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Charles Inouye

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# A LOVER'S QUARREL THE ORIGINAL, THE TRANSLATOR, AND THE LOSE-LOSE SITUATION

*Charles Inouye*

*I planted some bird seed. A bird came up.  
Now I don't know what to feed it.*

At a recent symposium at Tufts University on “The Art and Ethics of Translation,” a number of distinguished translators gave their thoughts about both the theory and practice of translation. Among the speakers were Peter Cole, Lydia Davis, Suzanne Levine, Jay Rubin, and Natasha Wimmer.<sup>1</sup>

In the course of the symposium, the usual questions came up. Is translation an art or a craft? Should we seek for fluency or fidelity? Is the work of the translator to produce or reproduce? Is the translator a friend to language, or its enemy? Should translation be highly regarded or dismissed as secondary to scholarship and criticism?

As I listened, these questions seemed like prison bars to me. Having put in my time as a translator, I had memorized their cold hardness with my own hands. Is there nothing new to say about translation? Was no one going to free me from the translator's prison, the lose/lose situation that tortures anyone who would dare call an apple a *ringo*, or a *pinguo*, a *pomme* or *manzana*? As those translators spoke so lovingly about the craft, I wondered if I was alone in my agony.

One can take sides in this either/or. You can believe you are a great artist, that your words as a translator sing a true and moving song. But the truth is that a translator's words are never fully his or her own. We always owe much to the original text, which is the real master, the hard driver. When our delusions of grandeur clear, the honest among us realize we are but an algorithm, a worker on the factory floor, an apple-picking drone.

Of course, one might try to invert this slavish relationship to the original. I have heard of many attempts. People call themselves true, faithful, the obedient

vessel that holds a divine nectar. Listen to how they align themselves with the musician or the actor, who largely accepts his relationship to a score or a script. But the fact is, the translator's relationship to the original is not so accepting. We do change things around, whether we sympathize with the kabuki actor who wants to ad lib, or with the *bunraku* chanter who honors the text by raising it above his head at the beginning of each performance. But the amount of fiddling we are allowed to do is limited.

At the Tufts Symposium, there came a moment of conceptual consolidation. Claire Conceison, the discussant, proposed that the art of translation is bound by three different relationships and, therefore, three ethical challenges. Simply put, there are the translator's responsibilities to the author, to the reader, and to himself or herself. An author deserves to be respected, his feelings and wishes expressed. A reader deserves a good read, an experience like that of reading the original. And, finally, the translator deserves to be true to one's tastes, one's understanding.

Recalling my own experiences as a translator, I was only weighed down by all this talk of responsibility. I wondered if these three relationships could be characterized a bit differently.

Consider the responsibility of the translator to the author. If we think of the author as a child, then the translator would be a bad parent. Each child has its own needs, and therefore requires different things. What works with one doesn't necessarily work with another. And yet we parents tend to treat our children alike. In the interest of fairness, we sometimes even call this lack of imagination maturity. We also indulge and neglect. In our admiration of our progeny, we see ourselves in them, even to the point of thinking we *are* them. Of course, at some point this parent-child analogy breaks down, since it is much easier to avoid certain authors than it is to avoid certain children.

As for the second ethical quandary, responsibility to readers, we might think of our readers as tourists and the translator as a tour guide. On my last extended stay in Japan, I made the generous though ridiculous offer to plan a family reunion for both my father's and mother's side of the family, where all my relatives in America could come and meet all my relatives in Japan. That was the idea, at any rate. To my great surprise, over thirty of my relatives in the United States actually came to Japan for the event. For one action-packed week, I was their guide as we gathered in Kyoto, made the trip to Kyushu on the Bullet Train, then visited the Inouye ancestral home in Inaibaru and met four different branches of our extended family, including Murakami and Mitarai lines. We did all of this on a pink touring bus chartered for our private use. Needless to say, taking care of the needs of everyone on the trip proved to be nightmarish because, in the end, it is difficult to say to your favorite aunt, "Look, just get in the bus, sit down, and shut up." Perhaps the only way to please our many readers and their various expectations is to require them to have the same, very low expectations. And if these literary tourists happen to know the languages we know, and if they have experienced the originals for themselves, then they are that much less inclined to accept our descriptions of what they are seeing out the right window.

As for a translator's responsibility to him or herself, this too is a tremendous challenge. The closest analogy I could think of for this relationship with oneself is

a bad marriage. To say you married in order to fulfill your own needs is to invite disaster. And yet, we often think of matrimony as the fulfillment of many of our greatest and deepest desires. The well-kept secret about life after the ceremony is that it is all about making the happiness of the other person your first priority. To see how two people's needs are one and the same is to be very wise, very lucky, or very deluded. Or is the goal to be both lover and beloved at the same time, a postmodern solipsism that seems to be happening more and more lately. I risk mangling this marriage metaphor in order to ask a simple but difficult question: Is translation essentially altruistic or selfish? Do we translate to please others, or to please ourselves? (Please, no one say "We're trying to do both.")

I would like to propose that translation is one of the hardest things a human being can do. Always being there for a child, for a bus load of tourists, and for oneself as mirrored by one's beloved is not easy. And these are just a few of the difficulties.

What about all that it takes to be able to contribute to a relationship in the first place? What about knowing the languages and understanding the cultures? What about mastering literary structure, dialogue, poetics? Many never reach a point of being able to be artful or ethical in the first place. One begins to wonder, is it the very difficulty of the challenge that attracts us to the work of translation?

This leads me to what I find to be the most daunting aspect of translation: tedium. Fortunately for me, I grew up on a farm, so I am accustomed to the mind-numbing work of translation, which is the intellectual equivalent of ditch-digging.

I have this memory of my father. Two of my brothers and I are standing with him at the head of an immense field, our feet heavy with clay mud, shovels in hand, mosquitoes circling. My father says to us, "Boys, if you don't study hard and go to college, this is what you have to look forward to for the rest of your life."

Well, I didn't study hard, but I did go to college. As a freshman, I signed up for Japanese 001, and now, years later, I find myself doing the one thing that could possibly compare with the drudgery of farm work, and that is translation.

Now, however, instead of potatoes or sugar beets, I make my way down row after row of words. I look up and see an endless field of language stretching far into the distance—word after word, sentence after sentence, paragraph upon paragraph. Slowly, steadily I move ahead. I am on row 34. I think to myself, "Only 9,567 rows to go." Sometimes I admire the beauty of the field that engulfs me—the way the tops of the t's and b's wave in the occasional breeze. But mostly I dream of an angel appearing at the hottest time of day with a popsicle in hand. And while I look forward to the harvest that my efforts make possible, in the short term, I'm really only thinking about what my mother put in my lunchbox, or going to play baseball at the park.

Is it this tedious aspect of translation that makes academic administrators think of translators as a bunch of loser drones? Are we the field hands of the intelligentsia? If so, it hardly seems fair. After all, there would be no food without farmers, and no knowledge without translators. Translators rule. Translators should be praised. Praise us for our high pain thresholds, if not for our high intelligence!

When you think about it, there is something a little strange about a department of tenured farmers. Of course, even farmers know how to get even. The world

might laugh at the drab tedious life of the translator. (I'm betting most of us don't even get dressed in the morning.) But from our quiet, humble labor comes the beautiful and the remarkable. Masterpieces of sentiment and thought that no one expected. Startling discoveries. New possibilities.

Yes, even the ugliest farmer can grow a beautiful carrot. But here, too, we encounter yet another bar of the translator's prison. In a relaxed moment, my mentor Howard Hibbett, the distinguished translator of Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, once relayed the familiar saying to me: "A beautiful translation is like a beautiful woman. The more beautiful, the more she is suspect of being unfaithful."

Professor Hibbett belonged to an age of chauvinistic men, the so-called "greatest generation" according to Tom Brokaw. He can get away with such sexist sayings, while I need to search for a way to translate the sentiment into something more gender innocent. How about "A beautiful translation is like a field of corn. The more beautiful, the more suspect it is of being genetically modified"

But what better expression of the lose-lose situation that I am struggling to describe than Professor Hibbett's dictum? To put it bluntly, the translator's choice really is between beauty and faithfulness, or, to remind us of our starting point, between art and ethics.

My own translation method is ruled by these two impossible expectations of beauty and faithfulness. Stage One, I carefully read the original. Stage Two, I produce a draft that tries to capture the full meaning of the original. Stage Three, I naturalize this text so that it reads well in English. Stage Four, I check this naturalized text against the original to see if I haven't strayed too far. Stage Five, I polish and revise, nudging the draft back in the direction of the original once again, keenly aware of how totally compromised I am at every turn. From start to finish, my process assumes that I will fully satisfy neither art nor ethics. Thus, lose-lose.

In this process of moving away from and moving back toward, I once asked a colleague of mine, Professor Haruko Iwasaki of UC Santa Barbara, if she wouldn't take a look at a few passages of a novella by Izumi Kyōka (1876–1939) that had resisted my every effort. I asked because she was one of a very small number of people in the world who could help me. She knew Edo-period texts and Meiji-period texts. Both her Japanese and her English were excellent. She loved Kyōka and had even grown up in his hometown, so she understood dialectical nuances and the material culture of the region. Finally, her very high literary standards qualified her to be my 'native informant.'

Ask any scholar of Japanese literature: Kyōka is an impossibly difficult author. He's the one Japanese novelist everyone thought would never be translated. I knew Haruko had already looked over Bill Sibley's attempted translation of the novella I was working on, *A Song by Lantern Light* (*Uta andon* 1910), one which he never actually published, despite Haruko's glowing appreciation of it.<sup>2</sup> I sent her about twenty passages by mail. She called me back, asking for a copy of the entire piece and the entire translation. I dutifully sent her both.

In retrospect, I see that I made a mistake in mailing her a later draft rather than an earlier, more literal one. A few days later, she called me back. "Charles, your translation is full of mistakes. The only way I can help you is if you come

out to Santa Barbara and stay for a week.”

“What do you mean stay for a week?”

“There’s really nothing I can do for you, if you don’t.”

I was a dean at the time, and getting away for a week in the middle of the semester was no small feat. But she insisted. So I cleared my schedule, flew out to the West Coast, and spent four or five days on the edge of the Pacific Ocean. We worked on *Uta andon* from morning until night, going over every word. She would read the Japanese, I would give her my English translation. Then she would gently correct my many mistakes. Although her willingness to spend so much time and effort on the project was beyond generous, that visit to California was also one of the most humbling and difficult experiences of my life.

For one thing, it reminded me of a particularly numbing moment from my Harvard years. Donald Shively, one of my teachers, had read my first graduate seminar paper and had called me in to talk about it. I thought he was going to tell me how much he liked the piece, but instead he solemnly pointed out the mistakes in my translation of Asai Ryōi’s *Sentō shinwa* and warned me, “Some day, someone will catalogue the errors in your work and publish them in a review. If that happens, your career will be over.”

I left his office shaken. That experience made me hypersensitive to a particularly insidious truth about translation: it’s what you know, not what you don’t know, that kills you. Why do I say this? Well, if you think you don’t know something, then you stand a chance of looking it up and getting the translation right. But if you think you understand something, then there is no way to realize that you actually don’t, and then how can you keep errors out of your translation? The psychological consequence of grasping this truth is that you never trust yourself anymore. And the practical consequence is that you end up looking up every word and idiom—both the ones you know and the one’s you don’t know—to avoid that career-ending blooper. Truly, the life of a translator is full of dangers.

To get back to those few days in Santa Barbara, Haruko was right, of course. My understanding of *Uta andon* had been mistaken in many places. And to tell the truth, I was most grateful to be corrected. But the new translation that I brought back to Boston with me a week later, though *correct*, was unusable. It read much like an early draft that I had stashed away in my filing cabinet. The words were right, but the meaning was wrong since the emotional register was off. To give you a better idea of the problem, let me give you three versions of the same passage.

#### 1. My early draft.

He wore an umber fedora, unaccustomed to his head and soaring like a mountain. Certainly, its obvious newness was a breach of good style, but perhaps we can forgive this lapse of taste. Even more telling was the way he pulled the hat down until its brim rested firmly on his ears.

#### 2. The Santa Barbara draft.

He wore a brown hat, a brand-new item for sure, but the two peaks on the stiff top stuck out like ridges and the rim was pulled all the way down nearly to cover his two ears.

### 3. The readjusted draft.

On his head rested an umber fedora with two stiff-looking peaks that rose up like mountains. Certainly, its obvious newness was a breach of style, but perhaps we can forgive this lack of taste. Even more telling was the way he pulled the hat down until its brim rested firmly on his ears.<sup>3</sup>

In the weeks that followed, as I worked to make things flow, I did so with a sharpened awareness of the ghost of Haruko looking over my shoulder. Or was it Professor Shively's? Or Professor Hibbett's? I kept asking myself, "How would you naturally express this in English without diluting or corrupting the force of the Japanese?" Disqualifying myself from the accuracy game, I knew that I really wasn't going to win the beauty contest either. Even today, I feel like my translation of *A Song by Lantern Light* is one of worst I have ever done. It doesn't read well because I didn't dare take sufficient liberties with the text. This is a shame for at least two reasons: this is one of Kyōka's best stories, and it is unlikely that another better translation will soon appear. The skill with which he wrote this story—which is two narratives woven into one—is, of course, part of what makes this work both difficult and worth doing. Yet it is a battle that I lost twice, the finished product being neither accurate nor beautiful.

If I have expressed a rather dark view of translation, I do so for a hopeful reason. Perhaps now we are ready to consider the question of why we do translation at all, given these difficulties. To stay with the agricultural metaphors, the question is "What is the attraction of digging ditches?"

To be sure, there are positive ways to view all the difficulties mentioned. For one thing, the translator who labors with an eye to art and ethics knows what understanding really is and really is not. To understand understanding—to grasp its difficulty, even its inherent impossibility—is to conceptualize a world where perfect understanding is neither necessary nor possible. Of all people, translators understand that it is wrong to expect to be perfectly understood, or to try to see someone or something with perfect clarity. Whether author, reader, or translator, to expect perfection is to misunderstand reality, to impose a neurosis upon a world that already has plenty of its own problems.

Translators can never be perfectionists. The kind of understanding we deal in is very human—that is, it is always partial and approximate. Like farmers, we have to have a keen sense of what is good enough. We have neither the time nor the energy to waste. Like good parents, good tour guides, and good lovers, we develop and retain a sharp sense of what can be done and what can't. Sometimes, *something* really is better than nothing. And sometimes, only the wrong words can have the right effect.

In affirming the need to compromise, I stop just short of advocating mistranslation. There is no glory in making a mistake without knowing it. Calling an apple a peach is a problem, one that my teachers have taught me to recognize. And yet, the problem with this problem is that calling an apple a peach can sometimes be a beautiful thing. Indeed, for some of life's problems, calling an apple a peach *is* the way to proceed, the only way to expand the kind of literary understanding that peace, compassion, and other worthwhile things rely upon. Beyond not knowing, beyond knowing what you know, and beyond not knowing

what you don't know, there is the life-giving miracle of wanting to know something in a new way. That possibility is the life of translation, and possibly the only way to solve the social and political problems that plague us.

Translation is the art of sustained metaphor and, therefore, what it creates is always different from the original. At best, it produces a world that resembles another, a false reproduction that is neither a copy nor necessarily a misunderstanding. It affirms with both similarity and with lack of similarity, using the familiar to entertain the possibility of the unfamiliar. By being honest about the limitations of understanding, we know translation can never be perfectly accurate even if it can still be true and, yes, sometimes beautiful. Understanding is misunderstanding; and misunderstanding is understanding. This is the truth that translation reveals—as both a way in and out of prison, where ‘exit’ means ‘entrance’ and ‘entrance’ means ‘exit.’ Why would we want to insist that it be one or the other?

*Tufts University*



## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The event, held March 6–7, 2008, marked the opening of Tufts’ new Center for the Humanities.

<sup>2</sup> For English translations of Kyōka’s work, see my *Japanese Gothic Tales by Izumi Kyōka* (Hawaii, 1996), and *In Light of Shadows, More Gothic Tales by Izumi Kyōka*, (Hawaii, 2005). Other translations include Edward Seidensticker, trans., “A Tale of Three Who were Blind,” in Donald Keene, ed., *Modern Japanese Literature, An Anthology* (Grove Press, 1956); Cody Poulton, trans., *Spirits of a Different Sort* (TK). Stephen Kohl, trans., *The Song of the Troubadour*, (Kanazawa, Japan: TK, TK) Nina Cornyetz, *Izumi Kyōka’s speculum: Reflections on the Medusa, Thanatos and Eros* (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, New York, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> *In Light of Shadows* 8.