birds are left out altogether. We can easily tell that as a translation, Lermontov's work is not satisfactory, the least satisfactory of the three. Yet we have been assured that as a Russian poem in its own right, it commands high respect; that as a translation it is a failure but as a Russian poem it can and will stand.

WE MAY deduce from these illustrations that: (1) It takes a poet to translate a poet, and (2) minor poets and minor poetry stand a better chance of being translated into another language. These are not rigid rules and need to be qualified and modified carefully. One asks immediately: What kind of a poet? Lermontov was a poet. So was Longfellow, who was considered the only poet of importance in his time. Even Liang Tsung-tai wrote some poetry of his own in his youth. Obviously, being a poet does not necessarily qualify one to be a good translator. Also, there is no intention here to belittle the constant efforts of translating Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Shakespeare through the ages. Shakespeare in French translation has excited more interest than enthusiasm. But we have been told that the Schlegel-Tieck translation of Shakespeare into German has done a remarkable service, so remarkable that many Germans have held the belief that Shakespeare is a German

¹¹ Winter, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

poet. Perhaps this is one of the exceptions to the rule. The inspired utterances of a major poet are a gift from the gods and often defy translation. However, it does not follow that all minor poetry can be translated. One has to find the right moment and the right person.

The best illustration would be Edward Fitzgerald. He was a poet. Two of his poems can be found in the *Oxford Book of Victorian Verse*. He translated the Spanish dramatist Calderón into blank verse before he translated "Rubáiyát" of Omar Khayyám. Omar is remembered more as a mathematician than as an important poet in Persian literature. Someone has even said of "Rubáiyát" that "by a miracle of intrepid dexterity, a half forgotten Persian poet is transfigured into a pessimistic English genius"¹² We have been told that Fitzgerald's translation is anything but faithful. And the four-line quatrain with the *aaba* rhyme scheme happens to evoke the tone and mood of the short regulated verse known as *chueh-chu* (絕句) in traditional Chinese poetry. As a matter of fact, the noted Chinese classical poet and professor at Tsinghua University, Wu Mi (吳宓), translated Fitzgerald/Khayyám to great effect by employing the seven-character *chueh-chu*.

*Come, fill the Cup, and in the Fire of Spring
The Winter Garment of Repentance fling:
The Bird of Time has but a little way
To fly—and Lo! the Bird is on the Wing.*

春到何須戀敝裘
勸君斟酒且消愁
由來時逝如飛鳥
振翼凌空不可留

So goes the wonderful refrain.

When one mentions translation of Chinese poetry into English, the first name that comes to one's mind is Arthur Waley. Waley has been considered a poet in his own right. This is the way Kenneth Rexroth speaks of him: "Waley is a special case. He is a fine poet who has deliberately limited himself, as a kind of rigorous aesthetic discipline — a little like the self-imposed rigors of Paul Valéry — to translation from the Chinese and the Japanese."¹³ Waley's translation of Po Chu-i's "The Temple" (白居易遊悟真寺一百三十韻) has been included in W. B. Yeats' *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*. I can understand why Yeats included Oscar Wilde's "Ballad of Reading Gaol", if only for sentimental and patriotic reasons. But I find Po Chu-i a bit incongruous alongside Ezra Pound and Edith Sitwell. It is like placing an old Mandarin in a long silk gown in the company of the Beatles. In any case, Waley developed a meter based on what Gerard Manley Hopkins called "sprung rhythm" to translate the Chinese five-character line—surely a unique achievement.

I do not propose here to go into isolated achievements in translating Chinese poetry into English. But it would be a pity not to mention Gerald Bullett's slender volume *The Golden Years of Fan Ch'eng-ta* (范成大四時田園雜興), a translation of a sequence of sixty pastoral poems. It has been noted that Bullett is himself a poet, although I have not had the chance of reading his poetry. Here is the first poem of the sequence:

¹² Dr. Fitzmaurice-Kelly, cited in Savory, p. 44.

¹³ "The Poet as Translator", in *The Craft and Context of Translation*, p. 47.

*But for the cockerel calling the noon hour,
 No voice is heard in the lane of willow-flower.
 The young leaves of the mulberry, half-uncurl'd,
 Are showing their green tips to the warm world,
 Waking from quiet dreams, where I drowse in my chair,
 With nothing to do but enjoy the bright air,
 I look from my window, flooded now with noon,
 And see the silkworm break from her cocoon.*

柳花深巷午鷄聲
 桑葉尖新綠未成
 坐睡覺來無一事
 滿窗曉日看蠶生

In using a loose couplet to render each seven-word line of the Chinese poem, Bullett has succeeded in catching the mood of the original, a poem written in the minor key by a minor poet. The result may not be anything spectacular, but somehow it conveys the gossamer quality of the original poem.

THE EFFORTS of the Chinese translators to render European poetry into Chinese have not been so fruitful or fortunate. Not that there has been a lack of courage. The main obstacle, I believe, lies in the fact that the Chinese language has gone through and is still going through a process of transformation. After abolishing the classical form, modern Chinese poetry has yet to find a new medium and a new form. A new rhythm has yet to be invented. Still, there are a few fine examples that leave us wondering what made such victories possible. Take Mallarmé's "Brise Marine":

*La chair est triste, hélas! et j'ai lu tous les livres.
 Fuir! là-bas fuir! Je sens que des oiseaux sont ivres
 D'être parmi l'écume inconnue et les cieux!
 Rien, ni les vieux jardins reflétés par les yeux
 Ne retiendra ce coeur qui dans la mer se trempe
 Ô nuits! ni la clarté déserte de ma lampe
 Sur le vide papier que la blancheur défend
 Et ni la jeune femme allaitant son enfant.
 Je partirai! Steamer balançant ta mâture,
 Lève l'ancre pour une exotique nature!*

*Un Ennui, désolé par les cruels espoirs,
 Croit encore à l'adieu suprême des mouchoirs!
 Et, peut-être, les mâts, invitant les orages
 Sont-ils de ceux qu'un vent penche sur les naufrages
 Perdus, sans mâts, sans mats, ni fertiles îlots
 Mais, ô mon coeur, entends le chant des matelots!*

For the sake of comparison, let us first look at Roger Fry's English version:¹⁴

*The flesh is sad alas! and all books I have read.
To fly far away! I know that the sea-birds are drunk
With being amid the unknown foam and the skies!
Nothing, not old gardens reflected in eyes
Will keep back this heart that is plunged in the sea
Oh nights! nor the deserted light of the lamp
On the empty paper which its whiteness protects
Nor even the young woman suckling her child.
I will start! Steamer balancing your masts,
Heave anchor to reach a nature exotic!*

*Ennui, devastated by my cruel hopes,
Still believes in the handkerchief's final adieu!
And perhaps the masts, inviting tempests,
Are of those which a wind bends over shipwrecks
Lost, without masts, without masts or fertile isles
But oh my heart listen to the sailors' song!*

And here is Pien Chih-lin's Chinese version:¹⁵

肉體真可悲，唉！萬卷書也讀累。
逃，只有逃！我懂得海鳥底陶醉：
沒入不相識的烟波又飛上天！
不行，什麼都喚不回，任憑古園
映在眼中也休想喚回這顆心，
叫它莫下海去沉緬，任憑孤燈，
夜呵！映照著白色掩護的空紙，
任憑年輕的女人撫抱著孩子。

我要走！汽船呵，趕快升起火來，
拉起錨來，開往遠迢迢的海外。
一個厭倦，經希望多少次打擊，
還依戀幾方手帕最後的告別！
也說不定，招引著暴風的桅檣，
哪一天會側向不測的洪流上，
不見帆蓬，也不見葱蘢的小島……
可是，心呵，聽水手們唱得多好！

We note that Pien renders the French Alexandrine into twelve Chinese characters (equivalent to twelve syllables) and the rhyming couplet is also kept intact. At the time of translation, Pien's knowledge of French was perhaps limited. His interpretation of the

¹⁴ "Sea Breeze" from *The Poems of Mallarmé*, translated by Roger Fry. New Directions, Norfolk, Conn., 1951, p. 54.

¹⁵ 卞之琳譯：海風（「西窗集」，上海商務印書館，1936，p. 11）

whole poem strikes us as vague and the interpretation of the words “*allaitant*” and “*ennui*” is open to question. But it must be admitted that the first line:

肉體真可悲，唉！萬卷書也讀累。

and the final line:

可是，心呵，聽水手們唱得多好！

stand out as good poetry in itself, although departing somewhat from the original. After all, Pien was already a poet of no mean achievement when he published this translation.

Roger Fry, on the other hand, was an eminent art critic and had devoted his spare time to the translation of Mallarmé, still unfinished upon his death. That, however, does not make him a good translator. His is only a loose prose paraphrase and the first line instantly shows his weakness:

The flesh is sad alas! and all books I have read.

In fact it has irked Rolfe Humphries so much that he complained: “The omitted definite article, for one thing, means something in the original, and the inversion has watered down the force. What would have been the matter with ending the line simply, ‘And I’ve read all the books?’”¹⁶ None at all. In fact, it is exactly the way the prose rendition goes in the recent Penguin edition of Mallarmé.

AMONG THE recent contributions of translations of poetry in Chinese must be counted Yu Kwang-chung’s translation of Emily Dickinson. Yu has been writing poetry for a number of years and is still playing an important role in modern Chinese poetry. His translations of some of the English and American poets have been deservedly well received. Here is Emily Dickinson’s “Further in Summer than the Birds”:

*Further in Summer than the Birds
Pathetic from the Grass
A minor Nation celebrates
Its unobtrusive Mass.*

*No Ordinance be seen
So gradual the Grace
A pensive Custom it becomes
Enlarging Loneliness.*

*Antiquiest felt at Noon
When August burning low
Arise this spectral Canticle
Repose to typify*

*Remit as yet no Grace
No furrow on the Glow
Yet a Druidic Difference
Enhances Nature now.*

¹⁶ “Translation in Revival” by Rolfe Humphries, in *New World Writing*, New York: New American Library of World Literature, 1952.

Yu's Chinese version reads:¹⁷

在夏日眾禽的啁啾之外，
 淒楚地起自草底，
 有一個較小的國度舉行
 它那寧靜的讚禮。

我們看不見有任何儀式，
 禱詞是如此舒緩，
 它變成一種沉思的風俗，
 擴大了寂寞之感。

日午時最感到古意悠揚，
 當八月焚成了殘燼，
 遂喚起這幽靈似的音樂，
 作為安息的象徵。

迄今盛況猶未見減色，
 光采也未顯繚紋，
 但是一種神奇的變化，
 已侵入自然本身。

The religious undertone in the original poem can only be slightly noticed in the translation. As a translation, it is inadequate. Emily Dickinson is too formidable a poet for translation, and she evaporates easily. But as a Chinese poem, Yu's translation is succinct and not without grace. It will certainly serve as a better model for modern Chinese poetry than the prevalent imitations of free verse.

I hope that other poets of promise will turn their attention to the translation of poetry. They have an impressive line of forerunners: Pope translated Homer; Rossetti translated Dante; Valéry translated Virgil; Rilke translated Valéry; Housman translated Horace; Pasternak translated Shakespeare; Pien and Yu translated French, English and American poetry. Translation provides the poet with challenge of the highest order. As Kenneth Rexroth has remarked, it is the best way of keeping the poetic tools sharp until the great moment comes.

¹⁷ 余光中譯：蟲鳴（「美國詩選」，林以亮編，香港今日世界出版社，1961，p. 78）