

■Speech Text

Haiku beyond Horizons

(Speech text for Lahti International Writers Reunion 2009)

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I have been translating haiku almost every day since the inauguration of the World Haiku Association in September 2000 in Slovenia. I serve as Director of the association. Japanese people often say to me that haiku cannot be translated from Japanese into another language and that haiku in another language cannot be translated into Japanese. So am I doing meaningless work nearly every day?

A week ago, I received a haiku from a child in Trieste via internet in my library.

Mani in movimento,
burrasca --
la vita è persa

Hands in motion,
a storm --
the life is lost

Andrea D'Addabbo

It took me only moments to create this Japanese version:

動く両手
嵐
命は失われた

I believe that haiku poem can be written well without season words, written well in free form and not only in 5-7-5 syllables.

Though I understand only a bit of Italian, I found this haiku to be rough but excellent, and found I could translate it readily into Japanese with the help of an Italian-Japanese dictionary as well as an English version of the haiku for reference. I consider my Japanese translation quite successful, since the surprising sonority of the Japanese version and tension between Japanese lines are as poetically relevant to the Italian as I had imagined.

My translation work is not commercial, but voluntary, based on my desire to find genuine poetry beyond political, cultural and linguistic borders.

Some people think the Japanese language is a variant of the Chinese language. Of course, this is a big misunderstanding, even if it is noted that Japanese borrows kanji that originated in China. These two languages are totally different grammatically. As you know well, the Japanese language is an isolated language: it is not very close to Korean, and even less close to Mongolian. Writing poems exclusively in Japanese may be dancing in a verbal darkness unlit by any other language.

My main passion is writing haiku as essence of poetry. I don't know haiku is the shortest poem in the whole world, but I'm trying to give birth to extremely short and poetically complete living poem called haiku. First, I write haiku in Japanese language, with some exceptions.

In the past 20 years, my haiku has been translated into many languages, including, among others, English, French,

Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Slovenian, Macedonian, Bulgarian, Latvian, Estonian, Lithuanian, and, of course, Finnish. In most cases, I enjoy translating them myself, which helps me discover new but hidden qualities of my work.

My first publication in India, entitled “Endless Helix: Haiku & Short Poems/無限の螺旋 俳句と短詩” (Cyberwit.net), appeared in 2007. 50 of my haiku in 6 languages—Japanese, Portuguese, English, French, Spanish & Lithuanian—are included there.

無限の螺旋
黙して歌う
われらが体内

Espiral infinita
cantando silenciosa
no nosso corpo

An endless helix
sings silently
inside our body

Une spirale infinie
chante en silence
à l'intérieur de notre corps

Un espiral infinito
cantando silenciosamente
dentro de nuestro cuerpo

Begalinė spiralė
tyliai gieda
mūs kūne

Though I regret not being able to fully understand all these versions, I take a huge delight in discovering these different blossomings of my haiku. Concerning verbal sonority, Japanese is quite simple, Portuguese is cheerful, English is sharp, French is sophisticated, Spanish is quite active and Lithuanian is archaic.

Needless to say, all of these versions are different. Such differences reflect the linguistic diversity of our planet. Beyond such differences, some invisible but clear poetic truth and essence can be kept in each.

In treating excellent haiku in languages other than Japanese, I find new and revealing horizons. The following haiku was submitted (in French) to our international haiku quarterly “Ginyu” No. 43 (Ginyu Press, Japan, July 2009) by the Moroccan poet Mohammed Bennis.

Des formes tremblent
À travers des explosions
Seule ici la quiétude

English version:

Forms tremble
Through explosions
Only here quietness

Here is my Japanese version.

爆発をへて

かたちは揺れる
ここにただ平安

This poem is full of suggestion and pathos. It recalls not only successive contemporary disasters, but also the bare truth of our physical world, though there is not a single concrete image in it.

Haiku poems are really short, so collaboration is possible through them in a very artistic fashion. For example, my recent haiku collection “空飛ぶ法王 161 俳句 Flying Pope: 161 Haiku” (Koorosha, Tokyo, 2008) includes haiku in Japanese with English versions by Jim Kacian. In this book, all haiku depict an imaginary “Flying Pope”, as if Pope John-Paul II had been given the nickname of “Flying Pope”. These bilingual haiku are animated by about 50 drawings by the Japanese artist Kuniharu Shimizu, which are interspersed amongst the poems.

Drawings in black ink can be simple and impressive, half figurative, half abstract. Nevertheless they are not explanatory of haiku. For example, consider this poem from page 39.

オーロラが別れに揺れて空飛ぶ法王

Aurora quakes
at the parting...
Flying Pope

The Japanese version is unhurried and a little bit sentimental, while the English version is silently evocative of any sorrowful parting. At its best, these different versions may come to animate one another.

The drawing created by Shimizu for this haiku is free from such any intention to represent directly the “aurora” or even the “Flying Pope.” Instead, two shapes made of strong and flexible lines slightly intimate these two objects. As a consequence, page 39 of this volume becomes a field of mutual animation between Japanese and English versions, letters and drawing.

Haiku with rich translation, haiku with sensitive collaboration, offers us a compact but expansive universe of art.

English text by Ban'ya NATSUISHI & Jim KACIAN