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Poetry Is What Gets Lost in Translation

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E. M. Dadlez

Poetry Is What Gets Lost in Translation
Robert Frost

Abstract

I will argue, not very controversially, that it is not possible to translate a poem into another language and retain the full impact of the original. Because excellence in poetry involves a fusion of form with content, an alteration in the means by which such content is presented cannot provide an adequate approximation of the original. Thus the original work lost in the course of translation.

My title is a quotation attributed to Robert Frost, and I will argue here that Robert Frost has it exactly right. Because excellence in poetry involves such a fusion of form with content, a radical shift in the means by which a given content is conveyed cannot provide a sufficiently exact approximation of the original poem. Thus the original – its impact and its voice – is, literally, lost in the course of translation. This is taken here to be trivially true of all translations, since a poem's form is regarded as essential to its literary identity. Nontrivially, however, we can still accept the claim that some translations are better than others, that some originals are more conducive to translation than others, and that some translations are simply new (and often excellent) poems in their own right, just poems that owe rather a large a debt to the insights of other artists.

I remember listening to an American academic talking about the poetry of Czesław Miłosz on NPR. "And it sometimes even rhymes!" she exclaimed chirpily, as if describing some inessential feature, like a weakness for archaic fonts. To be fair, that wasn't something the academic's American audience was at all likely to know. They would only have read Miłosz in translation, and the best translations of Miłosz are in free verse. Attempts to impose alien rhyme schemes on a translation can fail dreadfully, for any of several reasons. Sometimes, they sacrifice meaning on the altar of form, jettisoning entire metaphors and adding others simply to reinforce a rhyme scheme. On other occasions, there is a catastrophic failure of fit, as if a rousing call to arms had been set to the tune of "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" or a Mark Rothko painting had been placed inside an overwrought rococo frame. For these and probably for many other reasons, the best translations of Miłosz are the poet's own, in free verse. But even these, quite wonderful, works never quite convey what the original does.

It would be futile to deny that much of what a poem conveys can in fact be communicated in a translation. Metaphors can be tricky, and symbols are not always universal, though that is less a matter of language than of culture. But where paraphrase is possible, so is a translation that imparts a basic meaning. It was never my intention to contest this. It is just that poetry, of all genres, makes the most of the manner in which a particular content is presented – not just with this particular focus or that surprising comparison, but with that particular hesitancy and this cadence and those emphatic rhythms. Even without a rhyme scheme, every good poem has a rhythm, a kind of pulsebeat, a natural cadence. Sometimes we only recognize this in a bad reading, where the speaker has failed to employ that cadence. And while it is possible to convey many of the ideas of the original poem, it is not possible to replicate or convey its rhythms or its music in any complete way.

When Miłosz chooses to employ a rhyme scheme, the overall effect in Polish is what I'm tempted to consider faintly Shakespearean. It is difficult to describe just how much color and richness a poem's taking this form can lend to the overall effect when compared to a translation in free verse. The best analogy I can think of is a paraphrase of some moving Shakespearean speech that retains meaning but eschews formal similarities of any kind. Imagine the "Tomorrow" speech from *Macbeth* rendered with as much fidelity as possible to the significance of the words and no attempt whatsoever to preserve form. Worse yet, compare the Crispin's Day speech of *Henry V* to the deathless prose of *SparkNotes*:

King Henry says that they should be happy that there are so few of them present, for each can earn a greater share of honor. Henry goes on to say that he does not want to fight alongside any man who does not wish to fight with the English. He tells the soldiers that anyone who wants to leave can and will be given some money to head for home. But anyone who stays to fight will have something to boast about for the rest of his life and in the future will remember with pride the battle on this day. He adds that every commoner who fights today with the king will become his brother, and all the Englishmen who have stayed at home will regret that they were not in France to gain honor upon this famous day of battle¹.

Even converted into the first person, this conveys nothing of martial emotions that Kenneth Branagh can arouse in the most pacific breast. My use of this example is simply intended to demonstrate that it *matters*, crucially, how a particular content is presented. To be fair, the paraphrase in the example eliminates figurative language in favor of literal interpretations and converts poetry to prose, first person to third person. However, it is very clear that some nightmarish free verse version of the *SparkNotes* paraphrase would be equally offputting. Let us indulge in a further imaginative exercise using the *SparkNotes* paraphrase as a template, but making things a little more poetic in a paraphrase of the very beginning of the speech:

You should be happy that so few of you remain,
For each can now a greater share of honor earn.

¹ *SparkNotes*. *Henry V*. Summary: Act IV, scene iii. <http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/henryv/section9.rhtml> [Retrieved June 19, 2013].

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All who want to leave may now depart,
And will be given money for the trip.
But anyone who stays to fight will have a ground to boast.

Clearly things haven't been improved at all. And things can only be rendered more horrific by the imposition of an alien rhyme scheme:

You should be glad that very few of you remain,
For each can now a greater share of honor gain.
So anyone who wants to flee should now depart

But anyone who stays to fight with us, who has the heart
For war, will...

I should stop before anyone is overwhelmed by horror. It is clear that the imposition of inappropriate rhyme schemes (clumsy hexameter couplets with mistakes, in the case above) can have perfectly awful effects. Just remember the original for a moment:

...he which hath no stomach to this fight,
Let him depart; his passport shall be made,
And crowns for convoy put into his purse;
We would not die in that man's company
That fears his fellowship to die with us.

I am afraid that I've been having some fun at the expense of the translators I like least. But the examples I have been inventing above are mild compared to some of the atrocities to which spectacular poetry has been subjected in translation, even in the case of those translations that manage to retain the metaphors and symbols and images of the original. No translation of the poetry of Czesław Miłosz that I've read comes close to conveying the richness of the original.

Stanley Cavell writes of the impact of Shakespeare on the audience, pointing out that people often forget the critically significant point that Shakespeare wrote *poetry*. Attending to poetry, Cavell contends, is like attending to tonal music. Music calls forth different modes of attention from us, different ways of listening, different expectations². Listening to music would, I suspect, give rise to different expectancies, just as the rhythm and meter and cadence of poetry would. These aren't the kinds of expectancies we experience in conjunction with prose – those are usually formed on the basis of an estimation of probabilities or necessary connections. Music and meter, instead, lead us to detect patterns the instantiation of which we come to expect, they present us with variations upon which we attempt to impose order in certain ways. Indeed, some go even further and claim that poetry has an even greater effect on those who recite it. While I have no idea if this can be true, actors have actually claimed that Shakespeare's poetry was designed to *make* the actor feel the appropriate emotion, that this was just the effect that making those

² S. Cavell, "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*", in: *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York 1969, pp. 267-353, 321-322.

specific utterances had on the lungs, on the heart, on the senses. Whether or not this is possible, it at least seems clear that poetry can have an entire range of effects that bypasses the sense of its words, or at minimum does not depend exclusively upon them. These effects can, of course, lend power or richness, melancholy or passion to the sense of the poem in subtle or overt ways. What these effects are *not*, is expendable.

For my central example of difficulties in translation, I will respectfully depart from the work of Czesław Miłosz and reach further back in the past to one of my favorite poems: *Bajdary* by Adam Mickiewicz. This is one of his Crimean sonnets, written while he was in exile, filled with a passionate longing for home and for oblivion – vivid, evocative, and dramatic. I have loved this poem since I was eighteen. The matter of the poem is this: a sleepless rider spurs his horse into the sea. Here, as Sergei Sovietov indicates, the “dynamic of internal emotion is rendered by means of a consistent, dynamic description of the external activity of man and nature”³. Given the nationality of the writer and the date the analysis was undertaken, it is perhaps unsurprising it neglects to mention that one of the poem’s overriding themes is about the desperation of the exile. I will first attempt a more or less literal translation that can offer no more than a paraphrase, to make the matter of the poem clear, conceding immediately that it cannot hope to achieve any of the effects of the original. I will then criticize the most commonly found translation on the internet, one which attempts to impose a rhyme scheme in English. Finally I will conclude that the most that can be hoped for in translation is a reasonable approximation – one which, in this case and in my opinion, has yet to be achieved. We would be better off, perhaps, if more translators were poets in their own right. In any case, here is a translation of *Bajdary*, in the course of which undertaking I was principally preoccupied with the preservation of meaning at the expense of form:

I whip my horse into the wind;
Forests, valleys, promontories, in succession, then a jumble,
Stream past my feet, die like the receding tide;
I crave intoxication, oblivion in this maelstrom of images.

And when my lathered horse heeds no command,
And the world’s color’s lost beneath a pall of darkness,
Then, as in a mirror shattered, so in my parched eyes
Phantom forests, valleys, promontories dream themselves.

The earth sleeps; for me there is no sleep. I leap into the ocean’s womb.
A great black swell surges, roaring, to the shore,
I incline my head toward him, stretch out my arms,
The wave bursts overhead, chaos surrounds me;
I wait until thought, a vessel spun by eddies,
Is cast adrift and momentarily sinks into forgetfulness.

As indicated in the above-referenced analysis, the internal state of the speaker is reflected in the description of external activity. The rider loses control of his

³ S. Sovietov, “Mickiewicz in Russia”, in: *Adam Mickiewicz 1798-1855: In Commemoration of the Centenary of His Death*, UNESCO, Zürich 1955, pp. 61-88, 76.

horse just as the subject loses control of his train of thought and cannot impose his will upon it. The quality of the thought is exhausted, frantic, ungovernable. Some analysts stress the conflict between man and nature as one that is likewise echoed in the rider's internal turbulence. On another level, clearly, the chaos of speed, the ever-changing flicker and shift of images, the raging elements all literally drown out intolerable recollections. The subject's purpose in the ride is to achieve oblivion, to daze himself with sensory and external distractions in order to escape internal turmoil. The contrast between the sleeping earth and the sleepless rider underscores his alienation and exile, his attempt to forget what he has lost. The return to the womb of the sea signals a metaphorical dream of rebirth and perhaps the longing for return to one's birthplace, or lost homeland.

And here is the original poem, far more than the sum of such observations, glittering and bewitching by turns. With apologies to any Polish speakers in the audience, I elect to read this only to provide those unfamiliar with the language some idea of the rhythm and cadence of the original:

Bajdary

Wypuszczam na wiatr konia i nie szczędzę razów;
Lasy doliny, głązy, w kolei, w natłoku
U nóg mych płyną, giną jak fale potoku;
Chcę odurzyć się, upić tym wirem obrazów.

A gdy spieniony rumak nie słucha rozkazów,
Gdy świat kolory traci pod całunem mroku,
Jak w rozbitym zwierciadle, tak w mym spiekłym oku
Snują się mary lasów i dolin, i głązów.

Ziemia śpi, mnie snu nie ma; skaczę w morskie tona,
Czarny, wydęty bałwan z hukiem na brzeg dąży,
Schylałam ku niemu czoło, wyciągam ramiona,

Pęka nad głową fala, chaos mię okrąży;
Czekam, aż myśl, jak łódka wirami kręcona,
Zbłąka się i na chwilę w niepamięć pogrąży.

In 1867, Victor Hugo wrote that "to speak of Mickiewicz is to speak of beauty, justice and truth; of righteousness, of which he was the soldier, of duty, of which he was the hero, of freedom, of which he was the apostle and of liberation, of which he is the precursor"⁴. Certainly it seems that ideas like liberation often have a felt presence in Mickiewicz's work.

That presence is not felt at all, of course, in some translations:

Bajdary

I whip my horse into the wind and see
Woods, valleys, rocks, tumbling and tussling, a gleam,

⁴ Victor Hugo, Letter addressed to Władysław Mickiewicz, 17 May, 1867.

Flow on and disappear like the waves of a stream:
I want to be dazed by this whirlpool of scenery.

And when my foaming horse will not obey,
When the world grows colorless caught in a dark beam,
Woods, valleys and rocks pass in a bad dream
Across the broken mirror of my parched eye.

Earth sleeps, not me. I jump in the sea's womb.
The big black wave roars as it rushes ashore.
I bend my head, stretch out like a bridegroom

Toward the wave breaking. Surrounded by its roar
I wait till whirlpools drive my thoughts to doom,
A boat capsized and drowned: oblivion's core⁵.

This translation appears, at least, to make *Bajdary* a poem about suicide. And while there are elements of that in evidence, the thrust of the original work is clearly a lot different. Suicide is a permanent solution, rather than the "momentary" one that the original stipulates. Forgetfulness is seen in the original as a *respite* rather than something involving thoughts driven to doom. Especially dreadful things happen when the translator is scrambling to impose a rhyme scheme on his English version. This single attempt is probably the worst culprit in distancing the translation from the sense of the original. The translator tries to replicate the ABBA ABBA CDC DCD rhyme scheme without too much concern – indeed, without any – for meter or syllabics or any such regularities. The rhymes are imposed, however, at the expense of the meaning of the original poem. The difficulties emerge in the second stanza. A "dark beam", catastrophically reminiscent of grade B science fiction, is imported to replace the shroud or pall of dusk simply in order to rhyme with "dream" in the next line. Even more outrageous is the bridegroom who miraculously appears in stanza three to rhyme with "womb". The meter here is awkward for the rhyme scheme -- to have that rhyme work, the stress would have to be peculiarly placed on the last syllable: brideGROOM. But the problem here is mainly one of sense. Nowhere in the original is a bridegroom mentioned. It is possible, I concede, that the reference to leaping into the womb of the sea emboldened the translator to regard it as a prototypical heterosexual masculine achievement legitimately symbolized by the figure of a bridegroom set to perform his assigned task. Since the wave toward which the rider bows his head and holds out his arms is described as "he" in the original, however, the importation of sexuality into the equation seems muddling at best. Further, "bałwan" can be translated as "idol" or as "fool", and not just as "wave". These multiple meanings are of course not available to the English translator, another disadvantage under which translators labor. There might be some interpretive prospects to be explored here: the wave is a force beyond the rider's control that throws him into chaos. To characterize that force as a false idol or an idiot is politically

⁵ This is a translation more commonly found on the internet than any others, at least as of July 2012; <http://www.faculty.virginia.edu/introtopolish/poezja/mickiewicz/bajdary.htm#> [Retrieved June 19, 2013].

suggestive. Alternatively, to characterize it as a kind of pagan, elemental force dovetails with the theme of the rider being overwhelmed by nature.

More to the point, that which dwells in a womb does not, after all, think or reflect, and these are the very experiences the rider of the poem seeks to escape. It is more plausible, and certainly more consistent with the original, to entertain associations with maternity rather than sexuality regarding the metaphor of the womb of the sea. We might also consider further the possibility of some metaphor about returning to one's source or the arena of one's birth, whether this is tied simply to the goal of forgetfulness or to the idea of a longing to return to one's place of birth. This would be consistent with the original poem. References to bridegrooms are not.

The difficulties with this apparently popular translation arise, I think, from the attempted imposition of a sequence of rhymes fundamentally unsuited to the material, in particular because no attention is paid to meter and syllabics. So, first, the poetic form is not at all preserved since such a form involves more than a simple sequence of rhymes. The result is bad poetry, plain and simple. It doesn't scan – the proper rhythm and cadence simply aren't there. Second, the effort to obtain rhymes proceeds at the expense of meaning, importing new and sense-altering material into the poem.

I do not think that every attempt to construct a form similar to that of the original poem must of necessity fail. I think it possible that a very fine poet could issue a translation both lyrical and reflective of the meaning of the original work. I just think that this would be a new poem (bearing a heavy burden of gratitude), rather than a version of the old. The prospects seem most promising for originals in free verse, though (as previously indicated) there will still be a natural cadence that will not be replicated in a translation. Translations, even those which preserve as much meaning as possible, will probably suffer at least a little on the formal front, just because fidelity and exactitude can so restrict one's formal options. None of this means that translations should not be attempted. Clearly they should. It should just be understood and accepted that they are not versions or iterations of the original poem.