

“The Foreignness of Language and Literary Translation”
-- A retrospective essay on reaching the age of 80

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Published in *The Journal of English Language & Literature*. (ELLAK). Vol.68 No. 1 March 2022. Pages 193-208.

This essay does not set out to be a strictly academic “paper,” for the author was invited by the editors to write a personal essay on some of the challenges facing the translator of Korean poetry into English, an activity in which he continues to be engaged after publishing his first translations in 1990, more than thirty years ago. Unwilling to engage with the complexities of contemporary theories of translation, which often owe more to ambition and ideology than to actual experience of translating, he attempts to express simply some thoughts which have struck him. Beginning with his first attempt at formulating his ideas on the topic, he hopes to illustrate the extent to which a translator of Korean poetry has to negotiate the great distance lying between the Korean and English languages and cultural spheres, if Korean poetry is to be transformed effectively into English-language poetry that will speak to non-Korean readers. The familiar tension between “faithful” and “readable” has to be maintained and at the same time overcome if the translation is to have its desired effect.

In 1996 I published my first paper in the Journal of ELLAK, with the title “‘The Foreignness of Language’ and Literary Translation.” It was a text that I had prepared for an ELLAK international Conference and in fact the issue of the Journal it appeared in was a special issue, containing the papers presented at the conference. The paper, available through my home page, has always attracted attention because in it I offered six somewhat parodic versions of Kim Sowol’s poem “Azaleas,” to the delight of many and the horror of at least a few. My aim in doing that was to illustrate my main thesis, that a translated poem cannot be the same poem for its readers as the original poem is for Korean readers, in terms of impact and reception, but also in terms of language and structure. Many of my more recent articles on translation have developed this idea.

In that first essay, I began by considering the reasons for translating poetry. In an article published in *Poetry Review* (Vol. 84 No. 3, Autumn 1994 page 52), Jerzy Jarniewicz-- a Polish scholar of English poetry—had suggested three main reasons why people translate poetry: first he mentions “cultural ambassadors, whose aim is to introduce English readers to what they believe is the best in the culture they translate from.” This recalls the view that writers admired in Korea must surely be admired outside if only they are translated. A second group he sees as poets who make translations of works that interest them in order to effect an evolution in their own poetic tradition. A famous example is Ezra Pound, who was not deeply committed to the study of Old English or Provencal, and who knew no Chinese when he wrote *Cathay*. In this case the main commitment is to the translator's own literature, such translations are often free renderings rather than precise imitations. The third group he sees as mainly consisting of those who choose to translate a poet's work because of purely personal considerations. The poet is a friend, or an acquaintance, or a rather unknown poet that the translator happens to admire. In this case the cultural authorities at home may be irritated to see foreigners reading a “lesser” or “unknown” writer while the established names remain untranslated and unknown.

I went on to clarify my own thoughts on the topic: “Fundamentally, it can be argued that translating is not a matter of multilingual skills, that it covers all our efforts to comprehend what a person or text is expressing, even in our own language. Translating is the fundamental means of all communication. Arguments are often the result of mistranslations:

“I told you I was going to be late...”; “I thought you said you loved me?” “I didn't mean you to take it like that...”. Words offer the illusion that we can say something to someone and be understood; language is the art of deception. Poetry is language skating on thin ice. Translators fish through a hole in the ice. All messages, written or spoken, provoke guesswork and poems are the best of all riddles, as the Anglo-Saxons knew. Or as Walter Benjamin wrote: “all translation is only a provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages.”

I then went on (I am surprised to note) to present some ideas that I have developed much more fully in more recent essays: “There can be as many different translations of a poem as anyone cares to make, and different people will produce different translations; it is not because some are “closer” to the original in some mechanical way that they will be “better” or even “more faithful”: better than what, faithful to what? The best comparison might be with the “Theme and variations” in music, every translation being a new “Variation on a theme by...”. Perhaps indeed we ought always to offer several versions of every poem we translate, as a way to help the readers better encompass the full richness of the original. In “The Translator’s Task,” Walter Benjamin has a deep reflection on certain works' quality of “translatability” that is a function of their established value, their “immortality”, even.

“Certainly, translators always dream of a moment of perfect correspondence, when the gaps interfering with communication are all overcome in a moment of perfect union. The specter of the perfect translation is a powerful one that has sometimes to be exorcized. There can never be a full, perfect and exact translation from one language into another. What we offer are vague resemblances, unfocussed photos of remote beauties, travelers’ tales that evoke uncertain images of often exotic landscapes in the hearers elsewhere while we know that to the people living in the work's native land, our exotic is their familiar everyday.”

Just 20 years later, in 2016, I gave a presentation in Daegu, never published as such, entitled “Translating Korean-ness: Thoughts on Korean Poetry in Translation.” I began by saying, once again, “The essential ‘Koreanness’ of Korean poetry is also its most certainly untranslatable feature. What gets lost in translation is, inevitably, its specifically “Korean” quality, much more than any abstract “poetic” quality it might have. This is at the most superficial level quite obvious. Korean poetry is (almost by definition) written in Korean language. Translated Korean poetry is not. When poetry originally written in Korean is translated into English, it loses one primary aspect of its Korean identity, its Korean language. Whatever is considered “poetic” about the original poem by its original readers is thereby strongly compromised, indeed it is utterly “lost in translation.” It is not so easy to say in what sense a Korean poem, once it has been translated into English, is still a “Korean poem.” In idealistic terms, of course, a poem is a poem universally, it has no national identity. But Koreans are intensely aware of national identity issues, perhaps precisely because Korean identity is so hard to define.

“At the immediate level, it is not only the vocabulary and the grammar which have changed in the process of translation; no matter how hard the version may strive to be “conservative” or “faithful,” almost always there will have been radical changes in the sequence of words and phrases in the attempt to create a “poem” in the target language, to say nothing of rhythms and sounds. Moreover, certain vital words in the original may have been found to have no equivalent in the target language. Languages and cultures are sometimes so very different.”

This led me to conclude: “Another way of evoking the specific task of the translator is to stress that a poem is written by an individual poet; it is the result of a creative process which happens in the mind of a particular individual using a particular language and set of literary conventions. The resulting poem is inevitably composed of words and meaning, sound and sense, which are bound to be a unity since nobody can produce meaning without

words, while the words of a poem are normally chosen for considerations of both sense and sound, insofar as poetry in most cultures, as in Korean, retains an oral, spoken character, with links to song in many cases.

“There are, of course, many ways in which the relative importance of sound and sense can vary, since there are different kinds of poetry in most or all cultures. Lyric poems usually depend more on the harmonious sounds of the words and their flow, while satirical or philosophical poems, as well as narrative poems, rely more heavily on the meaning of the words chosen. The skill of a poet is revealed by the way in which a poem is made, no matter whether it emerged complete directly from the poet’s mind / imagination in a flash or was the result of long polishing and revision. We must always remember that the word “poet” originally meant “maker.” Now that is the essential difference between an original poem and a translation of it.

“The words of a translation cannot emerge in the same free, creative flow; instead, they are bound to be the result of a more or less laborious negotiation as we read and re-read, attempt to understand, imitate and re-create the poem (at the semantic level, first of all, almost inevitably) using the words and grammar of another language. The translator is not the original poet, and calling the resulting poem a “version” instead of a “translation” still does not justify betraying the poet and hijacking his work. Great poets are Great Poets, in a way that talented translators can never be “great” translators, I think. The translator does not dispose of total creative freedom, not even when he is called Ezra Pound or John Dryden and is, like them, consciously refusing to be “faithful.”

“We are always, inevitably, under the shadow of the original, struggling with the demand to recreate it “exactly” as it was, yet knowing that, no matter what we do, we are going to produce a radically new poem, which will have totally different sounds and rhythms, words and grammar; yet we also know that it should still be somehow identical with the original, knowing that the published text will be attributed first and foremost to the original poet, not the translator. There is a sense in which the work of translation is closer to pastiche and parody than to creative writing.”

In order to situate more clearly one limiting vision of the translator’s task, I evoked a familiar example: “I suppose I should find comfort in a dictum by Vladimir Nabokov: “The clumsiest literal translation is a thousand times more useful than the prettiest paraphrase.” He and Joseph Brodsky are the great enemies of the free recreations of Russian poetry and fiction sometimes justified as “versions” or “adaptations.” Nabokov was scathing: “Adapted to what? To the needs of an idiot audience? To the demands of good taste? To the level of one’s own genius?” Nabokov strongly advocated what he termed “literal” translation (as opposed to “the paraphrastic” and “the lexical”) “rendering as closely as the associative and syntactical capacities of another language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original. Only this is true translation.” We should recall that whenever we are tempted to “improve” on what a close, faithful translation yields in the name of “readability.” The results of Nabokov’s and Brodsky’s wish to see the original Russian language still perfectly embodied and embedded in their English translations have provoked furious debate, but it is important not to reject their challenge too readily.

The year 2022 is a long way from 1996, when I first wrote about translating Korean poetry. At that time I had published 5-6 volumes, now I count 50. The poets I have mostly translated are those of my own or an even earlier generation: Ku Sang and Seo Jeong-ju, Kim Kwang-Kyu and Cheon Sang-pyeong, Lee Si-young, Ko Un and Jeong Ho-seung, Do Jong-hwan and Kim Seung-Hee. In each case I have done what I could to produce translations which preserve something of the original poem’s charm, simplicity, tension or struggle. None of those poets can be termed a “difficult” poet, most of them are extremely “popular” in Korea and the bilingual edition of my translations of Cheon Sang-byeong has been reprinted

no less than 25 times, simply for sales within Korea. At the same time, although the poems by Ko Un and Kim Seung-Hee have been published and sold outside of Korea and have found acclaim without any reference to their Korean reputations, most other volumes, even though published abroad, have had very limited distribution, publicity and sales. What is certain is that those poets listed above have written poems that almost anybody can understand, that are easy to understand and appeal to a wide audience, even people without special knowledge of “literature.”

The same cannot be said of some other poets I have translated. Kim Soo-bok always insists that his poems are not “difficult,” but in my Daegu talk I gave an example of why his writing is at least “challenging” for the translator and reader:

마 산포에는 이제 바다가 없습니다 그풍성한 젖가슴까지드러내 놓고누워 있던
저녁 바다로 가는길 안개는걸히고 길안으로 온몸을밀고 들어서던선창집 마당발목을
적셔주던 저녁바다는 없습니다

“In Masan-po now sea is not. / That ample breast exposed used to lie / to the evening sea going path / fog clearing / into the path whole body thrusting / used to enter / wharf tavern yard / ankles used to soak / evening sea is not.”

This is a particularly vivid example of the way in which Korean word-order and grammar do not at all correspond to standard English word-order and grammar. It is only after much pondering that a possibly acceptable, more coherent phrasing emerges in English: “There is no sea now in Masan-po. The path leading to the evening sea, which used to lie with its ample breast exposed and then, as the fog cleared, come surging boldly up the path to the wharfside tavern yard and there soak my ankles, that evening sea is no more.”

Many recent poems by Kim Seung-Hee are “language poems” that play with very specifically Korean words in poems such as *하물며* ‘라는 말; *부디* ‘라는 말; *아직* ‘이라는 말; *이미* ‘라는 말; *어쨌든* ‘이란 말; *비로소* ‘라는 말. There is no English equivalent for some of these forms, and the flow of the poems is dictated by purely linguistic associations that have no parallel in English. Such poems are strictly untranslatable.

Even more challenging are the poems of Ko Hyeong-ryeol and in his case it is not simply a difficulty for the translator, a lot of Koreans find what he writes to be puzzling. Once we turn to younger poets, it becomes clear that writing Korean poetry in the 21st century is for would-be poets a challenging enterprise. They cannot and do not want to write as previous generations did. That should be qualified, of course. There are thousands of Koreans who write poetry, belong to literary associations headed by celebrated senior poets, and who aspire to write the kind of poetry they have grown up with, familiar, simple poems that do not challenge readers in any way. However, the truly creative younger poets who aspire to say what has not yet been said, in ways not already weary by being over-familiar, rejecting facile sentiment and offering verbal images of the often meaningless or perplexing aspects of life in contemporary Korea, will be obliged to write in ways that challenge the reader and the translator.

One such poet is Sin Yong-mok. I have worked to translate his poems over the years and now a representative collection of his work is to be produced in the United States. What follows is the preface I have written for this edition, in an attempt to show why the word “difficult” is less than helpful when approaching his work. This collection offers a selection of poems from Sin Yong-mok’s various collections, though not his most recent. It is intended to serve as an illustration of his evolution as a poet, and then provide a complete translation of the poems from his fourth collection, “When Someone Called Someone, I Looked Back.” Since that was published in 2017, he has published two more collections, the most recent in

2021, but the 2017 collection can be considered to mark his arrival at maturity in the development of themes and techniques that were beginning to appear in earlier volumes.

His first collection, “I Have to Walk Through all that Wind,” was published in 2004, when the poet was barely thirty. Further collections followed in 2007 and 2012. Born in 1974, he had passed forty before publishing his 2017 collection and will soon be turning fifty. He can be considered to have fully deserved the six awards he has received. At the same time, it must be admitted that there is a widespread opinion that his poems are so “difficult” that they are a challenge to the average reader, and even to older poets. In this, he is by no means alone among the poets of his generation, especially.

The translator of “difficult” poems faces a difficult challenge, since the translations should be as “difficult” as the original poems, but neither more nor less. One important question about any poet’s work is what s/he mainly writes about, the frequently recurring themes and topics. The other is how s/he write about everything. The first line of the first poem in this book is “At times a room is a tomb, so someone enters it and kills time making a mummy.” Death is a familiar theme for many poets, and certainly for Sin Yong-mok. One of the most significant poems in the 2017 collection is “Community,” which begins:

May I use the dead person’s name? Since he’s dead,
may I take his name? Since I gained one more name today
the number of my names keeps increasing.
Soon I’ll have all death’s register.

The poem goes on to evoke responses to people and things seen in a cemetery, since “death seems to have planted eyes in me.” But even more poignant is the poem “Lazy Corpse,” in which the poet talks very openly of the mystery of death, leading up to his experiences of the death of his father.

but only inscrutable incidents can be pointed at with a clear finger—
cracks in a glass and traces of spilled water
or the growth rings of a felled tree
or torn-up scraps of a letter
the color of burned ash
the oasis of red blood emerging from the hot asphalt of an intersection
when the motorbike sharply cuts a corner
and violently strikes the speeding taxi like a cross.

The corpse once concealed within the living body made accurately visible.

The poem continues, struggling with the impossibility of coming to terms with death, whether sudden in an accident or slow as the result of disease.

Critics have focused on the related theme of sorrow, seeing it as one of the most clearly dominant themes for Sim Yong-mok. Certainly, sorrow is a powerful factor in a number of poems, such as the poem “Flashlight” with the line (italicized) “*There are rainy nights because our sorrow is still young,*” followed by the affirmation “No rain can ever wash away sorrow.” Similarly, in the poem “Autumn and Sorrow and Birds” we find the lines, “since the word ‘autumn’ and the word ‘sorrow’ feel like the same word, / birds fall rustling like autumn leaves.” Later in the same poem, we read, “crimson paint splashes over sorrow / and the painter leans his brush against a thought, of branches, / and stares for a time,” and this points toward the culminating discovery: “*So that’s why bats are black! / Because sorrow and the body can be one and the same.*” Certainly, an awareness of fragility

and impending mortality dominates many poems, such as the start of the poem “A Lie Just Half Told,”

Nowadays I'm never surprised.
Not even when a bird mistakenly tears its way into the sky's blue flesh.

It's just the trees' fault, like long ago
when I used to borrow a hand from sorrow, the master of my youth
to toss stones into a pond, the trees
tossing all the birds in the park
were the water's graves that slept while standing up.

Yet there are times when the evocation of sorrow suggests that the poems, although they emerge from an all-pervading sense of sorrow, are in fact at the same time the fruit of a struggle to overcome that sorrow: “Through the sorrow of asking whether it's possible to think about life as / a blizzard's future, the water's forest, or morning that arrived alone / and the station of dreams.” We are brought back here to what might be called the “surreal” aspect of Sin Yong-mok's imagination, the way he proposes in a completely deadpan voice notions and connections that we have never come across before, and in such a way that we cannot simply reject them as preposterous, incomprehensible or unthinkable.

More importantly, the mentions of death and sorrow do not necessarily sound gloomy. Death, one might say, is so much a part of life that it is at the same time unthinkable, challenging, and utterly inevitable, a touchstone for our sense of what is truly real in life. Lines such as the following are paradoxically comforting and encouraging, not depressing:

Thanks to the sorrow
your destiny overtook and reclaimed
because the dreams, snatched away, were driven out of your body
I'll live this death called daily life
until I die.

Generally speaking, the poems often start with a response to an everyday experience of life, then pursue associations of feeling in a completely free-wheeling manner. In the earlier poems, there are some completely surrealistic topics indicated by titles such as “Certified Copy of Reeds,” “The Wind's Millionth Set of Molars,” or “Ice's Footnote,” while other titles refer to utterly familiar daily realities: “Inside the Glass Door of the Seongnae-dong Clothing Repairs” or “Autumn Rain.” The poems in the earlier collections are often arranged in fairly even-length lines, while a major characteristic of the more recent collections is a fragmentation of sentence structures indicated by multiple line breaks at irregular intervals. Most of the poems are quite long, some even covering several pages, although occasionally there is a very short poem.

Instead of trying to identify a dominant emotion, such as “sorrow,” it might be better to note a certain affirmative tone which overrides our awareness of a seemingly incoherent flow of images. The lack of logical connections, such as are found in a standard narrative, is the dominant feature of Sin's poetry, and the best term for this might be ‘defamiliarization.’ He provides constant glimpses into the free associations performed by his particularly fertile imagination, inviting the reader to accompany him without having any idea of where he is being taken. Once we learn to let go of our need to think we understand everything rationally, we can savor to the full lines such as these: “In the alleys the whirls of the stars' fingerprints turn in the locking direction;” “I'm living as the man next door;” “I am hidden as a feeling of

rain.” Far indeed from what is familiar, and therefore welcome, because we do not need a poet to tell us things we already know, or talk about life in terms that we already use.

At this point, we can ask the poet to formulate a way in which he might want to express all this: “Poetry has taught me that my body is a place into which everything sinks and a place where everything is connected! Small things and larger things, past and present, even life and death... To show that these things exist substantially, while writing poetry I came up with the idea that my body might exist! The sorrow that comes visiting my body is proof that all these things are using my body!”

Sin Yong-mok is an intensely intuitive poet of the inwardness that gives rise to all true poetry. The external world as such is meaningless and remote. It is only when it becomes part of the poet’s inner self that poetry can arise and the poet can be sure of existing as poet and as person. For him sorrow is not regret at loss, an elegiac mode, but the awareness that all that exists is present within him, at the same time as being and as non-being, all equally alive and progressing ineluctably toward death and oblivion in its very mode of being, an essentially tragic mode, and therefore sublime.

More significant still, the phrase “everything is connected” offers a vital clue to the way in which the poet sees his work. His poems, he suggests, embody all the experiences first embodied in his physical body with its memories, emotions and expectations. Like everyone, the past is buried deep within him, while the present passes constantly, a ceaseless flow of images, thoughts, and feelings, which are informed and transformed by randomly occurring memories from the past, which rise in great confusion by mere association, often unconscious. The future is equally present as the great white screen onto which dreams, hopes and fears are projected by the reflective imagination. Each poem stands as an image in words of a moment in life’s unceasing flow, showing concrete examples of interconnected images rising into the poet’s writing consciousness. No need, then, to be puzzled or surprised if the flow seems incoherent in terms of standard narrative models. The embodied mind has a logic that rationality knows nothing of, while the human heart ever rides a roller-coaster of emerging images and emotions over which it has no control.

It might be that for the poet, the poems he writes and publishes for us to contemplate are an extension of or an alternative to the act of intimacy he occasionally offers in baring a shoulder to reveal the tattooed tiger lurking hidden there:

There’s a tiger on my left shoulder that’s climbing a hill at daybreak.
And now

it’s Tuesday when fallen leaves die coldly on winter’s ground.

A blanket that I covered myself with spreading endlessly in a dream
snow falling and

when the water in the kettle on the stove boils with the sound of artichokes
this phrase comes to mind.

Death is the experience of the gravitational pull of a world we cannot know.
I write the phrase down and ponder. *What might it mean?*

Snow falls.

In a few sparse words and lines we have moved far from an Australian-made tattoo, far deeper beneath the poet’s skin and muscles, to discover the secret tiger of the dreams and

fears hiding there. If the poet's shyly bared tattooed skin is lovely, how much more so the confessions of the abrupt transitions of memory and association that compose his inner life.

In the end, the secret key to Sin Yong-mok's poetic imagination might be hidden in his shortest poem, so short that it says everything:

"A white butterfly is not like anything in this world. Any child pursuing it is sure to fall down."

The beauty of Sin Yong-mok's poems is like that butterfly and we are the children falling down as we pursue what we wrongly call their "meaning" instead of letting them flutter freely ahead of us through the familiar world and the world of dreams, suggesting patterns of association that owe nothing to the constraints of prosaic reasoning. Then we discover that their dominant characteristic is not gloom or sorrow, but a smile as bright and mischievous as that frequently seen on the poet's own face.

Brother Anthony's main articles on translation

"The Foreignness of Language' and Literary Translation" in *Journal of English Language and Literature* (The English Language and Literature Association of Korea) Special Number 1996

"Methodologies of Poetry Translation: Translating Shin Kyong-nim's Mokkye-chang't'o" in *Hanguk munhakui Woiguko ponyok* Seoul: Minumsa 1997

"Translating Korean Poetry" in *Modern Poetry in Translation* (King's College, London) Volume 13 (1998)

"Literary Translation from Korean into English: A Study in Criteria" in *Translation and Literature*, University of Edinburgh. Volume 11, Part 1 (Spring 2002) 72 - 87

"Translating Korean Poetry: History, Practice, and Theory" in *European Journal of Korean Studies* Volume 18, No. 2 (2019), pp. 153-166.

These and many other papers can be read through links in <http://anthony.sogang.ac.kr/Trans.htm>